

MERLINE
LOVELACE

UNDERCOVER
WIFE



INTRIGUE ...

Merline Lovelace

Undercover Wife

«HarperCollins»

Lovelace M.

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Playing the part of Gillian Ridgeway's tourist husband might be OMEGA operative Mike Callahan's toughest assignment yet. Keeping his hands off the too-young, too-innocent, stunning novice field agent while they were supposed to act all lovey-dovey? Right. He'd have to rely on all his torture training and focus on their mission: to track down the source of a potentially deadly virus in Hong Kong. When their job was complicated by pint-sized scam artists who wiggled their way into Mike's heart, Gillian knew her undercover husband wasn't as jaded as he claimed. But to turn their cover into a real-life arrangement, first they'd have to come home alive.

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“You’ve seen what I can do, Mike,” Gillian said. “You know I don’t lose my cool when things go boom.”

“Maybe not on the firing range or at a trap shoot, Gillian. They’re a world away from the streets and sewers that spawn the kind of garbage we run up against.” His eyes never left hers. “The same streets and sewers spawned me. When I fight, I fight dirty. In ways a girl with a lifetime membership to the Rocks Springs Golf and Country Club would never stomach.”

“So that’s it.” Uncurling, she snapped her champagne glass down on the coffee table. It was time...past time...that Hawk opened his eyes and saw her as she was, not as he wanted to see her.

“First,” she said, “I stopped being a girl years ago. Second, I can handle whatever crawls out of a sewer. And that—” she stabbed her forefinger into his chest “—includes you, Michael Callahan.”

Bunching her fists into his shirt, she swooped in. The heat, the anger fused her lips to his. When he remained rigid and unresponsive, sheer stubbornness took over. She altered her angle of attack and covered her mouth over his.

Dear Reader,

I first visited Hong Kong on my honeymoon. I was a young lieutenant stationed in Taiwan at the time and absolutely fell in love with the fabled city that combined British ambiance with a Chinese history that went back for millennia. I remember thinking then that the broad boulevards and narrow, teeming alleys made the perfect setting for a novel.

I didn’t follow up on that thought until my husband and I went back to Hong Kong last year for a brief visit. Once again, the exotic mix of cultures captured my heart and my imagination.

So I hope you enjoy this tale of danger, intrigue and sizzling romance set against the backdrop of one of the world’s most dazzling cities.

Merline Lovelace

Undercover Wife

Merline Lovelace



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MERLINE LOVELACE

A retired U.S. Air Force colonel, Merline Lovelace served at bases all over the world, including Taiwan, Vietnam and at the Pentagon. When she hung up her uniform for the last time, she decided to combine her love of adventure with a flair for storytelling, basing many of her tales on her experiences in the service.

Since then, she's produced more than seventy action-packed novels, many of which have been on the USA TODAY and Waldenbooks bestseller lists. Over nine million copies of her works are in print in thirty-one countries. Named Oklahoma's Writer of the Year and the Oklahoma Female Veteran of the Year, Merline is also a recipient of the Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA[®] Award.

When she's not glued to her keyboard, she and her husband enjoy traveling and chasing little white balls around the fairways of Oklahoma. Check her Web site at www.merlinelovelace.com for news, contests and information about upcoming releases.

To my handsome husband and those magical days and nights in Hong Kong. Who wudda thunk the honeymoon would last for thirty-eight years and counting.

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Prologue

“What do you think it is?”

His voice muffled by his surgical mask, the pathologist at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Forensics Lab yielded his place at the electron microscope to his partner.

“Damned if I know,” the second scientist answered as he peered at the sample taken from the carcass. “It doesn’t match any known viral strains.”

He straightened, and both men’s glances went to the glass enclosure separating them from the creature stretched out on the autopsy table. It was a *nomascus concolor*, or Western black-crested gibbon, very rare and native to the jungles of Asia. The two pathologists had no idea how it had made its way to the ditch beside California’s Highway 101 where it had been found dead, its carcass pecked almost to pieces by crows. The fact that those same crows lay in lifeless heaps beside the gibbon raised an immediate red flag with the road worker who stumbled across them. Within hours, local authorities, worried about a possible outbreak of avian flu, had sealed and shipped the remains to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Forensics Lab in Oregon.

The pathologists performing the autopsy could confirm that bird flu had killed neither the monkey nor the crows. The mounting evidence of what had killed them scared the crap out of both scientists.

“Looks like we’ve got us a mutant virus,” the senior member of the team acknowledged reluctantly. “Very contagious and very deadly. We need to issue an immediate alert.”

The alert went out to all government agencies. The Centers for Disease Control reissued it to the civilian sector, where everyone not directly involved in health care or simian research pretty much ignored it.

Except for one individual halfway around the world. When the alert painted across the screen of a computer configured to search for such items, it was read with fierce, almost primal satisfaction.

“Soon.” Exultation shattered the stillness of the darkened room. “Soon my revenge will be complete.”

Chapter 1

The town house halfway down a side street just off Massachusetts Avenue, in the heart of Washington, D.C.'s embassy district, looked much like its neighbors. It boasted an elegant, federal-style facade and tall windows framed by black shutters. A short flight of steps led to an oak door painted in gleaming vermilion.

A bronze plaque beside the door identified the town house as home to the offices of the president's Special Envoy. The position was one of those jobs created to reward rich campaign contributors with a yen for a Washington office and a taste of power politics. Only a handful of insiders knew the Special Envoy also served as Director of OMEGA, a supersecret government agency with an elite cadre of operatives activated only in extreme emergencies.

It wasn't an emergency that had brought a small legion of agents in from the various ventures that provided cover in their civilian lives, however. They were gathered in the director's office to welcome back one of their own.

Elizabeth Wells had served as executive assistant to OMEGA's director for almost two decades. The silver-haired grandmother had fallen while doing a foxtrot on a big-band cruise of the Potomac with her latest beau. After hip-replacement surgery and months of rehab, Elizabeth was ready to resume her duties.

Three of her bosses were present for the homecoming. Adam Ridgeway, code name Thunder, had hired Elizabeth all those years ago. Tall and broad-shouldered, Thunder stood with one hand in the pocket of his hand-tailored slacks and a pained expression on his face while his wife—also a former operative and one-time OMEGA director—related the latest exploits of their youngest.

"Tank insists it wasn't his idea." With a rueful grin, Maggie Sinclair, code name Chameleon, continued her description of her son's assault on the hallowed halls of Harvard. "He also insists he did not position Terence atop the bust of John Adams, at the perfect angle to spit into the face of the dean of the Business School."

Terence, as the assembled operatives all knew, was the orange-and-purple-striped iguana Maggie had brought back from a mission in Central America years ago. The evil-tempered creature was the bane of Adam's existence. He'd been looking forward to its demise for as long as anyone could remember, but his wife and three children adored the damned thing. So much so that Adam Jr.—known to his family and friends as Tank—had carted off the lizard with him to enjoy the delights of his freshman year at Harvard.

Tank's sister took up the tale at that point. "You should have seen Dad's face when the dean called."

Laughter sparkled in Gillian Ridgeway's vivid blue eyes. She had her father's gleaming black hair and aristocratic features. From her mother, she'd inherited a flair for languages and an irrepressible sense of humor. On extended leave from her job with the State Department, Gillian had filled in as executive assistant to OMEGA's director during Elizabeth Wells's convalescence.

"Dad won't say what it cost to keep both Tank and Terence on the student rolls, but I suspect Harvard got a hefty endowment out of it."

"I suspect they'll get several endowments before Tank graduates."

That came from Nick Jensen, code name Lightning, OMEGA's current director. Lightning had headed the agency through three successive presidential administrations. Although he hadn't made a formal announcement, the betting was he'd resign the directorship after the upcoming election. When his wife, Mackenzie, surprised herself and everyone else by turning up pregnant with their first child, the bet had become a sure thing.

"There she is!"

Alerted by a glimpse through the window of a sleek limo gliding to a halt at the curb, Lightning strode out to greet his executive assistant. A few moments later he escorted the slender, gray-haired grandmother into his office.

Agents with code names such as Slash, Rogue, Cowboy, Diamond and Cyrene welcomed her with warm hugs. Elizabeth had tears in her eyes when Maggie gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze and Adam dropped an affectionate kiss on her cheek. While the champagne corks popped, Elizabeth dabbed her eyes with a lace-trimmed handkerchief before proceeding to stun the entire gathering.

“I have an announcement. I’m afraid my return is only temporary.”

Instant concern replaced the smiles and good wishes. Lightning’s voice went taut. “What’s happened? Did you experience complications you didn’t tell me about during my last visit?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.” Her pale blue eyes filled with a combination of chagrin and delight. “I’m getting married next month. Next week, if Daniel has his way.”

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Lightning recovered. “Daniel? Who the hell is this character, and why didn’t you let us check him out?”

“You did. Very thoroughly, as I recall. It’s Daniel Foster. Dr. Daniel Foster.”

“Your surgeon?”

“One and the same.” A hint of red crept into Elizabeth’s cheeks. “Apparently he thinks I have rather elegant hips, before and after the surgery. I think he just wants to admire his handiwork.”

Whoops erupted throughout the room. When they subsided and champagne flutes made their way into everyone’s hands, Lightning lifted his glass.

“To you and Dr. Dan. He’d better make you very happy or some extremely lethal undercover agents will show up on his doorstep.”

Several similar toasts later, Elizabeth brought up the subject of her successor. Her expression was as warm as her voice when she turned to Gillian.

“Lightning says you did a magnificent job covering for me, Jilly. Will you stay on, dear, until you decide whether you want to go back to the State Department?”

“Well...”

Lowering her lashes, Gillian twirled the stem of her champagne flute between her fingers. She’d planned to wait to make her own announcement. Since Elizabeth had set the stage, however...

“Actually, I am staying on. As an agent.”

“The hell you are!”

The explosive remark surprised everyone, including the operative it burst from. Red surged above the collar of Mike Callahan’s shirt collar as all heads turned in his direction, but the frown he directed at Gillian was fierce and unapologetic.

She answered the thunderous scowl with one of her quick smiles. “It’s a done deal. Uncle Nick gave his stamp of approval yesterday.”

“Not without considerable arm twisting,” her honorary uncle muttered under his breath.

Mike Callahan, code name Hawkeye, tightened his jaw. “You’re not trained for this kind of work, Jilly.”

“I’ll get the training.”

Gillian’s smile took on an edge that either of her siblings would have recognized in a heartbeat. “I held my own in Scotland. Didn’t I, Rogue?”

The tall, slender blonde she addressed nodded. “That you did, girlfriend.”

Yeah, Callahan thought savagely. And he hadn’t drawn a full breath until he’d put her on a plane for home.

A former military cop, he was a dead shot with every weapon in the government’s arsenal and a good number that weren’t. Hence his code name, Hawkeye, which most of his fellow agents shortened to Hawk. In his civilian life he was a marksmanship instructor at the Federal Law Enforcement Academy at Quantico, Virginia. He’d also taught all three of the Ridgeway off-spring to shoot.

Gillian-with-a-J had been the first. The J was a standing joke that went back to their initial meeting. All arms and long, long legs, the teenager had grinned up at him and introduced herself as Gillian, pronounced with a soft G, like in Jillian.

Hawk had lost part of his heart to the gangly teen right then and there. In the years since, he'd come damned close to losing the rest of it. Like most of the male agents at OMEGA, he was seriously in lust with the stunning, sensual creature Gillian Ridgeway had become. The woman could set off a firestorm in his belly with a single glance from those electric blue eyes.

He'd kept the fire in check, however. Despite the hints she'd been throwing his way recently, he knew damned well he was too old for her, too rough around the edges. He also knew that undercover work could be dangerous not only for him but for anyone who went into the field with him.

He looked at her now, his insides twisting as another face superimposed itself on Gillian's classic features. He could hear the splat of bullets tearing through the vines. Feel the vicious downwash of the chopper hovering above the canopy. See the sprawled, lifeless body of the woman he'd gone into the jungle with.

Slamming the door on the searing memory, he swung toward Gillian's parents. "You've both been field agents. You know what it's like. You're good with this?"

"Yes," Maggie said instantly, then flashed an annoyed look when her husband gave a less enthusiastic response.

"I'll admit I'm not particularly thrilled with the idea," Adam said coolly, "but I trust Gillian's instincts."

Christ! Hawk's gut kinked again. Couldn't they see she lacked the killer instinct? She was too refined, too educated, too damned beautiful to...

The sudden buzz of the phone on Lightning's desk sliced into Hawk's chaotic thoughts. The blinking red light that accompanied the buzz stiffened his shoulders.

He and everyone else in the room knew that blinking light was the direct line to the White House...and that they should clear out of the director's office, fast. Depositing their champagne glasses, they made for the door.

Maggie and Adam could have stayed. They'd both taken direct calls from past presidents and were still cleared at the highest levels. But Lightning now shouldered responsibility for OMEGA. Unwilling to intrude on his turf, they joined the general exodus.

The operatives headed for the elevator that would whisk them to the ultra-high-tech Operations Center on the third floor of the town house. Hawk hesitated several seconds before he, too, strode toward the elevator.

Adam's eyes were narrowed as he followed the man's progress. Maggie's were thoughtful. Hooking her chin, she signaled for Jilly to accompany her to the ladies' room just off the first-floor foyer.

"Okay, daughter of mine." Leaning her hips against the marble counter, Maggie crossed her arms. "Tell me again, no frills, no fuss. How much of your decision to join OMEGA's ranks stems from a real desire to work undercover and how much from a determination to prove to Mike Callahan that you're all grown up?"

Jilly didn't blink. "I'm one hundred percent...on both counts."

Maggie eyed her daughter for long moments. She knew Hawk's paternalistic and overly protective attitude irritated Jilly no end. The irritation had increased exponentially since their trip to Scotland. Maggie thought of all the advice she could offer and reduced it to one caution.

"Don't push him too hard, Jilly. You might not like it when he pushes back."

Her daughter's jet-black brows snapped together. She looked so much like her father when he was annoyed that Maggie's heart kicked over.

"You and Dad have known Hawk for years. This is the first time you've ever hinted that you have a problem with him."

“We don’t. We would trust him with our lives.”

“But not with your daughter. What do you know about him that I don’t?”

Maggie hooked a strand of golden-brown hair behind one ear, considering her answer. She’d cheerfully rip out the heart of anyone who threatened her husband or children. But she had to weigh that fierce, primal love against her loyalty to the men and women she’d lived, worked and sweated blood with for so many years.

“I don’t know the details,” she said slowly. “No one does. Hawk has never talked about why he left the military, but...”

“But?”

“Your father ran into his former commanding officer at some function or another. The general didn’t go into specifics, but he did say Hawk hung up his uniform after a botched mission in Central America. Hawk went in with two other operatives. One of them didn’t make it out. The general didn’t say so but the implication was he buried his heart with her there in that steamy jungle.”

“Her?” Jilly echoed softly. “That explains a lot.”

“I thought it might. Tread carefully, sweetheart.”

Maggie couldn’t resist giving her daughter’s silky black hair a gentle yank. Where was the wide-eyed toddler who’d pulled up the just-planted pansies to decorate her mudpies? What happened to the mischievous little girl who loved to dress an ungainly iguana in doll clothes, deposit him in her baby sister’s buggy and stroll nonchalantly around the block? When had the giggling teen with braces grown into this smart, self-assured woman?

With a silent sigh, Maggie gave her daughter’s hair another tug and shooed her out of the ladies’ room. “You’d better go see what that call was about, Special Agent-in-Training Ridgeway.”

She tried to contain her emotion as she watched Jilly make for the elevator, but her husband knew her too well.

“She’ll be okay.”

Adam forced a smile as he looked down into his wife’s face, but acid rolled around in his stomach at the thought of what lay ahead of his darling, his little princess. He’d been out there. So had Maggie. Her exploits in the field had aged Adam well beyond his years. Remembering those turbulent times, his smile relaxed into a rueful grin.

“She’ll be okay,” he repeated. “She’s her mother’s daughter.”

The atmosphere inside OMEGA’s third-floor Control Center left no doubt in Jilly’s mind. Something was up. Something big.

She’d been up to the busy Control Center any number of times while filling in for Elizabeth. But the realization that one of those amber lights on the digitized world map that took up an entire wall would soon represent her sent a shiver of excitement down her spine.

Most of the agents had already dispersed, some to milk OMEGA’s computers, some to work the phones. Lightning stood at the main console with Hawk, their eyes glued to the data scrolling across a monitor.

They couldn’t be more different, Jilly thought as she approached the two men. With his tawny hair, deep tan and sartorial elegance, Lightning looked very much like the sophisticated jet-setter he now was.

Mike Callahan, on the other hand, looked very much like the man he was. Tough, uncompromising, no nonsense. He was more rugged than handsome, with a square chin and a mouth that rarely smiled. He wore his dark brown hair cut military short. His gold-flecked hazel eyes missed little. So little that Jilly had always believed that’s how he’d come by his code name of Hawkeye.

Until she’d seen him shoot, that is. The first time had been at an International Law Enforcement Tri-Gun Competition. Her parents had taken her to watch the final round, where Hawk scored top honors in the handgun and heavy metal categories. To his disgust, he’d come in second in the shotgun

class. He rose to hero status in her eyes that day. She'd been trying to bring him down to the level of mere mortal ever since.

Soon, she vowed as both men acknowledged her arrival with a quick glance. Soon.

"What have we got?" she asked.

Her deliberate use of the plural produced a scowl from Hawk, but Lightning accepted her into the fold.

"Some sort of mutant virus," he replied in a grim voice. "Scientists at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Forensics Lab found it a week ago when they autopsied the carcass of a..." He glanced at the computer monitor in front of him. "A *nomascus concolor*."

Jilly didn't even try to pretend she knew what that was.

"It's a monkey," Lightning informed her. "Or rather, a gibbon. A species of small ape native to southern China and Southeast Asia."

He swiveled the monitor around to display a black, furry creature with tufts of white on his cheeks and impossibly long arms.

"It's the most critically endangered ape species in the world. Supposedly, its very scarcity makes it highly prized as a sacrificial offering in certain far-out religious cults."

The tiny ape on the screen stared back at Jilly with an inquisitive expression in his caramel-colored eyes. The thought of this cuddly little creature being carved up by religious fanatics raised goose bumps on her skin.

"Someone tossed the carcass of one of these gibbons into a ditch in California," Lightning continued. "Both the road worker who discovered it and the animal-control officer who responded to his call are now in intensive care. Their docs are still trying to find the right combination of drugs to combat the virus infecting them."

That was scary. Gillian knew all kinds of nasty diseases like HIV, SARS and Ebola were linked to primates. Now, apparently, a new one had appeared on the scene.

"How did this gibbon get into the States?"

"We don't know. But the bug that killed it has proved so virulent that Homeland Security tasked one of their top agents to track down the person or persons who brought it in." Lightning's voice went flat and hard. "That agent was found this morning in a back alley in San Francisco, with a bone-handled knife through his throat."

His glance cut to the operative standing stone-faced and rigid on the other side of the communications console.

"Hawk was just about to tell us why his name was the last word the agent uttered."

The clatter of keyboards and hum of voices in the Control Center stilled. A tense silence descended until Hawk broke it with slow deliberation.

"Charlie Duncan and I served together. A long time ago. In Special Ops. He saved my life. My guess is he was hoping I'd repay the favor by hunting down whoever put that shiv through his throat."

His rigidly controlled tone belied the feral light in his hazel eyes. For the first time in her life, Jilly was just a little afraid of him.

Her mother's warning rang in her ears. But as quickly as the goosey feeling came, she shoved it aside. This was Mike Callahan. The man who'd cradled her against his chest, corrected her aim and taught her to put nine out of ten rounds dead center. He was big, certainly. Gruff, sometimes. Hot as hell, always. She refused to be afraid of a man she fully intended to bring to his knees.

Unaware of his fate, Hawk zeroed in on Lightning. "I want this mission."

"You've got it."

"I'll fly out to California tomorrow, see what leads the locals have on Charlie's death."

"You might want to talk to the folks at the Centers for Disease Control here in D.C. first."

"Will do."

"I can help," Jilly said. "I spent three years in Asia. I could..."

“No.”

Hawk rounded on her.

“Listen to me, Gillian-with-a-J. We’re talking a potentially lethal virus. Possibly radical religious nuts. A cold-blooded killer or killers. That’s enough for me to handle without worrying about you running around playing amateur secret agent.”

Heat rushed into Jilly’s cheeks and fire into her eyes. Before she could let fly, Hawk raked a hand through his short-cropped hair and offered a grudging compromise.

“I don’t like the idea of you getting into this game. You know that. But... Well, it looks like you’ve made up your mind. I’ll mentor you, Jilly. Teach you some of the tricks of the trade I’ve picked up over the years. After I get back from this mission. In the meantime, I need you to stay out of my way.”

Mentoring was the last thing she wanted from Mike Callahan. This was hardly the time to tell him so, however.

“I’ll stay out of your way,” she promised, masking her anger with icy politeness, “but at least let me work my contacts at the State Department. They have a special desk tracking religious splinter groups. One of the analysts might have something we can use.”

“All right, but let me know immediately if you find anything.”

His tone implied that he was highly doubtful, and Jilly had to subdue a thoroughly unprofessional impulse to flip him the bird. The gesture would have been wasted in any case. He’d already turned his attention back to Lightning.

Chapter 2

Jilly steamed all the way to Foggy Bottom.

None of the other passengers on the Metro would have guessed she was pissed. She smiled her thanks to the tattooed kid who moved aside to give her room. She apologized to the Navy lieutenant she bumped into when the train took off. And she had herself well in hand when she exited the Metro and took the soaring escalator at the Foggy Bottom–George Washington University stop.

Foggy Bottom got its name from the mist that swirled through the low-lying area between the Potomac River and Rock Creek. The Bottom was home to a host of well-known institutions, including George Washington University, the Kennedy Center and the infamous Watergate Hotel. Most Washington pundits, however, believed the “fog” emanated from the government agency that took up an entire block on C Street.

The headquarters of the U.S. Department of State was a monolithic square of concrete and glass. Jilly could still remember the thrill that had danced through her when she mounted the front steps for the first time as a very new and very junior Foreign Service Officer. She suspected her father’s considerable pull had something to do with her acceptance into the highly competitive Foreign Service. That, and acing the Foreign Service Officers’ exam. The fact that she’d inherited her mother’s flair for languages and had snagged a graduate Fulbright scholarship to study Mandarin at Peking University hadn’t hurt, either.

Her linguistic skills had led to her first assignment as a cultural affairs officer in Beijing. Those three years had been exciting as hell but convinced Jilly she wasn’t the stuff bureaucrats are made of. She’d loved the people she worked with and fully appreciated the positive effects of cultural exchanges but hated the paperwork.

She’d returned from Beijing undecided about a career with the State Department. The months she’d spent filling in for Elizabeth Wells had settled the matter. As an OMEGA operative, she could still travel to exotic locations, still engage with people of all nationalities and political persuasions. But she wouldn’t have to write a twenty-page report after every contact.

Since she’d handed in her State Department ID along with her resignation, she had to wait at the visitors’ entrance for an escort. He emerged from the inner sanctum moments later and greeted her in fluent Mandarin.

“Nee hao, Gillian. Ching shou, nee huey lai dao State!”

Laughing, she shook her head and answered in kind. “Sorry, Don. I’m not returning to the fold. I’m here as a civilian. And a supplicant.”

Don Ackerman huffed in disappointment. He was one of several senior Foreign Service Officers who staffed the China desk. He’d tried every stratagem in his considerable repertoire to keep Jilly in his sector, including outright bribes and her choice of assignments.

“What can I do for you?” he asked after he’d signed her in and she’d processed through security screening.

“Point me to whoever’s handling radical religious cults these days.”

“You’re kidding, right? You know very well two thirds of our antiterrorist division is working that threat.”

“This one doesn’t sound jihadist, unless they’ve gotten into animal sacrifice.”

“Animal sacrifice?” Don scratched his chin and led the way down a long corridor. “We’ve got several of those. The most visible is the Santeria sect in south Florida. But the Supreme Court decided their ritual sacrifice of chickens during ceremonies is an expression of religious freedom, so we don’t classify them as radical anymore.”

“How about monkeys? Or small apes?”

Ackerman's lips pursed. He was a big man, going soft around the middle these days, but still possessed the encyclopedic knowledge of world cultures that had made him a legend at State.

"That sounds more like the Vhrana Sect." He came to a full stop in the hallway. "They're bad news, Gillian. What's your interest in them?"

Although she suspected State had received the same urgent missive Lightning had, Jilly hadn't been cleared to discuss it with anyone outside OMEGA. All she could tell Don was a basic version of the truth.

"I'm doing some research for the agency I now work for."

His penetrating gray eyes drilled into her. "You'd better talk to Sandra Hathaway. She's our Vhrana expert."

Sandra Hathaway was a dark-haired, intense analyst. The kind, Jilly guessed, who doled out information sparingly to folks in the field. She hunched over her computer and made no effort to disguise her annoyance at the interruption. Her irritation morphed instantly into a closed, guarded expression when Don mentioned the Vhrana.

He overrode her bureaucratic caution with a blunt order. "Gillian was one of our own until she bailed. Despite that serious lapse of judgment, I'll vouch for her. Give her whatever information you can about the sect."

"Whatever" turned out to be scary as hell. The Vhrana, Jilly soon learned, were an even more dangerous splinter group of the religious fanatics who set off chemical bombs in a Tokyo subway some years back.

"The Vhrana believe the only true path to enlightenment is to cleanse the world of evil, as they see it," Hathaway related. "They practice rites that derive from Buddhism and ancient forms of Hinduism, with a dash of Turkish Sufi thrown in. The more 'advanced' in the sect go into trances and spin around for hours."

"Like whirling dervishes?"

"Precisely."

"And they also practice animal sacrifice?"

"In ancient times, they sacrificed humans. Usually enemies captured after a battle. The Vhrana drank blood from the vanquished warriors' skulls to imbibe their valor before devouring their hearts and livers."

"Nice guys."

"Don't delude yourself. The women in the sect were—and still are—every bit as bloodthirsty. You don't want to get crosswise of a Vhrana priestess. Nowadays, of course, human sacrifice has been outlawed. So has animal sacrifice, for that matter, but the Vhrana still practice it on holy days. They're rumored to offer up a variety of animals, but their sacrifice of choice is a monkey or ape."

The picture of the little gibbon flashed into Jilly's mind.

"I thought most Hindus revere monkeys. In fact, I remember reading about the hordes of monkeys that now overrun New Delhi because the devout feed them peanuts and bananas."

"The Vhrana have perverted that reverence. Or elevated it, I guess you could say. Since primates are the closest things to humans, they believe they're honoring the animal by sacrificing them to their gods."

"Do you have a fix on the Vhrana sects in the U.S.?"

"We're tracking seven different branches. The largest is in California."

Where the dead gibbon was found. A frisson of excitement jumped along Jilly's nerves. She didn't have the training or field experience of a seasoned agent, but every scrap of intuition she possessed told her she was on the right trail.

"The second-largest sect is right across the state line," Hathaway continued, "in Baltimore. It draws most of its followers from the D.C. area." Swinging around, she clicked a few keys on her computer. "Here's a shot of the exterior of their temple."

Jilly studied the windowless brick building. “It looks like a warehouse.”

“It is. We’ve ascertained that the owner has no idea what goes on in his building between the hours of midnight and dawn. His night manager takes over then.”

Another click brought up a shot of a handsome man in the turban of a Sikh. Next to him was a smiling, doe-eyed female in a turquoise sari and veil.

“That’s the night manager’s wife, the current high priestess. We’ve been told she wields the knife at the altar. We hope to verify that tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“It’s the first night of the second full moon since harvest. One of their holiest days.”

“Who’s going in?”

“Special Agent Nareesh. He was one of us until he transferred to the FBI.”

“Benjamin Nareesh?”

“Yes. You know him?”

“I do! We trained together as junior FSOs.”

Her pulse tripping, Jilly got Nareesh’s number from Sandra Hathaway.

The afternoon sun had warmed the air when she emerged from State. She stood for some moments on the wide front steps, debating her next step. She really, really wanted to follow this lead on her own. If it produced results, Hawk would have to eat his objections to her lack of training and experience. Common sense and the awareness that she was part of a team had her reaching for her cell phone.

Since she hadn’t yet been equipped with one of OMEGA’s handy-dandy, supersecure communications devices, she couldn’t directly access the Control Center or any of the operatives. Instead, she dialed the number for Lightning’s executive assistant.

“Offices of the Special Envoy. How may I help you?”

“Elizabeth, it’s Jilly. I need to speak to Uncle Nick.”

“He’s still in conference, dear.”

In conference was code for upstairs, doing duty as OMEGA’s director.

“I thought he might be. Ask him to call me on my cell when he’s free.”

Her cell phone pinged moments later.

“Where are you, Jilly?”

“Just leaving State. I may have something.”

Or not. The lead was pretty tenuous at this point.

“I want your okay to accompany a friend on a visit to a temple tonight.” She couldn’t go into more detail over an open line. “I’ll brief you after the visit.”

The silence on the other end was deafening.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Lightning finally asked.

“No, but my friend does. He’s with the Bureau. His boss might call you for confirmation that it’s okay for me to ride along. Will you give it?”

Another silence, longer this time.

“Uncle Nick? Am I good to go?”

“You’re good.”

She restrained her exultant whoop but couldn’t resist punching the air with her fist.

Hours later, she huddled beside a turbaned Ben Nareesh in his darkened car. Their intent gazes were fixed on the small screen in his handheld unit. It was fed by cameras the FBI had positioned to cover the brick warehouse. Figures had been slipping through the cloudy night and into the warehouse for the past half hour.

“I still can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Nareesh muttered. “Or that my boss gave the green light. You must have some powerful contacts.”

Jilly merely smiled as Ben’s gaze swept over her, looking for a chink in her disguise.

He didn't find one. She was draped in a silk sari she'd purchased in a downtown D.C. shop that catered to the city's large Indian and Pakistani population. Tinted contacts darkened her eyes. Thankfully, her jet-black hair had needed no touching up. She'd parted it in the middle and fashioned an intricate series of braids that now tugged at her scalp.

"Just follow my lead," he instructed. "And if we do find any sacrificial animals, we both stay the hell away from them."

Ben hadn't taken her warning about a potentially lethal virus lightly. In addition to his team of backups, he now had a crew encased in biohazard protective gear standing ready. All were prepared to move at his signal.

Jilly's nerves were strung tight when Ben stowed his unit and shifted to face her.

"Ready?"

She hooked the silk veil across the lower half of her face, dragged in a deep breath and nodded.

"Ready."

Hawk was huddled with a team of scientists at the Centers for Disease Control's Washington office when a cell phone chimed.

"That's mine." Annoyed at the interruption, the woman opposite Hawk flipped open her phone. "Dr. Cook."

He could tell the news was electrifying. The doc jolted upright in her chair and whipped a startled gaze his way before snapping the phone shut.

"The FBI just raided some kind of underground temple. One of the folks on the raid wanted to know if you're still here."

Hawk's insides turned to ice. Jilly. That had to be Jilly.

"They found several animals being prepared for sacrifice. One of them is an extremely rare *nomascus concolor*. The team has the animals in isolation units. They're delivering them to the containment lab as we speak."

All three scientists were already out of their chairs. Hawk stayed right on their heels as they raced through a maze of darkened corridors, down three flights of stairs and through an underground tunnel to a brightly lit lab.

He'd had to accept that Lightning had given her the go-ahead to accompany this friend of hers. A thorough check of Special Agent Nareesh's background and credentials had resolved some of Hawk's misgivings. That, and the fact that she would just ride along. As an observer. Not a direct participant.

He was still nursing that mistaken notion when he picked up the wail of a siren.

"Stay in the observation booth," Dr. Cook instructed as she zipped herself into biohazard protective gear. "It's sealed off and safe."

The booth's glass wall gave Hawk a clear view of the team that entered the lab some moments later. Looking like space travelers in their hooded suits, the team carried plastic cages with controlled breathing units. One of the cages contained what looked like a small rhesus monkey, the other a slightly larger primate with white tufts of fur on its cheeks. The gibbon's eyes were huge and frightened and seemed to lock on Hawk through the glass window.

"Poor babies."

He recognized Jilly's voice instantly but had to look twice to ID the woman who rushed into the booth, followed by a tall, slender man in a white turban.

Black mascara rimmed her eyes, which looked decidedly not blue from where he stood. A red caste mark decorated her forehead. To go with the pistachio green sari draped across one shoulder, he surmised, and sweet, cloying scent of incense that surrounded her like a cloud.

"Hawk! They told me you were still here. This is Special Agent Ben Nareesh. Ben, this is Mike Callahan."

She paused, smiled and looked Hawk square in the eye and said, "Mike and I work together."

Hawk got the message. In her own, inimitable way, Gillian-with-a-J had just thrown down the gauntlet. If he didn't accept her as an equal, right here, right now, it would be war between them.

He knew he would come out the victor. He fought too dirty to be vanquished by a pampered, privileged country-club type. Except Gillian Ridgeway, for all her pampering and privilege, possessed some real smarts under that sleek, silky mane. And she had the guts to match. She'd proven that tonight.

With a wrench that took him back to a place he never wanted to go again, Hawk yielded the field and extended a hand to Nareesh. "Good to meet you."

He couldn't miss Jilly's flash of triumph. It stayed on her face until she turned back to the observation window.

"They won't hurt them, will they?"

After his session with the folks at the Center, Hawk had a pretty good idea what might happen to the primates. It wasn't pretty.

"Depends on whether they show signs of infection."

"If they don't?"

"I don't know. They might be used for testing or research. Or turned over to a zoo," he added as Jilly's brows snapped together.

"Poor babies," she muttered again. "I wonder..."

Her lips pursed, and her expression turned thoughtful. Hawk had a sudden vision of Jilly showing up at the Ridgeway place with two hairy primates in tow. Maggie wouldn't mind. He could only imagine Adam's reaction.

"Ben, promise you'll keep me posted on what happens to these little guys."

Her request took the FBI agent by surprise. Obviously, he'd assumed his responsibility for the animals ended with the raid.

"I...uh...sure."

The man was putty in Jilly's hands.

Join the club, Hawk thought sardonically.

"Or," Nareesh countered in an attempt to wiggle out of the charge, "you could probably get the folks here at the Center to advise you directly."

"I could, if my partner and I weren't leaving for Hong Kong as soon as we throw a few things in a bag."

Enough was enough. Goaded, Hawk hooked her arm and swung her around. "Damn it, Gillian. How many surprises are you planning to pull tonight?"

"Sorry."

Her contrite look didn't fool him for a minute.

"I should have mentioned it right away. One of the worshippers arrested in the raid told us how the sacrificial animals were smuggled into the States."

She paused, playing the info for all it was worth. Hawk had to concede she'd earned her moment of glory.

"They were hidden inside a shipping container packed with antiques exported from Hong Kong. The shipping agency is Wang and Company."

Behind her tinted contacts, her eyes held only limpid innocence.

"Unless your Chinese is better than mine, Hawk, you might want to reconsider whether or not I'll be in the way when you call on Mr. Wang."

Chapter 3

Early the next morning, Hawk contacted the San Francisco detectives investigating Charlie Duncan's murder. They had no witnesses, no suspects and no leads. Frustrated, he used the remaining hours before he and Jilly departed for Hong Kong to supervise her transition from one-time Foreign Service Officer and temporary executive assistant to full-fledged undercover operative.

Jilly discovered a new Mike Callahan during those hours. This one was impatient, demanding and absolutely relentless. He began in OMEGA's training center with a crash course in down-and-dirty offensive and defensive maneuvers. Jilly was drenched with sweat and sporting several nasty bruises before she finally managed a takedown.

Hawk didn't allow her time for so much as a smirk to celebrate. Rolling to his feet, he hustled her into the weapons facility. He'd taught her to shoot, knew she could handle the polymer-based Beretta Sub-Compact she'd carry on this mission. Still, he made her snap in a clip and shred several paper targets before he turned her over to OMEGA's communications team.

Despite her grungy gray sweats and sweat-flattened hair, Jilly paid close attention while the team drilled her on communications procedures. Her only break came when Mackenzie Blair, Lightning's wife and the guru of all things electronic for OMEGA and several other government agencies, marched in.

"Well, my sweet, you certainly didn't waste any time snagging your first field op."

"What can I say? Duty calls."

Raking back her limp hair, Jilly grinned at the brunette she considered more of a big sister than an honorary aunt.

"How's the baby?"

Mac rounded a hand over her prominent belly and made a face. "The little stinker sleeps all day and kicks all night. Want to see what I have for you?"

Both women instantly switched gears. Mac's high-tech devices had made her a legend with the agencies she supplied. Jilly couldn't wait to see what supercool, James Bondish gadget she'd come up with this time.

It didn't look all that high-tech at first. The gold charm was pretty, though. It was in the shape of a Chinese character and embedded in a bezel of what looked like rare blue jade.

"Do you know this character?" Mac asked.

"Fu. It means good luck." Jilly had to laugh. "Appropriate."

"I thought so, too. This particular Fu, my sweet, just happens to conceal the world's smallest and most sophisticated encrypted satellite communications system."

With her belly nudging the table, Mac laid the charm in the palm of one hand and poked at it with the other.

"If you press on this little squiggle..."

"That squiggle is the character's radical, or root symbol."

After four years of Mandarin in college, two more in grad school and a three-year tour of duty in Beijing, Jilly spoke several Chinese dialects with a fluency rarely acquired by "foreign devils."

Reading and writing were entirely different matters. By various counts, there were somewhere between forty and fifty thousand Chinese characters. Thankfully, each character contained one of only two hundred and fourteen roots. If you could figure out the root, you could count the character's remaining strokes and—most of the time!—look up the word in a dictionary.

"The roots came down from ancient times," she told Mac. "Originally they were pictographs representing basic elements like man, woman, fire, water, and so on."

"If you say so. Press the root...radical...whatever...once to transmit, twice to receive. Go ahead, try a voice transmission."

Jilly pressed once. “Mary had a little... Whoa!”

She jumped as the nursery rhyme boomed through the Control Center’s speakers.

“You’ll be in silent mode most of the time,” Mac advised, “but you’ll know when someone’s trying to contact you. Put it on, and I’ll give you a demo.”

The chain was long enough to loop easily over her head. The jade felt cool and smooth against her throat—until Mac signaled to one of her assistants. The next moment, the semiprecious stone warmed like toast.

“Nice,” Jilly murmured, palming the charm. “Very nice.”

“It’s also equipped with GPS, an electronic jammer and a direct link to Hawk’s comm unit.”

“Don’t tell me you decked him out in a gold chain and charm, too?”

“I wish! No, his comm is in his watch.” A wicked gleam lit Mac’s brown eyes. “But I did spiffy that up to go with your cover. You should have seen his face when I presented him with a solid gold Rolex.”

Also appropriate, Jilly thought. She and Hawk would hit Hong Kong in the guise of a wealthy couple on a Far East buying junket.

A married couple.

Sharing a hotel suite.

So Hawk could keep an eye on her.

She’d bristled at that last bit. Not for long, however, since adjoining bedrooms in a luxurious hotel suite dovetailed nicely with her non-mission-related objectives.

Assuming she didn’t pull out her Beretta and pump a round into Hawk before they left for Hong Kong, which she seriously contemplated doing an hour later.

Not content with her firm grasp of OMEGA’s internal communications codes, Hawk insisted she memorize the NATO phonetic alphabet used by police officers and medical response agencies worldwide. That Jilly could rattle the letters off with some assurance wasn’t enough. He wanted every one burned into her subconscious.

“Give them to me again.”

She gritted her teeth. “How many times do I have to...?”

“Again, damn it.” The gold flecks in his eyes burned with intensity. “I’m not going into the field with someone who can’t call for backup if we run into an ambush.”

Was that what happened all those years ago in the jungle? Had Hawk and his partner and this woman he once loved been ambushed? The thought of what he’d lost in that murky green darkness put a lid on Jilly’s irritation.

“Alpha-Bravo-Charlie-Delta-Echo-Foxtrot-Golf-Hotel-India-Juliet-Kilo-Lima-Mike.”

She pulled in a breath.

“November-Oscar-Papa-Quebec-Romeo-Sierra-Tango-Uniform-Victor-Whiskey-Xray-Yankee-Zulu.”

She finished on a whoosh of air and gave him a nasty glare.

“Satisfied?”

“Yeah.”

He didn’t look satisfied. With his two-day’s worth of stubble and red-rimmed eyes, he looked almost as ragged as she now felt.

“We’ve got less than an hour before we have to head for the airport,” he informed her after checking his gleaming Rolex. “We’d better get up to Field Dress.”

Finally! A shower, a shampoo and a quick blow-dry. She couldn’t wait to shed her rank sweats and change into whatever the wizards in OMEGA’s Field Dress Unit had waiting for her.

Gillian emerged from FDU’s dressing room a different woman. Nothing like a French silk demibra and panties, an Emanuel Ungaro pantsuit in cobalt-blue and Bruno Magli ankle boots to

make a gal feel like she could take on the world again. She'd have to wait until Hong Kong to see the other delights packed in the Gucci suitcases waiting beside the dressing room door.

Hawk was waiting, as well. His gaze raked her from head to toe. A small grunt was her only indication that her duty uniform passed inspection. She, on the other hand, could barely keep her jaw from dropping.

She'd known him for so long, had seen him rigged out in everything from camouflage gear to a hand-tailored tux. But this was the first time she'd ever seen him with his brown hair slicked back and his nails manicured. Or in an Armani sport coat that molded his wide shoulders. Or Italian leather loafers. Or...

"If you're through conducting your inventory," he said impatiently, "we need to hit the road."

She popped a salute. "Yes, sir! It's just that... You look so different."

The Field Dress tech who'd outfitted them both frowned. "Not too different, I hope."

After discussing the matter with Lightning, Hawk had decided he should stick to his civilian persona. He was too well-known in the international marksmanship circuit to do otherwise. But his recent marriage to a wealthy heiress had plucked him from the shooting range and plunged him into the world of manicures and priceless artifacts. Or so he and Jilly would pretend.

With a spurt of real glee, she contemplated the crash course in Oriental antiques she would subject him to during the long flight to Hong Kong.

"I'm ready if you are," she told him.

"Not quite. We have one more piece of business to take care of."

She couldn't hold back a groan. "Not more codes!"

"Just one. You haven't picked your code name."

"We've been going nonstop since dawn. Who had time to think names?"

"So think now. What, or who, are you?"

"I don't know."

"We need a name, Jilly."

Fiddling with the pendant that nestled just above the swell of her breasts, she searched her mind.

"I can't come up with... Wait!" She stroked her thumb over the smooth round bezel. "Jade. I'll go by Jade."

Hawk's expression softened. For a moment, just a moment, she was sure she caught the ghost of a grin on his rugged face.

"Is that with a G or a J?"

"J." She smiled back.

"I'll let Griff know."

Dan Griffin, code name Ace, would act as their controller during this op. Only a few years older than Jilly, the former Navy pilot with the killer grin had already made a name for himself at OMEGA...and with the women who couldn't seem to get enough of him.

Hawk made a half turn and swung back to Jilly. "One more thing. You'd better put this on."

He dug in the pocket of his Armani jacket and withdrew a jeweler's box. When he popped the lid, Jilly gasped. Nested in velvet was a circlet of marquise-cut diamonds banded by sapphire-studded ring guards.

"It's gorgeous."

"Yeah. Field Dress doesn't miss a trick."

Her heart stuttered and almost stopped when he slid the wide band onto her ring finger. Cover, she reminded herself with a gulp. This was strictly for cover.

Which didn't explain why Hawk kept her hand in his for several seconds longer.

"I told them I wanted the ring guards in sapphire. To match your eyes."

She pondered that gruff comment all the way across the Pacific.

Hong Kong was everything she remembered from shopping excursions during her assignment to Beijing. And more. So much more.

As their plane swooped in for a landing, Jilly saw dozens of new skyscrapers crowding the harbor on both Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula on the mainland. Contrary to the dire predictions when the British relinquished their hold on the territories known collectively as Hong Kong, their teeming economy hadn't collapsed. Instead, it was exploding.

Gillian soon discovered that the traffic she recalled from previous visits had exploded, as well. Their limo driver added frequent blasts of his horn to the cacophony rising from taxis, trucks and Japanese-made vehicles of every sort. Masses of humanity, most with cell phones jammed against their ears, thronged streets with signs in both English and Chinese. Narrow alleys radiated from avenues with names left over from the British occupation. Sheng Tung Street bisected Waterloo Road. Kam Lam ran into Argyle. Tak Shing, Kan Su and Nanking all converged on the shopaholic's mecca, Nathan Road.

Jilly almost salivated as the Rolls-Royce limo glided past shop after shop. She would have loved to put herself into the eager hands of tailors who could take her measurements and deliver an entire collection of suits and shoes and ball gowns to her hotel the next day. Or the jewelers who could craft an exquisite pair of diamond earrings or a ruby slide to her specifications within hours.

Then there were the designers. Prada, Chanel, Versace and Kate Spade all had boutiques on Nathan Road, as well as in the high-end malls scattered throughout the city. Too bad the Gucci suitcases stowed in the trunk of the Rolls-Royce made those boutiques and jewelry stores superfluous. Not to mention the ring on her left hand.

She snuck a glance at the sparkling stones. She hadn't gotten used to their weight yet. Or the odd sensation that came with even a pretend marriage to a man like Hawk.

Women always sat up and took notice when he entered a room. Their admiring glances had never bothered Jilly before. So she couldn't explain her annoyance with the redhead who'd almost tripped over her own feet while ogling Hawk at the airport. Or her irritation when a certain flight attendant became a little too attentive.

"That's the Peninsula ahead, sir."

The uniformed chauffeur pulled up at a red light and tipped his head toward the venerable hotel dominating the next block.

"Unfortunately, construction of the new subway line has temporarily blocked vehicle access to our main entrance. I'll have to let you out at the side entrance."

Well, darn! The Peninsula was one of Hong Kong's most revered institutions. Jilly had wanted Hawk to see the front portico with its massive white pillars, liveried doormen and fleet of Rolls-Royces at the ready. On impulse, she grabbed the door handle.

"Let's walk from here. The driver can drop off our bags at the side entrance. I want you to get the Peninsula's full effect."

The noise of a large and vibrant city hit them the moment they emerged from the Rolls. Car horns honked. Street vendors hawked their wares. Jackhammers and cranes added their signature sounds to the solid mass of humanity that thronged the streets. And above the din, Jilly caught the whistle of an arriving Star Ferry.

"You have to see this."

With a quick change in direction, she joined the crowd crossing the street. A short flight of steps led to the wide promenade that circled the Kowloon side of the Victoria Harbor.

Across the gray-green waters were the towering skyscrapers of Hong Kong Island. Victoria Peak rose above the columns of glass and steel, her summit wreathed in hazy mist. And there, just pulling into the terminal, was one of the distinctive green-and-white ferries that still served as a primary means of transportation.

Smiling at the sight, Jilly leaned her arms on the promenade's rail and breathed in the mingled scent of salt water and diesel fumes.

"They built a high-speed tunnel to connect Kowloon and Hong Kong some years ago," she told Hawk, "but I always take the ferries when I'm here. They're crowded, noisy and swarming with pickpockets, but they're quintessential China."

"I'll remember that."

Hawk obviously had more important matters on his mind as he shot back his cuff and checked his Rolex. "We'd better get settled in at the hotel, then call on Mr. Wang."

Jilly gave the magnificent skyline across the bay a last look and pushed away from the rail. Hawk put a hand to the small of her back to turn her toward the stairs. She shouldn't have felt his touch through layers of Hermès and Emanuel Ungaro. Shouldn't have but did. The skin under those layers tingled even as she issued another stern reminder.

Cover, girl! It's just cover!

Preoccupied with both the thought and the touch, she didn't see the pint-size street vendor in pink sneakers and T-shirt who'd approached them. Neither did Hawk until his abrupt turn brought them into direct contact.

"Ai-ah!"

The girl—she couldn't have been more than four or five—landed on her bottom. The wooden cage she was carrying also hit the concrete. The cage door flew open, and the canary inside made its escape.

With another cry, the girl scrambled to her feet and tried to catch the bird, but it was already soaring on the stiff breeze off the bay. Jilly would have bet the thing would soon be gull bait if she hadn't witnessed a similar performance during a previous visit to Hong Kong. That one had involved caged crickets, but the theatrics were the same.

Sure enough, the little girl's shoulders slumped pathetically. When she turned back to face them, tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, kid." Hawk reached into his pocket and pulled out the wad of Hong Kong dollars he'd purchased at the airport. "I'm really sorry."

"You might want to wait on that," Jilly advised.

"I bowled her over. How much should I give her for the bird? Five? Ten?"

"What you do to Mei Lin?"

The indignant query came from the boy who charged up the promenade stairs two at a time. He was older than the girl. Nine, maybe ten. Like her, he wore jeans and a faded T-shirt of indeterminate origin. But his AirMax Nikes, Jilly noted, looked brand-new.

"What you do?" he demanded again, but didn't wait for an answer. Waving his skinny arms, he launched into a tirade of broken English. "You hurt little sister. You break cage. She lose bird, lose money. Lose face with Grandfather."

The girl's tears continued to flow, and the boy's accusations were starting to attract attention.

"Here, kid. Will this save your sister's face?"

No fool, the boy took the twenty and held it up to the sunlight. Counterfeit money was as pandemic in China as bootlegged DVDs and Prada knockoffs.

The boy didn't lose his angry scowl, but his message to the girl held smug triumph. "We plucked a fat goose," he said in swift Cantonese. "Come, we'll buy hot dumplings to take to Grandfather."

Jilly said nothing while he scooped up the empty wooden cage. The two took off without another word and disappeared behind the oleanders separating the section of the promenade from the next.

Obviously relieved that the fracas was over, Hawk pocketed the rest of his money. "Let's go."

"Hang on a sec."

"Why?"

“Just listen. Yep, there it is.”

The chirpy trill carried clearly over the hubbub of the harbor. A moment later, a flash of yellow nose-dived into the oleanders.

The man beside her was silent for several moments. “I knew it was a scam.”

“Uh-huh.” Grinning, Jilly hooked her arm through his. “You’re on my turf now, fella. You might want to consult me before forking over any more twenty-dollar bills.”

Hawk was a whole lot more concerned with his body’s instant, instinctive reaction to the press of her breasts against his bicep than the fact that he’d been gulled by a couple of con artists.

What was with him, for God’s sake? He’d held her in his arms before. And not just at the firing range. A few months ago, he’d escorted her to a black-tie reception and used her as cover while scoping out a congressman suspected of selling government secrets. He’d nailed his target, but sweat still gathered at the base of his spine when he remembered how Gillian-with-a-J had moved in a strapless, flame-colored column of silk that bared more of her than it covered.

Damn it all to hell! He had to get his head straight. Too much rode on this op to let his fantasies about this blue-eyed siren override his common sense.

“Let’s go,” he repeated with a distinct edge to his voice. “We have business to take care of.”

Chapter 4

The first item on the agenda was to check into the hotel. Hawk was too preoccupied to appreciate the British colonial ambiance of the Peninsula's pillared entrance or the soaring lobby with its brass fixtures, rattan chairs and potted palms. Jilly, however, drank in the elegance as they walked to the reception desk.

"Welcome to the Peninsula, Mrs. Callahan."

With a small jolt, she realized the clerk at the reception desk had addressed her. "Thank you."

"I hope your flight in wasn't too exhausting."

"Not at all."

Once Hawk had stopped drilling her on operating procedures and let her get some sleep that is. She'd retaliated during the final leg of their journey with a lecture covering four thousand years of Chinese dynastic history.

"Is this your first trip to Hong Kong?"

"I've visited several times before but my...er...husband hasn't."

Hawk covered the near stumble by sliding an arm around her waist. "Still takes some getting used to, doesn't it, darling?"

His slow smile ignited sparks just under Jilly's skin and darned near melted the receptionist where she stood. Like hopeless romantics everywhere, the young woman got all googly-eyed. "Are you on your honeymoon?"

"We are."

"Congratulations." Her fingers tapped the keyboard. "Perhaps we might be able to switch you to the...Oh, I see you're already booked into one of our finest suites. I'll send up some champagne and fresh strawberries, compliments of the house."

"Sounds wonderful. We'll put them to good use."

There was that smile again. Tender, intimate, so full of sensual promise that heat raced through her like a California wildfire.

"Your luggage has already been taken up to your suite. If you'll just sign the registration form, Mr. Callahan, I'll scan your passports and credit card."

She didn't question the fact that Jilly's passport was in her maiden name. The blushing new bride wouldn't have had time to change it.

"You're in the Tower, sir. Edward will show you the way. And once again, my congratulations."

"Thanks."

As they followed the uniformed attendant to the elevators, Hawk kept the pretense up—and the wildfires raging—with a casually possessive hand to the small of Jilly's back.

The heat didn't cool until they reached the twenty-second floor and their escort slid a key card into a lock.

"There are two entrances to your suite," he informed them. "This one accesses the foyer. The other, just there, takes you into the walk-in closet and storage area."

Jilly thought that was pretty handy until she saw Hawk eyeing the second door with a crease between his brows. Two entrances, she realized belatedly, meant twice the necessary security precautions.

Damn! She'd better start thinking more like a field agent.

"Here you are."

Handing Hawk the key card, the attendant stood aside to let them precede him into the foyer. All marble and cream, with an artistic arrangement of snowy-white chrysanthemums on a side table, the entryway led into living and dining rooms that blended Asian and European with flawless symmetry.

Rich, jewel-toned Oriental rugs softened the parquet floors. Jilly's heels sank into the plush thickness as she admired the twin black lacquer chests inlaid with mother-of-pearl that framed the fireplace. The mantel held an artistic display of porcelain ginger jars in a delicate blue-and-white pattern that complimented the wingback chairs and sofas.

But it was the terrace with its floor-to-ceiling sliding-glass doors that knocked the breath back down her throat. Shedding her jacket, she aimed straight for the doors. Once outside she felt as though she was standing at the top of the world.

A stiff breeze whipped her hair while she watched gulls circling above a fishing junk that chugged through the gray-green waters of the bay. Across the harbor, late-afternoon sunlight glinted on the glass towers of Hong Kong. Twenty stories below, a cruise ship was just pulling into a berth alongside the Ocean Terminal.

"Hawk! Come see this view!"

When he didn't answer, she turned and found him with a phone already held to his ear.

"Guess the honeymoon is over," she murmured to the squawking gulls.

"That's right," Hawk was saying when she slid the terrace doors shut behind her. "Mr. and Mrs. Michael Callahan. We e-mailed Mr. Wang about arranging shipment of the furniture and antiques we intend to purchase in Hong Kong."

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