



Romantic Suspense
INTRIGUE

A photograph of a woman with brown hair styled in an updo, wearing a vibrant red, backless, halter-neck dress with a beaded strap. She is sitting on a dark ledge, looking down and to the right. The background is dark and textured, possibly a wall or a large piece of fabric. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting her skin and the dress.

Secret
Obsession
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Аннотация

He didn't know which was harder: not falling for a woman who was off-limits, or protecting her from a madman... Scarred from the brutal murder of her fiancé, former UN translator Lyssa Cafferty sleeps with one eye open. Now a serial killer is determined to finish what he started...and she's his next target. Desperate to survive, Lyssa seeks protection from the one man with knowledge of her past.Noah Bradford, a cunning ex-marine, vows to protect Lyssa—along with the secret she keeps from her watchful predator. It soon becomes evident that Noah's growing attraction for Lyssa could distract him from his mission, but only together can they crack the cryptic messages of a killer. With time running out, it's uncertain who will come out unharmed—or alive.

“I’m so sorry they got pulled into this. If I thought it would help, I’d go back to Chicago.” She lifted her gaze to his. “It wouldn’t help, would it?”

“He knows I’m involved, and he’s not happy about it.” Noah scooted closer to her and placed his hand on her knee. “Count on one thing—I won’t leave your side until he’s no longer a threat.”

With a sad smile she covered his hand with hers. He couldn’t look away from her green eyes. So much hurt, so much pain, and yet a determination buried deep that she couldn’t hide. He turned his hand and squeezed hers, offering comfort.

She gnawed on her lip, her nerves showing through. He couldn’t look away. The awareness that had been flickering through him since he’d seen her again erupted. He was so close to her, if he leaned over just a bit, their lips would touch.

If he ever kissed her, he didn’t know if he’d be able to stop.

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Robin Perini



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Award-winning author **ROBIN PERINI**'s love of heart-stopping suspense and poignant romance, coupled with her adoration of high-tech weaponry and covert ops, encouraged her secret inner commando to take on the challenge of writing romantic suspense novels. Her mission's motto: "When danger and romance collide, no heart is safe."

Devoted to giving her readers fast-paced, high-stakes adventures with a love story sure to melt their hearts, Robin won a prestigious Romance Writers of America Golden Heart Award in 2011. By day she works for an advanced technology corporation, and in her spare time you might find her giving one of her many nationally acclaimed writing workshops or training in competitive small-bore-rifle silhouette shooting. Robin loves to interact with readers. You can catch her on her website, www.robinperini.com, and on several major social-networking sites, or write to her at PO Box 50472, Albuquerque, NM 87181-0472, USA.

For my readers.

Thanks for the wonderful letters telling me you loved the Bradford family from *Finding Her Son*. Noah's story exists because of you.

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[Chapter One](#)

The sting of frozen rain pricked Lyssa Cafferty's cheeks, another attack she couldn't prevent. She hurried from the L station toward her small Chicago apartment. If only she could pull her hood over her head, duck down and avoid the piercing needles of ice on her face, but then she'd lose her peripheral vision.

She couldn't afford to allow comfort to trump safety.

Not now. Not ever.

Instead, she tugged her thrift-store winter coat tighter around her body, the jacket too big but at least warm. She peered over one shoulder then the other, seeing only commuters huddled against the winter wind and racing down Roger's Park streets. No one familiar.

She picked up her pace and pressed on through the blustery weather. Of course, she wouldn't recognize the man out to kill her until she was already dead.

Two years. Two long, horrible years since the night she'd lost Jack, since she'd lost her love, her life and everything that had made the world wonderful.

She couldn't have imagined things would get worse after Jack's murder.

They had.

A brilliant, uncatchable psycho had made it his business to find her.

Archimedes.

Just his name made her heart stutter...with fear and fury. He'd stolen her life.

She paused two blocks from her apartment and, ignoring the cold, stilled. On high alert, her entire body tensed. She struggled to calm the rapid beat of her heart.

Some days she just prayed he'd find her and get it over with. Those were the days when the constant state of fear wore down her soul.

Most days, though, she longed to look him in the eye and kill him for what he'd done to Jack, and to her. For the precious moments she'd lost with the one thing she loved more than herself. The one secret she'd die to protect.

She refused to even let her mind go there. She couldn't contemplate what might have been. Or what could be. Until Archimedes was brought to justice, this was her life. She had to focus on staying alive. At least for one more day.

Lyssa shifted, keeping her movements subtle, scanning each person, each darkened corner, searching for anything out of place, anyone following her. Her gaze flickered back and forth, furtive and cautious. He could be anyone, anywhere.

With each new stretch of building and street, her chest tightened in dreaded anticipation. She hurried past a couple of boarded-up storefronts and still, he wasn't there.

For three hundred and fifty-three days he hadn't been there.

One more day and he hadn't found her.

She tugged her hood lower and raced through the main entrance to her building. She trudged up the stairs, acutely aware of each squeak. A baby cried in apartment 219. At the sound, Lyssa paused, her hand instinctively reaching for the brass doorknob. A wave of despair nearly propelled her to her knees. A shush and a coo, and the baby quieted.

She squeezed her eyes shut against the burning wells in the corners. She couldn't think about the past, or her loss. She had to stay focused.

With careful placement of each step, she padded across the floor, knowing the location of each creak, a skill she worked to perfect every single day. She needed to move silently, invisibly.

Finally, she stopped in front of the small apartment the Justice Department had arranged for her. So-called Witness Security. She wasn't the best witness. She'd only heard the whispers of a madman, but had never seen him. And she certainly wasn't secure.

She was simply the sole survivor of a man who'd killed dozens.

The walnut door to her temporary home appeared exactly as she'd left it, down to the small slip of paper she'd wedged near the hinge. A trick she'd learned. Few would notice it, and as long as the paper didn't move, Lyssa could be confident no one had opened the door.

Safe at last.

She slipped the key into the dead bolt. As she tried to turn it, the key resisted in the lock ever so slightly. At the slight deviation from normal, she hesitated, her instincts firing.

The cold. It could be the cold. The temperature had plummeted twenty degrees today.

It probably was the cold.

One hand slipped into her pocket to the phone she carried with her. She hesitated. She couldn't call Gil again. She'd contacted her WitSec handler three times this month already. All false alarms.

The last time, after he'd rushed over to her place, she'd

witnessed irritation in his eyes, though he'd tried to hide his reaction. He couldn't understand. She'd been in Chicago almost a year. Too long. She knew in her gut time was running out.

She flipped open her bag with her free hand and gripped the butt of the black-market .45 in her purse. Gil may have read the file, but he didn't comprehend the minute-by-minute fear that stalked her. Archimedes wasn't a typical serial killer. He was smart. He was thorough, and for some reason he had Lyssa in his sights.

Hand tight on the weapon, trigger finger ready, she shoved open the door and stepped across the threshold of a place she could never call home.

The coppery scent of blood strangled her belly.

Gil Masters lay on the ground, dead, in a pool of blood.

Archimedes had found her.

She forced herself to look at Gil's face. Someone had gouged out his eyes. Empty sockets stared unseeing at her, accusing. She didn't want to look lower, but she had to. His shirt had been ripped open, a frame for Archimedes's handiwork.

She froze, unable to look away from the horrifying, familiar symbol carved into his belly.

Infinity.

The curves of the sideways eight dripped with rivulets of blood streaking down his abdomen along his torso, pooling beneath him.

Archimedes had found her.

“No. God, no.”

She lifted the gun and froze in place.

No sound. No movement. No creak of the floor.

No one was there.

She slowly turned, the muscles in her arms, legs and neck all at the ready.

Waiting.

Waiting for the attack to come out of nowhere. Waiting to die.

Each second became an hour. Each inch of movement felt like a mile.

But nothing happened. No heaving breaths, no hand over her mouth. No sadistic whisper in her ear.

She couldn't tell how many seconds had passed when she realized she wasn't going to die. At least not in this moment.

He really wasn't here.

But his message was.

She might not know what meaning infinity had for the killer, but she could read these words.

Blood smeared the wall, the promise indisputable.

No one will come between us. You will be mine.

Her gaze whipped around the apartment, her throat tightened in panic. What if he was watching, just waiting for her to let her guard down?

She had to get out.

She raced into her bedroom and grabbed the jewelry box from the top dresser drawer, digging through it until she pulled out a

thin gold chain threaded through her diamond engagement ring. She slipped it around her neck.

Gil would have called her a fool. She didn't care. She wouldn't leave the ring behind.

A door slammed down the hall.

No more time. She yanked open her closet and grabbed a small duffel. The bag she kept packed. Always.

Lyssa heaved it over her shoulder and clutched the ring. "Help me, Jack."

She ran past Gil's body. Guilt pounded in her head. He had a family, a wife, two kids, five and seven years old. A girl and a boy. Witness and handler weren't supposed to get to know each other, but over a year, she had learned things about the man who watched out for her.

"I'm sorry. So sorry," she murmured. She closed her eyes in regret, tore down the stairs and hurried out of the apartment building. She wouldn't be coming back.

Speeding past end-of-the-day commuters, she tried to tame her panting breaths. She rushed up the stairs to the L platform and hopped onto the first southbound train. Her trembling legs refused to hold her. She sank into an empty seat.

The image of Gil's face, the void where his eyes should have been, battered into her memory. She'd never forget.

Lyssa clutched the duffel to her. She had to push Gil aside, cold and heartless as that was. She had to concentrate. She had to survive.

The train rumbled beneath her, the iron supports whizzing past, each second taking her farther from the body of the man who had sworn to protect her, further from the life she'd lived for almost a year.

She knew one thing; this wouldn't be a repeat of the last time Archimedes had found her. This time she would dictate the rules.

She caught sight of an ad for the Atrium Mall from the train's window. A lot of people. Open late.

She had no idea how much time had passed when she walked into the huge shopping center. Crowds milled around her. She let herself breathe again. Archimedes didn't kill in public. Or he hadn't yet. She found a corner table in the food court, near a wall, out of the way. She shoved her hand into her pocket and grabbed the unused, prepaid cell phone.

She dialed but couldn't stop her hands from shaking. She hated the response, hated the show of vulnerability. Somewhere inside she had to find the strength to do what two years ago she could never have imagined doing.

She didn't bother with 911. They couldn't help.

She dialed a number she'd memorized a year ago.

"Nichols," the voice barked.

The one man she trusted not to betray her.

"He found me again."

* * *

NOAH BRADFORD VAULTED onto the edge of the roof from the ladder propped against his father's house. The brisk

morning air would make it easy to stay alert. He scaled the pitched tile using techniques not so different from an escape he'd engineered in Kazakhstan. At least this time bullets weren't flying past his head.

Donning an elaborate tool belt stuffed with everything from levels to screwdrivers to ratchets and hammers, his brother Chase followed Noah to the satellite system.

Noah knelt to inspect the latest winter storm's hail damage. "Colorado weather is not kind to my toys," he muttered. "No wonder Dad's had so many outages."

Ignoring the fact that he should have found time to repair this months ago, Noah grabbed a small set of tools from his back pocket and quickly adjusted the encryption device while Chase checked out the damaged tiles from the storm.

They'd almost finished before Chase spoke. "You were out of touch for over a month, bro," he accused. "Dad was worried."

Yet another way Noah had let down his dad. He sent Chase a sidelong glance. "I told you, I had business—"

"You gave the family a cock-and-bull story that even a child would see through. We're not stupid, Noah. Dad developed pneumonia two weeks ago. We couldn't get ahold of you. You didn't answer your cell. No one from your companies could tell us anything. Not acceptable."

A small screwdriver fell from Noah's normally secure grip, rolled down the roof and tumbled over the side. He let out a sharp curse before snapping the cover over the panel. "I can't talk about

it.”

He eased to the edge and made his way down the ladder in seconds. Chase followed. “I’m just giving you fair warning. You won’t be able to avoid the truth this time. Dad’s staging an intervention.”

Noah stilled, the muscles at the base of his neck tying into a familiar knot. He looked over at his SUV. He could just leave. His family was better off not knowing about his side job as the Falcon. They knew about his public career. The encryption and software patents he’d developed as a teenager had turned into big business. They’d never understood why he’d left it and home at eighteen for the Marines.

They definitely had no idea that he now worked for an organization that took on tasks the government or military couldn’t risk.

Chase slapped his brother’s shoulder and the move yanked Noah from the dark memories.

“Come clean,” his brother said. “Just like you did when Dad caught you and Mitch sneaking out during high school. Some things aren’t worth avoiding.”

“And sometimes the truth doesn’t make it better,” Noah said. “This isn’t high school.”

Bracing himself, he entered his father’s home, past the handicapped ramp that his siblings, Mitch, Chase and Sierra, had installed. Noah had been on a job. By the time he’d returned, all he’d been able to do was write a check.

His mind already searching for a means of escape, he found his way into the living room. “Satellite is fixed. You’ve got TV and internet, all encrypted for your super-secret-police consulting.”

His father didn’t take the bait. Paul Bradford said nothing, he simply quirked an eyebrow while the football game played in the background. Noah squirmed under his dad’s focus. He might be in a wheelchair after a gunshot severed his spinal cord, but nothing was wrong with his instincts.

Noah’s forefinger scratched at his knuckle. “What?”

His brother Chase shrugged and passed him a longneck bottle with that I-told-you look.

Paul Bradford drummed his fingers on his chair. “I did a little digging—”

Noah’s hand paused on the way to his mouth, then he took a long gulp. Yeah, he’d been brilliant encouraging his father’s interest in computers. Noah knew exactly how he inherited his own tech ability. The idea of setting Dad up with a side business doing investigations had seemed like a perfect way to keep Paul Bradford engaged in life—and law enforcement. Noah downed half the bottle, the cool liquid sliding down his throat. What a fool. “Your point?”

“I hit a damn brick wall,” Paul growled.

At least something had gone right today.

“You want to tell me why I can’t find out anything about you, Noah? Short of the vanilla bio you published on the websites of

your companies.” Paul rolled his chair across the wooden floor, coming a few inches from Noah. “I haven’t pried into your life before. Well, that stops now. Exactly what are you into, Noah? How worried should we be?”

His sister, Sierra, saved him from answering. For the moment. She exited the kitchen with a large tray of chips and guacamole, followed by Mitch and his very pregnant wife, Emily. Mitch held Emily’s two-year-old son Joshua in his arms while Emily waddled into the living room and settled down on a hard-back chair with a sigh. “I can’t get out of that sofa,” she said with a smile. “Last time, Mitch had to use a crane to hoist me.”

Thankful for something to do—anything to avoid answering questions—Noah doled out a plate for Emily. She looked at him in surprise. “Thank you?”

“It’s not like our resident man-of-mystery has learned manners,” Chase commented. “He’s just avoiding Dad’s questions.”

Noah winced and eyed the door. He should go. This conversation had already strayed too close to truths he couldn’t discuss—some classified, some, well, they’d just worry. Some—things he’d done he would never talk about. To anyone.

He tugged on his jacket. “I’d better go.”

Before he could get to the door, Emily gripped Noah’s hand and her sympathetic gaze met his. He really loved his sister-in-law. She saw through more than most. Probably because she’d been to hell and back. “They’re worried about you, Noah. You

scared them this time. Your dad, too,” she mouthed the last few words.

Noah scrubbed his hand over his face. His dad had lost weight from the illness. He looked pale. “I’ve made sure you can reach me anytime, anywhere,” he said, tugging a card from his wallet and handing it to his father. “This number will page me no matter where I am. I designed it myself. I won’t be out of touch again.”

Paul tucked the card into his shirt pocket. “It’s not about that, Noah. It’s about the riddle your life has become. What if something had happened to you? How would we ever know?”

“I’m a trained marine. I can take care of myself on a business trip.”

“Business trip, my butt,” Sierra said under her breath.

“You haven’t shown your face at any of your companies in six months,” Chase said. “Just a few conference calls. So where have you been?”

That they’d infiltrated the careful web he and Crystal had set up gave him pause. He had some major shoring up to do once he figured a way out of this mess.

Mitch settled next to Emily, clasping her hand while he bounced Joshua on his knee. “We get that you like your privacy, Noah. You’ve always preferred hiding off in your lab with your electronics and computers, but this is different. No word. Not even an answer to the calls and emails when Dad was in the hospital.”

Truth was, they didn’t know him at all. Noah had never wanted

to disappear, but he hadn't fit in. He'd never fit in. Mitch and Chase were the athletes and Sierra was the perfect daughter. They hadn't understood him. Noah kneaded his neck. That's why he'd joined the Marines, hoping to find a place in the family. But then the secrets just got worse. He couldn't talk about his job. Or the Falcon.

So, most of the time, he didn't talk. He just listened. Even now, how could he tell his family that he'd spent the past six months dealing with one crisis after another for Covert Technology Confidential based in the middle-of-nowhere Carder, Texas?

He'd backed off the government intel jobs, but CTC kept him busy, and truth be known, not a lot safer.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He slipped it from his coat and glanced at the number. A number he hadn't seen in a very long time. "We'll have to talk about this later," he said. "There's an emergency in Phoenix..." He let his voice trail off, too tired to lie. He sighed. "There's an emergency. Let's leave it at that."

"Someday you'll have to trust us with what's going on in your life, son," Paul said quietly. "We're your family. We love you. We want to know you."

Noah looked at them. They did love him. He knew that. He just...he didn't know if they'd like him very much after the choices he'd been forced to make. Even with his brother Mitch and his dad as cops, would his family understand what the Falcon had been forced to do to save his own life and, more importantly,

the lives of his men. Not knowing was better.

“See you soon,” he said. Emily struggled to her feet and hugged him close. “Be careful,” she said softly.

His throat constricted and he walked out to the front porch, the brisk winter air freezing his ears. He flicked on the receiver. “I’m surprised to hear from you, Reid. It’s been almost eighteen months. What happened to incommunicado?”

“I’ll call you back,” his old marine buddy said. “Stand by.”

He’d known Reid since basic training, and only twice had his voice held that much tension. Noah’s posture went rigid. This couldn’t be good.

The phone rang again. This time the screen showed an unknown number. Noah flicked a switch on the side of the phone. A Washington, D.C., number popped onto the screen. “What the hell’s going on?”

“Archimedes found her,” Reid said.

Reid didn’t have to say any more. Noah closed his eyes. Jack’s fiancée, Alessandra Cummings. The moment Jack had introduced her, Noah had been in awe. She was open, transparent and full of joy. She’d accepted Jack for who he was, for what he’d done. What would it feel like to be loved as much as Alessandra had loved Jack? Not a day went by when Noah hadn’t wondered. Damn, Jack had been lucky. For a year or so, he and Alessandra had lived a fairy tale. Until Archimedes.

It had been two years since Jack’s death. Noah didn’t know what name she used now. He’d promised Reid he wouldn’t track

her after Archimedes had found her just a few months into hiding. To keep her safe, Noah had agreed.

“Is she...” He didn’t want to finish the question.

“She’s still alive as of an hour ago.” Reid paused. “This is the third time he’s located her, Noah. She should be dead. For whatever reason, he hasn’t killed her, but I have a leak at Justice. I need your help.”

Noah glanced at his watch. “I can leave within the hour. Where is she?”

“We placed her in Chicago. She’s ditched her phone. She’ll call me at noon. She’s scared, but it’s more than that. I don’t like the sound of her voice. She’s on the edge.”

“Has she given up?”

“I don’t think so, but she’s tired of waiting. Hell, so am I. The guy’s a damn ghost.” Noah could hear the fatigue in his friend’s voice. “I should have called last night, but I’d hoped the news would be better.”

“How close are you to catching him?” Noah asked. “Straight up.”

“No closer than the night Jack died.”

Noah ground his teeth together. He should have insisted he stay on the case.

“Archimedes is better than good. I reviewed the current status of the investigation after she called last night. They can’t nail him down. He doesn’t leave evidence behind when he kills. Hell, half the time I think they’re pinning all unsolved murders with little

or no evidence on him.”

Noah tugged the keys from his jeans and strode to his SUV. “We both owe Jack our lives. This time, we protect her. And we find Archimedes.”

* * *

LYSSA SAT INSIDE the public library hidden by some shelves but with a clear view of the front entrance. She clutched her new phone in her hand. She’d transferred from train to train all night long, switching lines and directions. She couldn’t keep up this pace much longer. Plus she didn’t have an unlimited supply of funds, just the one thousand dollars she’d scrimped and saved and placed in the pocket of her ready bag.

She hated to admit she’d been stupid yesterday. She’d been thinking about the moment Archimedes would find her for a year, and when it happened, panic had won. She’d run.

In the clear light of day—and without Gil’s body on the floor—logic ruled. She sat here, watching people go about their everyday lives, and realized this was the answer. The strategy.

Go on with her life. Keep doing what she’d been doing.

Let Archimedes find her.

It was a good plan. She couldn’t go on any longer waiting to die. Archimedes was too smart, too deadly. She had too much to protect, and if he ever discovered that her true vulnerability wasn’t fear...she couldn’t bear the thought.

A shiver of awareness registered at the back of her neck. She swallowed. Had he found her already?

Her attention shifted to the entrance of the library. She peered at a tall figure pushing through the double doors. He wore jeans, a leather bomber jacket and cowboy boots. He didn't belong in a library.

But she recognized the shape of his face, the color of his hair, and surprisingly enough, the fit of his jeans.

Where had that come from? She'd only met him three times. Once at a barbecue with Jack, once in a crowded bar and once at Jack's funeral.

He scanned the room, then paused when his gaze fell on her. She shifted in her chair. Would he know her? He didn't hesitate. He walked over.

"Alessandra," he said quietly, his deep voice washing over her.

"Lyssa," she whispered.

He nodded and surveyed the room. "Let's switch locations before we talk."

She ducked her head and grabbed the small bag.

"That's all you have?"

"I'm traveling light these days."

His brown eyes darkened. "You'll be safe soon."

Lyssa let him lead her out of the library and down the street half a block. When they passed a small alley, she pulled him into the shadow between the two buildings. She glanced around, but they were alone, save for a trash bin and a stash of cardboard boxes, blankets and empty whiskey bottles.

"What's this about?" He frowned down at her, shifting so she

remained hidden from the street by his large frame.

“I don’t want to be safe, Noah. I agreed for Reid to bring you in because Jack told me you were the smartest person he’d ever met. And you were ruthless. I want to find Archimedes, Noah. And I want him dead.”

* * *

THE DINER WAS dingy, grimy and dirty. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the chair down before carefully sitting in the booth.

Alessandra had run, but he would have her. Soon.

He shifted in his seat. His feet clung to the sticky floor and he grimaced. Carefully using two fingers, he opened the menu then couldn’t bear to hold the germ-infested plastic in his hands. He rubbed the table with two napkins to protect his skin from touching the filth.

“Are you going to order or keep cleaning?” A young woman with streaked blue hair and a tattoo on her neck stared down at him, chomping her gum.

He focused on the table, gripping his trousers. She was rude, but she was probably rude to everyone. He should ignore the urge. He had more important work to do.

“Come on, buddy. Either order or get out. I ain’t got all day.”

He pasted a smile on his face, but inside, his head throbbed, pounding at his temples. “Coffee. Three sugars. Cream. Not creamer, cream. The kind that comes from cows.”

“Freak,” she muttered and snagged the menu from him.

He clenched his fists and watched with an irritated gaze as she grabbed a cup, poured coffee into it and carelessly dumped in nondairy creamer.

As if he couldn't tell.

The waitress practically dropped the cup on the table. Coffee sloshed over the edge. She didn't even bother to wipe it down. She sashayed away to another booth where a smiling young man winked at her.

They ignored him. They always ignored him.

She wouldn't ignore him for long.

Abandoning the coffee, he stood and walked out the door. He took a half dozen steps and waited, an alley situated strategically behind him.

The girl ran out of the coffee shop. "You can't leave without paying!" she shouted.

"And you need to learn some manners."

He smiled and grabbed her neck in a calculated pressure, using twenty pounds per square inch directed at her carotid artery. He wanted her weak, not unconscious.

He dragged her behind an industrial waste bin out of sight. Car horns honked, but no one saw. They ignored. Everything. Everyone.

Her eyes grew wide. She whimpered, trying to break his hold.

"I don't think so, girl." With a smile, he slipped a knife from his pocket. "You're very rude," he whispered, pressing the knife against her side. "You must be taught a lesson." With a quiet

move he slit her shirt on the side and flicked the sharp knife through a layer of skin.

She opened her mouth, but before she could scream he covered her lips with his hand. He pressed her against the brick wall. "I won't be ignored," he said softly. "Or dismissed." He drew the knife around her torso, positioned the blade between her ribs and shoved it in.

She tried to scream, tried to bite him. "Don't bother," he said softly. "You're bleeding inside. You'll be dead soon."

The waitress tried to shake her head, then she blinked. Life faded from her eyes. He let her drop to the ground.

With practiced ease he slid his knife through her dress, baring her chest. He didn't look on her tattooed curves with desire. Just disgust.

He dragged his blade across the tainted pale skin of her belly, then stopped. She wasn't worthy of him or his attention. Marred with drawings and piercings.

Alessandra Cummings had none of those. Alessandra Cummings was perfect.

She'd run from him, though.

What a disappointment. He'd forgiven her the slight twice before, but this time she would have to prove herself worthy of him.

If she didn't pass the test...

She would. She would come to understand they belonged together. Had always belonged together. Just the two of them.

He stared down at the woman's body, then at his hands, bloody and uncovered. He tugged out a vial from his pocket and sprinkled the body with the concentrated accelerant he'd created.

The strike of a match and her body was engulfed in flames. He tugged his coat's cashmere collar around his neck and slipped down the alley before rounding the corner.

Behind him someone shouted.

Sirens screamed, but he didn't care.

Archimedes had a seduction to plan.

Chapter Two

In the midday light, the Chicago skyscrapers cast a shadow, smothering the alley with pockets of darkness. Noah studied Lyssa: her unwavering gaze, the determined set of her jaw, the circles beneath her eyes and her furtive glance at every hiding place, as if waiting for Archimedes to leap out at her.

"You're exhausted—" he started.

"Weary to the bone," she said, "but not too tired to know what I have to do."

Fatigue written on her pale face, she stepped into the light. The sun illuminated the small worry lines in her forehead. She'd changed so much. He hated seeing her this way. He wanted to wrap her in his arms, comfort her and take the pain away. He wanted to tell her everything would be fine.

It would be a lie, though. He knew the truth and so did she. Archimedes had found her three times. He would find her again eventually. Unless Noah stopped him.

“Are you going to help me kill him or not?”

She didn't back down, but Noah recognized the edge she teetered on. He'd been there. On every mission. The adrenaline rush that kept you going for a while—until you crashed, or made a mistake.

His plan to hide Lyssa away and then go after the serial killer himself exploded with the destruction of a rocket-propelled grenade. This was not the woman he'd met two years ago, the woman he'd envied his best friend over. The woman whose fluency in five languages intrigued him, whose nomadic childhood had shaped her desire to create a home with Jack. The joyously open woman for whom his friend had decided to give up fieldwork and take a desk job.

The woman Noah had fallen for before he'd realized how Jack felt about her.

No, he wouldn't go there. The woman standing before him had been through hell.

Noah knew the place well.

“Lyssa—” he began, not quite sure how—or if—he could convince her to stay at the safe house.

“Don't bother trying to convince me otherwise, Noah. I'm sick of being afraid,” she said. “I'm done with running from a man no one can catch.”

Her green eyes flashed with an emotion he couldn't pin down.

She finally sighed and raised her chin in steadfast resolve. “I'm tired of waiting to die.”

“I won’t let that happen.” Noah took a step toward her but she shook her head. He paused, then lowered the arm he’d reached out.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Noah. WitSec promised. Reid promised. The only person keeping his promise is Archimedes.” She shifted her bag on her shoulder. “I will find Archimedes. You can help me or I’ll go on my own. Either way, I’m finished postponing the inevitable. It will be over soon.”

Noah didn’t doubt her resolve for an instant, evoking a shot of admiration he hadn’t expected. Lyssa had turned into a warrior, and damn if he didn’t like her. A lot. Unfortunately, all that fire and vinegar would make his job a hell of a lot more complicated.

On so many levels.

If he’d met her in the field, he’d have been hard-pressed to keep his hands off her. He could imagine nights under the stars, working off the adrenaline of the mission in a too-small sleeping bag, hot, sweaty and satisfying.

As it was, she was Jack’s fiancée—even if his friend was dead. That meant hands off.

“Fine. I’m on my own.” Straightening her shoulders, she hesitated for a moment, peered up and down the street and the sidewalk, then took a step out of the alley.

What was she doing? He gripped her arm and pulled her into the protection of the building. Cornering her against the brick wall, he placed a hand next to her ear. “Hold on, Ally. I didn’t say I wouldn’t help you.”

With only an inch between them, he could feel the slight tremble rush through her. A crackle of awareness vibrated between them. He'd never risked being this close to her and he fought his body's immediate response. He breathed in deeply, taking in the scent of lavender, then clenched his fist to stop himself from touching her caramel-colored hair. He stared down at her and her eyes widened, her pupils dilated, her emerald eyes sparked in response.

This was not good, but he couldn't deny the truth. Even strained to the limit, she was breathtaking. And he wanted her. He'd always wanted her.

With a shake of her head, she pressed her hands against his chest. He didn't move. He didn't want her taking off again. If he was going to protect her, he had to make her see her vulnerability. "Ally—"

"Don't call me that," she hissed, and with a quick, evasive move, ducked beneath his arm.

"Lyssa then," he corrected, turning slowly. "Impressive. You've had self-defense training." He leaned closer, deliberately crowding her. "So, what's your plan to find Archimedes?"

"He wants me," she said, her voice matter-of-fact. "It's the one pattern I can predict. Unlike Reid and the Justice Department, I'm willing to use it. But this time on my terms."

"Become bait?" He studied her, from her eyes to her guarded stance. He recognized another layer of emotion in every pore of her body. Resignation. She was ready to die. Well, he wouldn't

let it happen. “Do you have a weapon?” he challenged.

She opened her purse. “.45 caliber, hollow point ammo. Got it on the black market. Untraceable. Not that I care.”

“Kimber 1911. A .45’s got quite a kick.”

“I spend hours every week on the range and at the gym. I can handle it. I like the rear sight. Besides, it’ll blow a hole in him.” Her eyes went frosty. “He won’t get up again.

“If he comes to my apartment while I’m there, I have a super-shorty 12-gauge shotgun.” She sent a pointed glance at the small ready bag at her feet.

He hadn’t seen this spine of steel in her two years before, but he’d learned over time you didn’t really know a person until they had their back against the wall. Jack had probably known Lyssa was a fighter, but she definitely had more guts than Noah had imagined.

“The WitSec marshal was armed, and he had more training and experience,” Noah said, his voice soft and low. “Archimedes killed him. What makes you think you can do better?”

She clutched her purse—and the weapon—closer, but a flash of regret marred her expression before she shoved it away. She hadn’t perfected cloaking her emotions the way Noah had. She’d learned to quell them, though. Noah hated she’d been forced to use the skill. His ability to turn off his feelings made him doubt his humanity sometimes. It also gave him the ability to think on his feet. Lyssa had thrown him a curve. He’d have to adjust.

“How long have you been planning to go after him?” he asked.

“Since Reid brought me to Chicago. I knew if the FBI couldn’t locate him and put a case together, he’d eventually find me. I can’t risk...”

She swiped her hand down her face.

“Risk what?” Noah asked, watching as her face turned to stone before she averted her gaze. Noah’s instincts pinged a warning, that gut feeling that had kept him alive all these years. Every time he’d ignored the signs, he and his men had paid a heavy price. She was hiding something from him. Something important. “You’re taking a huge chance pulling out of WitSec. They have resources. Why are you really doing this, Lyssa?”

She zipped her purse and lifted her duffel to her shoulder. “WitSec failed Gil. And me. If I stay in the program, I’ll die anyway. Isn’t that enough reason?”

Her gaze shifted to the left. Why was she lying? He was here to help. He lifted the bag from her shoulder and his hand brushed her skin. The touch made his nerves tingle. He wanted to pull her close but he couldn’t. She was Jack’s. Instead, he shoved the urge aside and shouldered the duffel. “Reid wants you safe.”

“If he told you to hide me, just go home.” She reached out a hand for her things. “I won’t fight you and Archimedes. I can’t.”

Noah gripped the straps tighter. “Jack wouldn’t want you to die, Lyssa.”

Her arm dropped and she stumbled back as if he’d punched her. Noah refused to regret the words. Sometimes the end justified the means. He would keep her alive.

He owed Jack.

She swiped at her eyes, then blinked. “That was a cheap shot.”

“Did it work?”

She studied him, crossing her arms, feet apart, ready for battle.

“Okay, Mr. Hotshot Spy Guy, what would you do? According to Reid, the FBI task force has no leads. Even when only Reid and Gil knew my location, Archimedes found me. He killed Gil and left me a message—”

“What message?” Noah interrupted. “Reid didn’t mention a message.”

“He wants me to be his. It was painted on my wall. In Gil’s blood.”

Her expression had frozen like stone, but Noah could see the effort in maintaining control. First the muscle at the base of her neck twitched, then her teeth bit into her lip. Finally, her shoulders slumped as if the energy required to keep up the front collapsed.

“No...no one else will d-die—” her voice broke “—because of me.”

Here was a glimpse of the woman who cared, the woman Jack had fallen for, who wore her emotions for all to see. She might try to put up walls, be a cold-blooded vigilante, but even Lyssa couldn’t keep her soft heart solid all the time.

Noah scratched his chin in resignation, the stubbly new beard not quite grown in yet. He’d thought he’d be heading back to Afghanistan before this call. “If I put you in a safe house, you

won't stay, will you?"

"He'd find me," she said flatly. "So, what's the point?"

Noah slipped his secure phone from his pocket. "If we do this, we need help. Right now Archimedes has the upper hand. We don't know who's giving him information or how he's getting it."

Lyssa grabbed his arm. "I told you. There's a leak."

"I'm not calling WitSec or even the higher-ups in the Justice Department," he assured her. "Covert Technology Confidential is different. CTC isn't government. Highly paid, highly screened. I've put my life in their hands more than once."

She tugged at a gold chain around her neck. "I don't know..."

"Lyssa, look at me."

He wanted to see her face. He had to convince her.

She lifted her chin and those green eyes met his gaze with an unflinching challenge.

"I'm good at what I do, Lyssa. So are the people I work with. We can find Archimedes. We can take him." He clasped her shoulders, slid his hands to her elbows, down her arms, then squeezed her ice-cold fingers. "Jack trusted me. So can you."

She swallowed, and the gulp echoed between them. She looked down at the bag holding her weapon. One breath. Two breaths.

Had he persuaded her? He had this one chance. If she didn't choose to go with him, he'd have to do something he really didn't want to do—take her to the safe house against her will. He prayed she'd put her faith in him.

“Jack trusted you,” she said finally. “I’ll give you a chance, but if I get bad vibes, I won’t say goodbye. I’ll just disappear.”

“And I’ll be chasing after you until this is over.”

Noah let one of Lyssa’s hands go and dialed a number on the cell phone.

“Falcon?” the familiar voice answered through the phone. “Surprised to hear from you.”

Ransom Grainger, the head of CTC—formerly known as Hunter Graham, formerly known as Clay Griffin and a dozen other aliases—used Noah’s code name casually.

“Pretty good,” Noah said. “How’d you know it was me. This phone is secure.”

“Not from Zane.” Grainger chuckled. “It’s a good thing he’s on our side.... What are you doing in Chicago?”

“I need a favor,” Noah said, ignoring further proof of CTC’s tracking prowess. He’d need every advantage. “It’s a big one.”

“Name it.”

Lyssa pulled from his grip. Noah tried not to consider the loss of her touch. When she tugged at her bag, he slid it from his shoulder. She walked across the alley, crouched down and rummaged through her purse. She didn’t fool Noah. She listened intently to every word he said. One misstep and she’d take off.

“I need a full team. We may have to tap into WitSec. Maybe even an FBI task force.”

Grainger let out a low whistle. “I’ve got an insider—”

“No good. I have it from a top-notch source there’s a leak.”

A low whistle escaped from Grainger. “That’ll be harder,” he said, “but it can be done. You know better than anyone how to circumvent—”

“It’s Archimedes.”

At the mention of the serial killer’s name, Lyssa’s fingers fumbled momentarily at the duffel’s zipper, then she shook it off. She yanked a sheath from the bag, followed by a knife. Noah couldn’t take his eyes off her. With practiced moves she attached the weapon to her ankle. God, she had guts.

Grainger went silent. “What are you into, Noah? That guy makes some of our intelligence operatives look like amateurs.”

“Long story. I’m standing across the alley from the only woman to survive an attack by Archimedes. She needs help. He’s found her. Again.”

Lyssa didn’t pause this time. She removed her ragged coat, slipped on a shoulder holster and fitted the oversize garment over the weapon. Yeah, she definitely knew her way around a firearm.

He understood the move. She’d decided to give him a bit of room, but she wasn’t trusting anyone with her safety—not him, not CTC. She had armed herself with easy access to the .45 and her knife.

“What do you need?” Grainger asked. “Safe house?”

“She wants to track him down and eliminate him.” Noah lowered his voice. “She wants to be bait.”

The sound of drumming fingertips filtered through the phone. “It’s risky.”

“I know.” Noah said. “If you can’t do it—”

“I didn’t say that. If half of the murders they’ve assigned to him are true, he needs exterminating. I’ll pull Rafe, Zane and Elijah.” Grainger paused and Noah could almost hear the man he had once called partner thinking through every conversation they’d ever had. “She must be important.”

Noah’s memories of a flag-draped coffin lingered in his mind, of the woman broken and sobbing, struggling to remain standing. No comparison to the warrior she had become. “She is.”

“Expect the team in a few hours at Chicago Executive Airport. Elijah will want a firsthand look at the crime scene.” Grainger let out a long, slow breath. “You want this done so the feds can prosecute?”

“Not necessarily,” Noah said as he took in Lyssa’s strained features. “I want her safe.”

“You got it. No rules.”

Grainger hung up, and Noah pocketed his cell. He faced Lyssa. “They’ll be here soon.”

“You trust them?”

“They’re smart, savvy and won’t run from a fight,” Noah said. “And they’ve saved my life more than once. Kind of like Jack.”

She shoved her hands into the pockets of her wool coat. “I can’t afford to pay you,” she said. “Everything I made while in WitSec has gone to training and weapons.”

“I owe Jack my life.” Noah gritted his teeth until his jaw ached. When he, Jack and Reid had started out in the Marines

together, they'd covered each other's backs. That had never changed. Once Jack proposed to Lyssa, he'd taken a job stateside. Supposedly safe, to live out his life with Lyssa. He wasn't supposed to die at the hands of a madman in his own home. Noah would keep that oath. He'd cover Jack's back this time. "The last thing you need to worry about is money."

"Thank you."

"Thank me when Archimedes is behind bars."

"Or dead," Lyssa said, her gaze pointed. She pulled a piece of paper out of her bag. "Since Archimedes is obviously in Chicago and found my apartment, we should—"

Noah lifted his hand. "Hold on. You may have had an idea how you want to run this operation, but I'm in charge now. Archimedes has the upper hand at the moment. I want to put him off balance. We do this my way, Lyssa. I tell you when to run, to duck, to jump. I don't want an argument. We're switching up the game."

Lyssa frowned at him. "I let Gil pick my location, set up the meetings. Look what happened to him."

"I'm better than WitSec. So is my team." Noah crossed his arms. He'd do anything to keep her safe, even risk her anger. As long as she didn't run, they had a chance. "Are we in agreement?"

She paused, chewing on her lip. "I keep my weapons?"

Noah nodded.

"If we're not in immediate danger, then I want input. You'll listen?"

Damn, she was tenacious. He liked that about her, so he told her the truth. “You know Archimedes better than anyone. I’d be a fool not to take advantage. But I also know a few things about strategy and egomaniacal killers. I get final say.”

Lyssa studied him, her green eyes intelligent and thoughtful. “I won’t stay if I think we’re losing ground. I won’t spend another year in hiding. I just can’t.”

There it was, that small break in her voice, the vulnerability that clutched his heart and squeezed it into submission. He couldn’t afford his emotions to take over, and yet he couldn’t stop himself from these strange feelings that bubbled inside. He shoved the distraction away.

“CTC is bringing in a forensics expert, a computer tracker and...muscle. We’ll finish the job.”

“And what will you do, Noah? Besides try to take over.”

“Me?” He pulled out a small coin and handed it to her. “I play with toys. Put it in your pocket. Keep it with you day and night.”

She stared at what looked like a quarter and held it in her hand, giving him a suspicious glance. “Why give me a quarter?”

“It’s a tracking device. Pretty much unlimited distance. I want to know where you are at all times.”

“So, if Archimedes takes me and kills me, you’ll find my body,” she stated flatly.

Noah clasped her arms, the cheap wool coat scratchy under his palms. He pulled her to him. “Where’s your faith, Lyssa? You showed me enough bravado to go after him. Now you have help.

The best there is. We're not going to fail you. We'll keep you safe."

"Jack believed he could protect me from anything. He was trained. Archimedes killed him."

She shook her head, her gaze falling to the ground. "That psycho found me even when they removed my case from local jurisdiction and took it to the D.C. office. As much as I want to, I can't believe in you, Noah." She lifted her chin, her gaze unwavering and honest. "I can't afford to believe in anyone."

Chapter Three

Darkness had fallen over the city. More shadows, more hiding places. Lyssa crouched in the alleyway across from her apartment, four men at her back. They'd been waiting here over an hour. The temperature had dropped even more. Her fingers twitched. She pulled the coat tighter around her but couldn't stop the shiver.

"Here," Noah said, wrapping a soft scarf around her neck and rubbing his hands over her arms. "We'll get you someplace warm soon."

"No police," Rafe Vargas commented from his position just behind them.

She peered over her shoulder. The former Green Beret looked as if he could kill without caring—not unlike Archimedes—except Rafe's expression wasn't crazy; it was tortured. The patch over his left eye gave him the look of a pirate, but something in his expression when he'd exited the private plane and taken her

hand in his had made Lyssa pause. He wasn't a killing machine. He was a man who did what he had to do. All these CTC operatives seemed to share that trait.

For the first time in a long time she wondered if they had a chance to get Archimedes.

"Reid is as good as his word," Noah said. "He'll call in the murder tonight. Until then, we have unfettered access to the crime scene."

"He could get fired for not reporting," Zane Westin murmured behind them. "Especially since it's Archimedes." The operative specialized in electronic surveillance, but his bulk made Lyssa wonder at his other skills. He looked nearly as dangerous as Rafe.

"It'll be obvious the body has been there for twenty-four hours," Elijah interjected. The forensics expert carried some sort of large case. "Even the county medical examiner could figure that out based on core body temp, much less the FBI task force." He snapped on his gloves. "When can I get inside?"

"Reid should be here by now," Noah muttered, glancing at his watch.

Narrow lines of worry deepened between his brows causing prickles of alarm to raise on Lyssa's arms.

Behind her, Rafe, or the enforcer as she'd come to think of him, adjusted his eye patch. "Maybe the leak has him running cautious."

"Could be." Noah checked his phone again.

The streets had grown quieter; rush hour had ended. Lyssa

shifted her position again. The men remained completely still, as if they were used to waiting endlessly. She couldn't tamp down the tension. She twisted her fingers and scooted forward.

Noah tugged her back by the coat. He gave her a slight smile. "We've got this."

"I know what's up there," she said. "What if Archimedes is watching?"

Noah turned to Zane, who studied his laptop. "You ID'd the street's security and traffic cameras?"

The computer expert nodded. "A couple of subjects have come into view based on the anemic descriptions of Archimedes. None of them stayed. All of them met someone and walked off. Archimedes is a loner. He's not here. Not in view." Zane adjusted his screen. "By the way, I hacked into the system. I have control of the cameras now."

Noah grinned. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"I never knew you cared." Zane tapped a few keys. "Still nothing. Reid's nowhere in sight."

Lyssa chewed on her lower lip. She had a bad feeling. She chanced a look at Noah.

His expression had grown solemn. Another scan of his phone. "Turn the cameras off, Zane. I don't want a record of Lyssa returning to that apartment. Not while the body is there."

Zane hit a few keystrokes. "Done."

"We can't wait for Reid any longer. Let's move out."

Elijah took point. He'd slipped his forensics case into a

box and walked across the street as if he belonged. His entire demeanor had changed. Head bowed, he gave the impression of someone exhausted, going home from work, maybe who'd just been fired.

Noah placed his arm around Lyssa's shoulders and pulled her against his side. His warmth drove away the chill from the weather, but with each step across the sidewalk, then into the street, she tensed against him. She had to stop; she needed to look around.

Her feet stopped moving. He pushed her forward, smiling down at her. "We're lovers," he whispered into her ear. "We're going home, and that old woman thinks we're eager to do the horizontal mambo. She's jealous."

He kissed the tip of her nose and led her toward the apartment building. "Relax. Almost there."

She tried. She wanted to sink into the heat of him, to forget everything and let him lead, but she couldn't. She couldn't allow herself to be vulnerable and unaware. If she'd been better prepared, better trained, she could have done something the night Archimedes attacked. Maybe Jack would still be alive. Maybe they would be a family, with a white picket fence, a baby and another on the way.

Ultra-aware of the movements around her, she caught sight of Rafe and Zane moving in opposite directions, then circling back. If she hadn't been watching for them, she would never have seen the tactic. These guys knew what they were doing.

Lyssa tried not to have too much hope, but a small fire ignited to life in her gut. Not big—she'd been singed before—but enough of a spark that she wondered if she might actually get out of this alive. She'd fully expected her confrontation with Archimedes to end with at least one of them dead, probably both.

As long as Archimedes couldn't hurt anyone else she loved, Lyssa could live with that. But now, maybe... She clung to Noah. He tightened his hold in return. She hadn't felt this way for a long, long time. Not since Archimedes had found her and forced her to make the toughest decision of her life.

Once they entered the apartment building, the subterfuge ceased. They headed straight up the stairs and down the empty hallway.

“Key?” Noah held out his hand. She gave it to him. He rotated the lock and pushed in the open door.

He stepped into the room, then stilled. Lyssa knew exactly what he saw. The memory of Gil's body and mutilated face had burned itself into her brain.

After several seconds he faced her, his expression completely calm except for a fury blazing in his eyes. Then the rage fled, replaced with a sympathy that made Lyssa's throat thicken as the emotions she'd fought to suppress resurfaced.

“You don't have to come in,” he said, his deep voice soft and laced with compassion.

Part of her wanted to run, part of her always wanted to run, but she refused to give in. Archimedes had won too many battles.

No longer.

“You might need me,” she said, following him into the apartment.

“What a psycho,” Elijah muttered, walking past her and kneeling next to the body.

“Search all the rooms,” Noah ordered. “Look for anything out of place.”

Zane and Rafe fanned out, beginning with the kitchen. Lyssa couldn't take her gaze away from Gil. Noah grabbed Lyssa's shoulders and turned her toward him. “Don't.”

“I can handle it,” she said, shrugging away from his grasp. “I have to.”

She faced the room, forcing herself to study each shelf, each generic knickknack, each bit of decor she'd added to allay the landlord's suspicions she might have something to hide. There had to be a clue.

Nothing stood out.

“I don't notice—”

“Damn it,” he whispered under his breath, gripping her arm and stepping back. He pulled out his phone and hit a couple of codes. “Zane,” he called. “Get in here. Elijah, finish fast.”

Lyssa froze at the urgency in his voice. What did he see?

Zane exited the bathroom and Noah tilted his head toward the living room. “We've got eyes. Check out the ivy.”

Lyssa followed his gaze to the plant stand in the corner of her living room. A round electronic lens sat tucked on the edge of

the pot.

“A camera?” she asked. Her body shivered. “Someone’s watching? Now?”

“Move it, Rafe,” Noah shouted. “We’re on the clock.”

Zane pulled out a palm-size screen. “Your jam is working. Audio and video.” He studied the device, then hooked his handheld to one of the wires. Furiously he tapped his screen. “Come on, just a little longer.”

His fingers quickened, but he started shaking his head. “I can’t trace it. He has the signal bouncing all over the world.” Finally Zane shoved the gadget into his pocket and disconnected the camera with a scowl. “He’s good. Maybe I learned a few of his tricks.”

“It better be more than a few,” Noah said. “We can’t afford to miss any opportunities. He knows we’re onto him. If you know his ploys, he knows some of yours.”

“You’re sure it’s Archimedes and not WitSec?” Lyssa asked, praying. She might be embarrassed that she’d run through the living room first thing in the morning with little more than a pair of panties on, but it was better than the alternative. Archimedes watching. “How long has it been there?”

“WitSec doesn’t have the funds to set up this kind of toy.” Zane knelt in front of the plant. “When’s the last time you watered it?”

“Yesterday morning before work,” she said.

“Then my guess is Archimedes set this up when he killed your

handler. He had a lot of time in this apartment. He wanted to see you find the body. Bastard probably gets off watching you be afraid.” Zane snagged the camera and slipped it into a plastic bag. “I’d like to turn the tables on him.”

Noah’s warm body stepped in close behind hers, pulling her against him. Despite her need to stay strong, Lyssa shivered at his nearness. She couldn’t stop herself. She leaned into his comforting strength. She’d been fighting this battle alone for so very long. “He’s sick.”

“And obsessed.”

Rafe came out of the bedroom. “The room’s clean except for one anomaly. Lyssa, did you move your jewelry box recently?”

Lyssa placed her hand at her throat. “Yes.”

“Then we’re clear except the hall closet. Do you normally keep it locked?”

The question sent unease rolling through her. “I didn’t even know it locked.”

Noah’s posture stiffened. “Stay with Rafe,” he said softly.

Noah and Zane walked down the hall. Lyssa couldn’t keep away. She had to know. Rafe’s intense presence shadowed her. She peeked around the corner. Noah knelt down and in seconds sprang the knob free.

“He’s the best,” Rafe whispered. “Does that like he was born breaking and entering.”

Noah opened the door.

A man’s body tumbled into the hallway. She recognized the

military cut, the square of his jaw. “Reid!”

Lyssa shoved forward and knelt beside Noah. The U.S. Marshal had been bound and gagged, his head bashed in, blood soaking his shirt.

Lyssa’s hands placed her fingers on his wrist, searching, praying for a pulse. He looked too pale.

Noah tore off the duct tape. “Who did this, buddy?”

Reid’s eyes flickered. “Warn...” was all he said before his head lolled to the side.

“Oh, God.” Lyssa placed her hand over his chest. She could barely detect a heartbeat.

Noah leaned over and pressed two fingers against the man’s carotid artery. “He needs an ambulance. Fast.”

Zane tapped his earpiece. “Well, he’s going to get help sooner than we expected. Someone called in an attack to this address. Cops are on their way.”

Noah’s expression turned to stone. “We’ve been set up. Out now.”

Lyssa grabbed his arm, her fingers digging into him. “You aren’t going to leave Reid, are you?”

She couldn’t believe this. Jack had said Noah was loyal. She’d believed it. Had she been wrong about him?

He faced her. “Archimedes knows you have help. He knows we’re here. If we get hauled down to police headquarters, he knows where to find you.” Noah knelt by Reid, checking his pulse again. “An ambulance is coming. Elijah will make sure

Reid makes it to the hospital, but we have to go.” He looked at Elijah. “You get photos of the body?”

The forensics specialist nodded.

“Then we’re out of here.”

Zane peered out the window. “Black-and-whites. We’re out of time.”

“Take the fire escape,” Noah ordered her.

Lyssa climbed onto the landing, his words finally sinking in. She paused. “Archimedes knows about you. Oh, God. What have I done?” She should never have called Reid. She should have done this alone. She was a fool.

Noah frowned at her. “Don’t go shaky on me now, Lyssa. He would have known soon anyway. Hopefully it will irritate him enough he’ll make a mistake.”

“He hasn’t yet, Noah.” Lyssa took a deep breath, regret weighing heavy on her shoulders. “You’re all in danger. I’m so sorry...”

Noah climbed a few steps down the ladder on the side of the building. “But we also learned that his obsession has escalated. He never left cameras before. He’s getting desperate, and desperate men make mistakes. It’s only a matter of time.”

A matter of time before more people died. Lyssa didn’t know if she could live with any more of Archimedes’s “messages.”

She peered over the side of the building, down the rickety fire-escape ladder. Noah stared up at her, his stance confident, waiting for her, ready to catch her. She looked into his chocolate

brown eyes.

Noah emitted certainty with every decision, every move, and Lyssa only knew one thing for sure. Now that Noah was in her life, he wouldn't willingly leave. Not as long as he breathed.

When she'd decided to confront Archimedes, she'd thought she'd be on her own—like always. Then Noah had come into her life. She'd been so determined she hadn't considered she'd be putting him and his team at risk.

What had she done?

* * *

THE FIFTY-INCH monitor flickered in the darkness. Archimedes sat forward in a leather chair in the pristine penthouse suite and watched the snow-filled screen.

“Alessandra, Alessandra,” he said with a cluck of his tongue. “Haven't you learned?”

He typed in a few commands and the monitor cleared, but this time the room was empty. Except for his promise in blood.

They thought they could outsmart him. They might have disabled his signal and even taken one camera, but he never moved forward without a contingency plan. The second device worked perfectly.

Police flooded the room, then cordoned it off; they looked like little ants scurrying about on his screen. They'd be looking for Lyssa soon. WitSec would get involved. His little bird would sing to him all the information he needed.

As for Alessandra, he would have to be more clear with his

message the next time.

He picked up a perfectly sharpened pencil and brand-new notepad from the walnut desk beside him. Switching signals, he rewound the tape, pausing the moment she'd entered the room.

She had been holding the hand of another man. A man who wanted her. Archimedes could see the desire in the intruder's eyes, in the way he infected Alessandra with his touch.

The pencil-tip broke.

He tossed the offending implement into the garbage can and took a second pencil. He stilled the tape.

"You belong to me," he whispered. "I am your destiny. We've waited ten years to be together. Nothing will stop us now."

A printer whirred and his rival's face stared back from the image it produced. "No one will stop us."

He walked to the closet and pulled out a new coat. He placed the bloodstained cashmere overcoat in the fireplace, sprinkled a small amount of accelerant and lit a match.

The fire exploded in warmth and the flames danced in celebration, consuming the evidence linking him to the waitress's unplanned death. Such a waste, but he refused to make a mistake. Not so close to having her.

Another lesson was in order.

Alessandra would be his.

And the man she leaned on—he would pay a heavy price for wanting her.

* * *

THE SMELLS AND sounds of Chicago's nightlife rang through the air: Italian spices, succulent barbecue, rumbling traffic, the clink of glasses, a few far-off sirens and laughter. Noah clutched Lyssa's resistant hand, anchoring her to his side. The city never turned completely dark, but that didn't mean peril didn't lurk in the shadows, no matter how inviting the music in the bars or how many people milled around enjoying the atmosphere.

Noah didn't want to think about how comfortable and right Lyssa's hand felt in his. To everyone watching, they seemed to be a couple walking the streets of Chicago at dinnertime. No one would guess they were on the lookout for a serial killer—a man whose face and identity remained a frustrating mystery.

A darkened alcove appeared just ahead. Noah slowed. The danger prowling just out of sight reminded him more of Afghanistan than a business district in one of America's largest cities. He scanned each potential vulnerability before he allowed Lyssa to move forward.

She wasn't any less vigilant. Her free hand hovered near her .45, poised for combat. He'd want her in his corner if he had to fight it out. He had no doubt she wouldn't give up in the midst of a battle. Which wouldn't be a problem as long as they were on the same page. If their plans of attack diverged, Noah could see fireworks in their future, and not the pleasurable kind.

Lyssa motioned left at the corner, and he swiftly circled to keep his body between the street and her. In front of a small mom-and-pop diner she stopped. He glanced at the hours posted

on the glass. They'd be open a while longer, until 11:00 p.m.

"How often do you come here?" he asked.

"I stop by every few days or so for coffee. I try not to be predictable, and I pay cash," she added. "For everything."

"It's not realistic to go somewhere only once," he said, "even if it's ideal. You learned the game well."

"But not well enough." She didn't try to keep the bitterness from her voice. "You think he saw me here?"

"It's worth asking. We can't leave any possible lead untouched. Archimedes won't."

She fingered the chain at her throat. "I hate having a target on my back."

"I understand," Noah said. "Believe me." The last year or so overseas, chatter had started. The Falcon had become too well known. Some part of him relished the idea that his reputation alarmed the terrorists, but he knew if he was ever caught, if they ever discovered his identity, it would make the torture his friend Daniel Adams had survived look like amateur hour.

Noah had discovered intel that Daniel's abduction had partly come about because his enemies had put a price on the Falcon's head. Daniel was caught in the cross fire and ended up being captured in the process. One more person to whom Noah owed a debt. One more reason he should keep his activities secret from everyone.

He opened the door and Lyssa stepped inside. The scent of well-used fryers filtered through the room. The diner was like

a thousand others with a pass-through window connecting the kitchen and dining room. A muscle-bound cook flipped a burger, dumped an order of fries and then slid a plate through to the shelf.

“Order up.”

“Lyssa?” A woman with a freckled face smiled and walked over. “Usual table? Take a seat. I’ll be right there.”

“Usual table?” Noah raised an eyebrow.

“I should have stopped coming here,” she said, grimacing. “Chastity has way too good a memory.”

“Which might be to our advantage.”

Noah escorted Lyssa into the small room and they took a seat. Chastity came over with a large smile. “How’s it going? You’re here late. Then again, so am I. They called me in. Your usual?” She tugged a worn order pad from her pocket.

Noah didn’t need another moment to peg Chastity. She wore her role with ease, knew the right thing to say. She’d obviously been a waitress a long time. Knew the game and was good at it. He bet she got good tips and could’ve worked anywhere, but he’d noticed the cook’s attention linger on her a little too long as he’d handed over a plate. Not to mention her slight blush at the attention.

She worked here because of him.

“I’m not really hungry,” Lyssa said. “How about a cup of hot tea?”

The woman turned to Noah. “And for you?”

Noah gave her a smile. “Coffee. And do I see homemade

blueberry pie over there?”

She blushed. “Yes, sir. I baked it myself earlier.”

He’d known. The blueberry stains under her nails gave her away. “Can’t pass up blueberries,” he said with a wink.

Chastity giggled and sent Lyssa a grin. “He’s a keeper.”

She left them alone. Lyssa leaned across the table. “What are you doing?” she whispered through clenched teeth. “Are you trying to grab Archimedes’s attention? You’re being memorable. I thought being invisible was the first rule.”

“Chastity will remember more easily if she’s not suspicious,” Noah said. “Besides, we’re not following the rules any longer. Relax. You’re making me tense.”

“I should have seen it. You want to make Archimedes angry,” she hissed. “I’m bait for a man who’s killed dozens of people. I have the right to be tense. Especially when you don’t tell me we’re going with my plan.”

She glared at Noah, daring him to deny it.

He couldn’t. He doubted their visit here would result in a hit, but maybe Chastity could provide information. “Your plan, with adjustments. Rafe’s watching.” Noah tilted his head toward the window.

Lyssa glanced outside. The operative stood near the bus stop, his eye patch and beard visible when he lifted his head in acknowledgment. Moments later, he returned to perusing the paper.

“I didn’t notice him tailing us. I thought he was observing the

cops.”

“He was. He switched off with Zane. Someone will always be watching, Lyssa. Our job is to never let you out of sight.”

Her leg bounced under the booth’s table. “He’s in plain sight. It’s a mistake. Everyone I’ve involved is now dead or in the hospital.”

“It’s our job, Lyssa. We do it well.”

She let out a long sigh. “Okay, then what do we do now?”

“Talk to Chastity, maybe luck into a description that will fit with some of the other sightings. Zane is reviewing Archimedes’s records. With Reid still unconscious, he had to force his way into the system. Elijah tried to tone down his smarts so he could make friends with the local CSIs. He’s checking out the crime scene information.”

Her lists twisted. “You won’t find anything. Trust me. My plan was easier. I sit in my apartment and wait for him. Let him come to me. Simple. Straightforward.”

“It gives him all the power—and the advantage. That’s the last thing I want to do.” Noah leaned forward. “Give me a few days to fine-tune an approach. For Jack.”

“You’ll use anything to get me to fall in line, won’t you?” Lyssa toyed with the necklace around her throat.

What was on the end of it escaped from beneath her collar. Noah recognized it. Jack’s engagement ring. The sight of the diamond twisted Noah’s gut. The memory haunted him in a different way from Lyssa. “You must miss him.”

“He shouldn’t have died that way.” Lyssa rubbed her ring finger, obviously trying to tamp down the memories. “Archimedes just shot Jack in the head.” She shivered. “He died for me.”

Noah placed his hand on hers and squeezed. “Always the hero.”

Lyssa swiped at a tear. “Yeah.”

“I miss him, too.” Noah swallowed down the regret. His friend had deserved to be happy. So had Lyssa. “Jack saved my life. And Reid’s. We were on special assignment. The whole thing went south. Jack was always the best shot. He came back for me and took out the sniper. He was a good man. I’d be dead without him.”

He met her emerald gaze. Something they had in common.

With a last push of the memories aside, Noah shifted in his seat. The past was over. He had a very dangerous present to deal with. “We’ll get Archimedes, Lyssa. I won’t stop until you don’t have to run. I left you once. I won’t do it again.”

Chastity walked over to their table with their order on her tray. Noah looked up at her with a smile, then he frowned. Perspiration dotted her forehead. Her skin had gone gray.

“Are you okay?”

She swayed then collapsed at his feet.

Noah vaulted from his seat and knelt beside her. Her muscles had gone rigid. She met his gaze, her eyes wide with fear. She tried to speak, but couldn’t move. He sniffed her breath. No odor,

but it had to be poison.

Her chest rose once, twice, then simply stopped.

“No!” Lyssa cried out.

He started CPR even though he knew she had no chance.

The cook dashed around the counter. “Chastity!”

A customer dialed for an ambulance.

Noah knew there was no hope, but he didn’t stop. He met Lyssa’s gaze and shook his head slowly.

She closed her eyes and stared down at her feet.

Then her lids widened. He followed her line of sight.

Chastity’s order book had opened.

On the very last page. Infinity.

Archimedes’s signature.

Just below the infinity he’d included a new, second symbol. A small spiral moving counterclockwise on the page, followed by two words.

I’m waiting.

Chapter Four

Lyssa sank to her knees and clutched Chastity’s hand. “No. Don’t let him do this.”

Praying it wasn’t true, Lyssa bowed her head. She could barely breathe. “Fight, Chastity. Fight him.”

The entire diner froze in shock.

Noah kept up the CPR for what seemed like forever. He paused and held his finger to her carotid. “I’m sorry,” he said, looking up at the cook, who hovered to Noah’s left. “She’s gone.”

“Oh, God, Chastity. You can’t be dead.” The cook’s pained voice pierced the crowd.

The waitress’s eyes stared wide at the ceiling, unseeing. With a grimace, Noah forced her eyes closed.

The diner erupted into chaos. A waitress screamed. A wave of panic hurled through the restaurant. Half the patrons ran out the front.

Lyssa gripped Chastity’s hand even tighter then squeezed her eyes tight. “This can’t be happening.” Chastity had done nothing to deserve this. She was a nice waitress who was good at her job, never hurt anyone.

“Why?” Lyssa looked up at Noah. “Why did he have to kill her?”

Noah didn’t answer, but then again, Lyssa didn’t expect one. What answer could there be?

“Damn him,” she said.

“Rafe, you see anything?” Noah hissed into the nearly invisible communication device.

The response couldn’t be good. The muscle in his jawline throbbed. “Meet us around back. We’re getting out of here.”

Noah leaned over and with two fingers picked up Chastity’s order book by the corner.

“What are you doing?” Lyssa said under her breath. “That’s evidence.”

“It won’t do the cops any good. And it’s our only clue.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. “Let’s go.”

Lyssa's teeth ground together, but he was right. God, she hated leaving Chastity, but the woman was gone. One more person she'd placed in Archimedes's path. One more reason she had to stop the serial killer.

She grabbed her purse and let Noah tug her through the few morbidly curious customers who lingered in the diner. She shoved into the kitchen. His gaze swept the room and she headed to the back door.

"We clear?" Rafe said into his microphone.

The cook ran into the kitchen, his cheeks wet with tears. "You're not going anywhere," he growled. "What did you do to my Chastity?"

He lunged at Noah. In a blur of moves Noah had the big man on his back, his forearm to the guy's throat.

"We didn't hurt her," Noah said, his voice low and deadly. "Now, when she picked up that last order, did she do anything different than normal? Was anyone else back here?"

Lyssa shoved her hand into her coat to grip her weapon. "Is he here?" Her half panicked, half vengeful gaze searched the kitchen then through the pass-through window at the few people left in the diner.

"This was a message not an attack." Noah pressed his arm harder against the guy's neck. "Answer the question. Who else was back here?"

The man struggled against Noah but couldn't escape the tight grip. Finally, the cook stilled and scowled up at his captor. "Why

do you care? You're running away. At least my other waitress, Sally, was willing to watch over Chastity, keep those vultures away. Only a coward would hide. Or the guilty.”

Noah lifted his arm and backed away. The cook sat up, holding his throat. Lyssa knelt next to him, taking in the man's grief-stricken eyes. “I know how you feel,” she said, her voice strained. “We know who did this. He killed my fiancé. Please, help us.”

The man's shoulders sagged, his big heart obviously broken. Another tear slid down his cheek. “She was excited. Some guy left her an envelope. He told her he'd stiffed her on a tip. She didn't remember that happening, but it was three twenties.” The cook's brow furrowed. “She remembers—” he swallowed “—remembered every customer. Who did this?”

Noah held out his hand to the man and helped him to his feet. “Archimedes.”

“The serial killer?” The cook's mouth gaped open. “I saw a news report about him. They called him a ghost.”

“Did you see Chastity talk to him?”

“The guy met her out back. No one saw him but Chastity.” The big man rubbed his bald head. “Oh, babe.”

“Where's the envelope Archimedes gave her?” Noah asked.

“She put it in her locker.”

“Get in here, Rafe,” Noah growled into the communication device.

Within seconds Rafe shoved through the back door, slamming

it open, gun raised.

“There’s an envelope in one of the lockers. The victim was poisoned, so be careful. Take one of the bills. Leave the others for the cops.” He nodded at Chastity’s order book, which had slid across the floor when he’d taken down Al. “Bag that, too. I want to know what he used. It acted fast.”

Rafe tugged a blue glove from inside his vest and headed through the door the cook pointed out.

Noah crossed his arms. “Listen to me carefully, Al.” The cook’s eyes widened. “Your name tag,” Noah pointed out. “Archimedes is after this woman.” He indicated Lyssa. “He’s killed a lot of people. We could use your help.”

“I couldn’t even protect Chastity.” Al looked as if he might collapse again. “Maybe the cops can help.”

“The feds can’t catch him, the cops can’t catch him. I will.”

Sirens sounded in the distance. The look on Noah’s face sent a chill through Lyssa.

“They’re coming. I need some cover, Al. If we get pulled into custody, she’s a sitting duck for this psycho.”

Al’s expression changed and he shoved up his shirtsleeve. He had a tattoo that read *Semper fidelis*. Always faithful.

“You get this guy, make him pay for what he did to Chastity and the cops don’t hear nothing from me except that envelope.”

Noah gave the man a sharp nod. “You got it, Marine.”

Rafe slipped back into the room, a baggie in his hand with a twenty-dollar bill showing. “There was a pin in the envelope.

Pricked her skin. Not much here. My guess is batrachotoxin because of the amount.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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