

MILLS & BOON



Vintage INTRIGUE

**Face of
Deception**

ANA LEIGH

Mills & Boon Vintage Intrigue

Ana Leigh

Face Of Deception

«HarperCollins»

Leigh A.

Face Of Deception / A. Leigh — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon Vintage Intrigue)

Mike Bishop's latest assignment should have been simple—rescue a woman and the young boy in her care. But there was nothing simple about beautiful Ann Hamilton. Suddenly, Mike was thinking more and more about ways to mix business with pleasure. Lots of pleasure...Mike was a hazel-eyed, walking hunk of testosterone—and the last thing Ann needed. She wanted only to start a peaceful new life with her adopted son, but Mike had a way of inflaming much more than just her temper. He would protect her life, but what about her heart?

Содержание

“If I didn’t know better, Ann, I’d swear you were hitting on me.”	6
Face of Deception	7
ANA LEIGH	8
Contents	9
Chapter 1	10
Chapter 2	14
Chapter 3	19
Chapter 4	23
Chapter 5	27
Chapter 6	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

“If I didn’t know better, Ann, I’d swear you were hitting on me.”

“Hitting on you!” She must have turned six shades of red. “We both agreed to keep it strictly business between us.”

“Yeah, that was our agreement,” Mike said. “But I’ll warn you now, lady, when this business is cleared up, I’ll be coming after you.”

She stopped and turned around. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve got a lot of lost pleasure to make up.”

“Do you actually think I’m stupid enough to get involved with a guy who lives on the edge like you do?”

“I think it’s out of both our hands. Right now I want to pick you up and carry you to bed. Are you really going to deny you don’t want me to? No, sweetheart, it won’t fly. Those violet eyes tell me all I have to know. And I figure it’s going to be worth the wait.”

Dear Reader,

Welcome to another month of excitingly romantic reading from Silhouette Intimate Moments. Ruth Langan starts things off with a bang in *Vendetta*, the third of her four *DEVIL’S COVE* titles. Blair Colby came back to town looking for a quiet summer. Instead he found danger, mystery—and love.

Fans of Sara Orwig’s *STALLION PASS* miniseries will be glad to see it continued in *Bring On The Night*, part of *STALLION PASS: TEXAS KNIGHTS*, also a fixture in *Silhouette Desire*. Mix one tough agent, the ex-wife he’s never forgotten and the son he never knew existed, and you have a recipe for high emotion. Whether you experienced our *FAMILY SECRETS* continuity or are new to it now, you won’t want to miss our six *FAMILY SECRETS: THE NEXT GENERATION* titles, starting with Jenna Mills’ *A Cry In The Dark*. Ana Leigh’s *Face of Deception* is the first of her *BISHOP’S HEROES* stories, and your heart will beat faster with every step of Mike Bishop’s mission to rescue Ann Hamilton and her adopted son from danger. Are you a fan of the paranormal? Don’t miss *One Eye Open*, popular author Karen Whiddon’s first book for the line, which features a shape-shifting heroine and a hero who’s all man. Finally, go *To The Limit* with new author Virginia Kelly, who really knows how to write heart-pounding romantic adventure.

And come back next month, for more of the best and most exciting romance reading around, right here in *Silhouette Intimate Moments*.

Yours,



Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Editor

Face of Deception

Ana Leigh



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ANA LEIGH

Ana Leigh is a Wisconsin native with three children and five grandchildren. From the time of the publication of her first novel in 1981, Ana successfully juggled her time between her chosen career and her hobby of writing, until she officially retired in September 1994 to devote more time to her “hobby.” In the past she has been a theater cashier (who married the boss), the head of an accounting department, a corporate officer and the only female on the board of directors of an engineering firm.

This bestselling author received a Romantic Times Career Achievement Award nomination for Storyteller of the Year in 1991, the BOOKRAK 1995-1996 Best Selling Author Award, the Romantic Times 1995-1996 Career Achievement Award and the Romantic Times 1996–1997 Career Achievement Award for Historical Storyteller of the Year. Her novels have been distributed worldwide, including Africa, China and Russia.

To Dave,

The best “Ready Reference” a mother or author could hope for.

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28

Chapter 1

French Guiana

The SUV sped along the crude road sending a trail of dust into the air—a trail that could easily be observed by anyone in pursuit.

Ann Hamilton shoved back the strands of long hair that had fallen across her eyes and nervously glanced up into the rearview mirror. Thank God! I'm not being followed.

She cast a quick look at the curled-up figure asleep on the seat next to her, then returned her attention to the road ahead.

Her heart was aching, and a steady stream of tears made seeing difficult: before driving beyond broadcasting range she'd heard an announcement on the car radio that Clayton Burroughs, British-born official with the European Space Consortium, had been killed by an unknown assassin in Kourou.

Clayton knew he was in danger. That's why he sent us away.

She swiped at her tears and returned her attention to the road.

A dozen questions flashed through her mind in rapid succession. Why did Clayton insist she and Brandon come all the way up to his retreat near the coast to wait for help? If he knew he was in danger, why didn't he come with them? Why hadn't he sought help from the British or American Embassies?

She couldn't believe the man she'd loved as a father was dead. Who would want to kill her beloved Clayton? Could the news report have been mistaken? Now, out of broadcasting range, she had no idea of the latest developments.

Dust and tears painted mucky streaks on her face. Ann brushed them aside just as the car hit a pothole and flew above the ground for several seconds before the wheels bounced back on the road.

Brandon awoke and rubbed his eyes with a balled fist. Raising his towhead, he looked around. "Are we almost there, Ann?"

"Almost, honey. Go back to sleep. I'll wake you when we arrive."

His young forehead creased in a frown and he sat up in the seat. "Are you crying?" When she didn't answer, he asked, "You're crying because Grandfather didn't come with us, aren't you?"

Ann bit down on her lip to force back her sobs. The attempt failed; her tears continued to flow.

At the sight of her misery, Brandon's eyes welled with his own unshed tears. "Please don't cry, Ann."

The youngster's parents had been killed in an airplane crash two years earlier. Now she would have to tell him the devastating news of his grandfather's death. "We've got to try to be very brave, honey," she managed to murmur.

As they sped over the precipitous road, Ann was gripped by panic for their safety, and despair at the thought of Clayton being dead. One question leaped continually to her mind: Why was he killed?

The bordering jungle soon engulfed the road. With only the beams of the car to cut a dim swath of light through the inky blackness, Ann eased up on the accelerator and cut her speed to almost a crawl. Nearing midnight, she halted in front of a small villa.

She jumped out of the car and yanked on a bell that hung at the gate of the tall wall surrounding the courtyard of the secluded house. As Ann waited impatiently, she cast a glance back to Brandon. He looked so small and forlorn, his round, blue eyes were wide with apprehension as they followed her every move.

Tugging impatiently at the bell cord, Ann was relieved to see a light materialize in the house. The caretakers, a local couple named Guillaume and Marie Sellier appeared at the door. The man peered through the darkness to identify whomever had awakened them at such a late hour. Recognizing Ann, he hurried to open the gate as Ann lifted Brandon out of the SUV.

After a perfunctory greeting, Guillaume looked about expectantly. “The monsieur did not accompany you, Mademoiselle Hamilton?”

Since the remote area was devoid of telephones and radio, Ann knew the couple would not have heard of Clayton’s death.

“Mister Burroughs will not be coming,” she said, fighting back her tears. Dear God! How can I explain this to them when I don’t understand any of it myself?

“Marie, will you make Brandon a sandwich and a glass of milk? He hasn’t eaten anything since morning.”

“And you, mademoiselle?”

“Nothing for me. I’m not hungry.”

When the woman departed with Brandon in tow, Ann sank down on the couch and buried her head in her hands. Her long blond hair draped in a silky curtain about her face—a symbol of the isolated despair she was feeling.

What should I do? Clayton told me to wait here for help. Should I try to get a message to the American Embassy?

She leaned back and closed her eyes. If only it would end by just waking.

“Mademoiselle.” Ann felt a gentle nudge on her shoulder and opened her eyes. “I have your tea, mademoiselle.”

As if in a trance, Ann thanked the woman and accepted the offering. “Is Brandon in bed?”

“Oui, mademoiselle. The young one waits for you to come to say the good night.”

After a few sips of the hot tea, Ann rose wearily to her feet. Until this moment she hadn’t realized how exhausted she was. She patted Marie’s shoulder. “Merci, Marie. I’m sorry to have disturbed you and Guillaume at this late hour. Go to bed now. We won’t need anything else tonight.” The woman nodded and immediately disappeared.

Pausing outside of Brandon’s bedroom, Ann drew a deep breath and grasped the doorknob. Brandon sat in bed playing with a silver coin.

She’d fallen in love with the youngster from the first day the orphaned child had come to live with his grandfather. Brandon felt the same way about her, and followed her around as though she were the mother he had lost.

“So, what have you got there, sport?” she asked, gathering him into her arms.

“Grandfather gave this to me before we left. He said I should keep this coin to remember him by.” Intensity registered on his young face. “Why did he say that, Ann?”

Hugging the boy tighter, Ann forced back her tears. She couldn’t lie to him. “Honey, I have something very sad to tell you. Your grandfather...died this morning.”

The words sounded so final, as if by voicing the truth the appalling act became a reality.

Brandon remained silent. Ann was uncertain he had understood her until the youngster asked sadly, “Is Grandfather in Heaven now with Mommy and Daddy?”

“Yes, he is, sweetheart.” No why or how—just acceptance. She wished he would cry instead of sitting there looking so vulnerable. Her chest knotted with pain at the pathetic sight of the six-year-old child already conditioned to death.

Brushing back the light hair from his forehead, she pressed a kiss to his brow. “Would you like me to stay with you tonight?”

“No. I can stay alone, Ann. I’m a big boy. Grandfather said so.”

The brave but tragic announcement wrenched at her heart. She felt tears welling in her eyes. Rising to her feet, she tucked the sheet around him and then leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Go to sleep now, honey. We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

“You go to sleep, too. And don’t cry, Ann. Grandfather’s happy now. He always told me how much he missed my daddy.”

As she was about to close the door, Ann saw Brandon open his fist and stare at the coin clutched in his hand. Tears trickled down his cheeks.

“I’ll remember you, Grandfather. I promise,” he declared fervently. Then he tucked the coin into his pajama pocket.

No longer able to contain her sadness Ann hurried down the hallway to the privacy of her bedroom.

By rote, she went through the motions of preparing herself for bed and was about to retire when the door flung open with such force that it slammed against the wall. A scream burst past her lips at the sight of a man in the doorway waving a weapon at her.

“Out. Out,” he ordered sharply, gesturing wildly with the rifle.

“Ann! Ann! Help me,” Brandon cried out from the other room.

“Oh, dear God! Brandon!” In her hurry to reach the frightened child, Ann ignored the armed man and rushed past him. Another abductor was pulling the protesting child by the arm out of his bedroom into the living room.

“Take your hands off him,” she cried, rushing to Brandon’s defense. His captor shoved her away and she fell back onto the couch.

“Don’t you hurt her.” Brandon’s lower lip jutted out pugnaciously as he pounded the chest of his captor. He was sent sprawling next to Ann. She clutched him tightly as they huddled, terrified, while the two servants were herded into the room by more armed men. After a quick exchange, the abductors bound and gagged the servants and took them back to their room.

Several others went into her bedroom, and Ann could hear them ransacking it.

“Up. Up,” her captor ordered when they returned. His knowledge of English may have been limited, but his body language and the menacing gestures spoke an international language that was not difficult to interpret as he herded Ann and Brandon into her bedroom.

As frightened as she was, Ann refused to cower under their intimidating glares. “What is the meaning of this? What do you want from us?”

“No talk. You no talk,” he barked, and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

She couldn’t believe the devastation their captors had created in such a short time. The room had been thoroughly sacked in their search for weapons and valuables. Bureau drawers had been pulled out and the contents strewn everywhere. Chairs were upended and pictures yanked off the walls.

After Brandon helped Ann put the mattress back on the bed and restore the bedding to a proper order she insisted he go to bed.

“I’m scared, Ann. I don’t want to go to sleep. When are these mean men going away?”

“Soon, honey. Soon,” she soothed. “Try to sleep. Maybe they’ll be gone in the morning.”

When he finally settled down, Ann went to the door and tried to hear what the men were saying. From the few fragments of sentences she was able to overhear, she grasped that they were waiting for further instructions before moving Brandon and her to a different location.

Good Lord! Who were these men? Were they responsible for Clayton’s death? Were they going to kill her and Brandon, too?

Her breathing came in quick, shallow gasps as her panic mounted. She felt she was choking. Rushing to the window, she raised it and drew several deep breaths. An armed guard outside waved his weapon to indicate she move back inside the room. Irritated, she slammed down the window.

Her nerves were raw, and she could feel herself coming apart. Her fright, Clayton’s death and not knowing the reason behind it all had driven her to the brink of losing her control. Brandon’s need for her was the only thing keeping her from breaking down.

To occupy herself Ann tidied the room. The task helped to take her mind off her misery until she picked up a framed photograph that had been knocked to the floor. Her eyes misted as she gazed at the cherished face of the distinguished-looking man in his sixties. She had snapped the photograph of Clayton Burroughs the day they met.

“Oh, Clayton.” Sobbing, she sank in despair to the floor.

Chapter 2

Mike Bishop awoke with a start when Cassidy nudged him with his foot. “I think I just saw the signal.”

Saturated with perspiration, he sat up and looked around hastily at the men stretched out on the deck. All were sleeping except for Dave Cassidy at the helm.

Mike pulled out his binoculars and trained the glasses on the shore. The infrared lenses distinguished a ragged coastline capped by a dense jungle. As the boat drew nearer, a light blinked three times from the shore, the prearranged signal from the local guide. They were on course.

Frowning, he lowered the glasses, removed a black wool cap and then wiped his brow on the sleeve of his sweater. He ran his fingers through the clipped hair matted to his head and rose to his feet to stretch his cramped muscles. He was hot and sweaty and would have liked to pull off the black sweater that clung to him in wet patches, shuck the pants and boots and dive into the inviting water.

Despite the undulating movement of the small craft, his step was firm, his back ramrod straight as he crossed the deck.

“We made good time.”

Cassidy nodded. “You think the woman and kid are still alive?”

“I’m not psychic! Your guess is as good as mine.”

“What’s chewing on your ass?” Cassidy asked. “You’ve been uptight since the briefing.”

“Nothing. Nothing’s bugging me,” Mike growled. He returned to his former seat, picked up a round tin and began smearing black greasepaint on his face. When he was through, only the whites of his eyes could be discerned in the darkness. Passing the tin to Cassidy, he settled back and began to reflect on the mission ahead.

From the quick briefing they’d received from Prince Charming, a British national had been murdered in French Guiana. A contact informed them that the man’s six-year-old grandson and American assistant, Ann Hamilton, whom the Agency assigned the code names of Boy Blue and Snow White, had reached a prearranged rescue site, but were now being held prisoners, presumably by those responsible for the Brit’s murder. And since his squad was on a training exercise in neighboring Guyana, they were immediately dispatched to go in fast and get the woman and kid. And not make it an international incident. That meant not to take out any of the abductors. What the hell was with the Agency? Did Baker and Waterman think they could just walk through the door and the bastards would hand them the prisoners?

For the dozenth time Bishop reached into his pocket and pulled out the faxed photograph given to him at the briefing. He stared at the woman’s face in the picture. Deep-violet eyes veiled with thick dark lashes stared out at him from the photograph. Shoulder-length golden hair feathered in soft curls around a flawless face blessed with a small straight nose and high cheekbones.

Man, she was hot!

He ran his finger absently across her wide, generous mouth. What in hell had been with this Burroughs? The guy had to have known the risks. Only a damn fool would bring a woman along on an assignment.

On second thought, he’d cut the guy some slack. Maybe the poor fool didn’t know. Baker had said that Burroughs wasn’t actually an agent. That Waterman had asked Burroughs for his help.

Why had Queen Mother asked this Burroughs for help? Espionage was no job for amateurs. So now the poor bastard’s dead for his effort.

Mike felt a tightening in his chest. And by this time, the woman and kid are probably dead, too.

When Cassidy began to rouse the men, Mike refolded the paper and returned it to his pocket. He was proud of this team. Known as the Dwarf Squad in the Agency, he, Cassidy, Bolen and Fraser were former Navy SEALs; Williams and Bledsoe had been with the British SAS. Each man was a

specialist in a particular field. They had served together as a team for the past three years, and he trusted all of them. Would stake his life on the performance of any one of them. Mike smiled wryly—he'd often had to.

There was nothing to distinguish one of them from the other. They wore no identification. Dressed alike. On this mission, each of them carried an Israeli-made Uzi submachine gun. In addition they all carried a Silver Trident knife, a garrote, grenades and six extra clips of ammo strapped to their waists.

The team never carried survival rations. They survived on whatever the land offered.

The craft touched shore, and they slipped into the water and beached the boat. At the sound of a crackling leaf all six weapons swung toward the man who stepped out of the brush. He identified himself as the contact they were expecting.

“Burroughs's house three kilomètre,” the man explained, holding up three fingers as he struggled with English. He pointed to a spot on the map that Bishop had extracted from a waterproof packet. “I see nine, maybe ten go into house.”

“Did they all have weapons?”

“Oui.”

“Automatic weapons?” Mike pursued.

“I not know, monsieur.”

“What about servants?”

“Only Guillaume Sellier and his wife.”

“Are they friendly?”

“I think yes.”

Seeing there was no more information to be gleaned, Mike nodded abruptly. “Williams, Bledsoe, you two have Boy Blue. Bolen and Fraser, the servants. Cassidy and I will take Snow White. Conceal the boat and we'll move out.”

Armed with only a machete, their guide slipped silently into the jungle. “Williams, Bledsoe, take the point.” The two men followed the man into the forest.

Cassidy came over to him. “Well, we made it this far. Wonder if we've been spotted.”

“We'll soon find out,” Mike said. He shifted his gaze to the dense foliage surrounding them. Not a leaf stirred. “It's damn quiet.”

Cassidy's smile flashed whitely against the greasepaint on his face. “We'll get them out, Mike. I've got good vibes about this mission.”

Mike's face slashed into a grim line. “You said that about Beirut, too.”

Mike's heart pounded like a jackhammer. The closer they got to the house, the faster it beat. His hand holding the rifle was clammy and sweaty. He knew he had to get a hold on himself, but he could only think of what they might find when they entered the house. What if the prisoners were dead? He couldn't forget those violet eyes staring at him from that photograph. The time had come to get out of the business; he was losing his objectivity.

Suddenly they were there, no more time for what-ifs. The men halted, awaiting orders. He sent the guide back to his village to protect the man's identity in the event the mission fell apart.

Stay focused, Bishop. Don't lose your objectivity or you'll endanger the squad as well as the woman and kid. He mustn't let his emotions muddy the water. So why in hell was he fighting the urge to run up to the house and burst through the front door?

Mike shook his head to clear his muddled mind and concentrated on the mission. A brick wall surrounded the house. A damn brick wall! Bad enough he was battling mental obstacles, now he was confronted by a physical one—a damn brick wall! They could be picked off like sitting ducks as they tried to scale it.

The squad remained concealed as Williams and Bledsoe checked an SUV parked on the outside of the gate. Before moving on, Bledsoe shook his head and indicated with a hand signal that the keys weren't in the ignition.

As Mike passed the car, he glanced inside. A white flowered scarf shimmered like a silky pool on the front seat. He picked it up and brought the material to his nose. The sensuous fragrance hit like a punch to his gut. The damn scarf smells like Violet Eyes looked in the picture—sensuous and sexy.

Round blotches began to dot the flimsy material. Mike glanced up to discover that it was raining. That was a good sign. Rain would muffle the sound of footsteps. Maybe they were getting a little bit of outside help. He stuffed the scarf under his sweater. The piece of silk adhered seductively to his heated skin.

Bledsoe and Williams returned to report that only one man guarded the front door. In addition, the first stumbling block had been eliminated—the gate had been left ajar; they wouldn't have to scale a wall. One by one the men slipped through the gate until all six members of the squad were inside.

A light glowed from a front window of the house. As the squad huddled in the shrubbery, the front door opened and two men stepped outside carrying automatic weapons. One relieved the guard on duty while the other crossed the patio, passing right by the concealed team. Mike motioned to Bolen and Fraser, and the two men followed the gunman.

He gave Cassidy a signal to take out the guard at the front door and his second in command moved away. Bledsoe and Williams worked their way toward the back of the house to check for any other sentries.

Overcoming the guards proved a simple task, and with the perimeter secured, their objective now was to find the prisoners.

Each of the men moved to a window at the rear or sides of the house. Mike selected the one where Williams had discovered a sentry. Raising the window carefully, he peered into the darkened room and could see a figure in the bed. The light was too faint to distinguish whether it was male or female.

Moving cautiously, he climbed into the room, drew the Trident and crossed the room to the bed. He froze in his tracks when he was close enough to identify the sleeping figure.

He'd found Snow White. Boy Blue was asleep beside her.

Bishop slipped the knife back into his boot and leaned over the woman. The sensuous combination of French perfume and woman drifted up in a seductive titillation. He was tempted to clamp his mouth—instead of his hand—over that wide, generous mouth of hers. Objectivity, hell! He'd been in the jungle too long!

Her eyes popped open in alarm and she struggled to rise, but he forced her back down.

“Quiet. We're here to help you.”

Incredulity replaced Ann's initial shock and panic. He sounded American! She peered up at the frightening apparition. The room was too dark to see anything except the faint figure of a man dressed in black. But there was nothing faint about the firm hand clamped over her mouth.

“I'm removing my hand. Don't make a sound. Do you understand?” he whispered.

No doubt remained; that voice was American. She nodded, and couldn't have cried out if she wanted to. She was too numb with shock.

He removed his hand and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Don't be frightened,” he whispered. “We'll get you out of here. How many men are there?”

Ann wanted to break out in a chorus of “God Bless America.” When she finally found her voice, her heart hammered so loudly in her ears, she couldn't hear what she was saying. “I saw eight of them, but I think there were others.”

“Is there anyone else in the house besides you and the kid?”

She nodded. “Two servants. The last time I saw them they were tied up in the rear bedroom.” Now that the shock had worn off, once again she could feel hysteria mounting within her.

He must have sensed her rising agitation and tried to relax her. “You’re doing fine. Now tell me, were all the men armed?”

“I think so. At least all of the ones I saw. Who are these men? Are they the same ones who murdered Clayton?”

“I’ll explain everything later. Just remember, they’re dangerous, and won’t hesitate to kill you or the kid. Do exactly what I say. Did any of them speak English?”

“Poorly.”

“Could you understand anything said?”

The man’s clipped questions and reticence were beginning to make her feel as if she were on a witness stand. “I think they’re waiting for someone—or some instructions. They said something about moving us to a different location.”

“Did they say where? Mention any names?”

At the negative shake of her head, his jaw hardened into a grim line. “Did any of them harm you?”

“No.”

A trace of a smile tagged at the corners of his mouth. The glimmer was gone before she realized that it might have been an attempt at smiling.

“Will the kid cry when you wake him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. But this has been a harrowing experience for him.”

Bishop stood up. “Get dressed.”

“What about Brandon?”

“Let him sleep for the moment.”

By now her vision had adjusted to the darkness, and she saw that the man was tall, at least four inches over six feet. He dwarfed her five feet eight inches. Most men she met didn’t.

After collecting her clothing, she cast a prim glance in his direction.

“What?”

“I’d like some privacy, please,” she said.

“Lady, this is no time to worry about privacy. Just put the damn clothes on.”

“Then turn around, Mr.—”

“Bishop.” Disgusted, Bishop pivoted. Ann slipped on a pair of lace panties, pulled the nightgown over her head and replaced it with a bra. Jeans and a shirt followed quickly, and as she buttoned the shirt, she slipped her feet into a pair of sneakers.

“You can turn around now.”

His look was one of pure annoyance. “Wake the kid, but don’t dress him. Just put shoes on him, and for God’s sake, keep him quiet.”

She leaned over the bed and shook Brandon gently. “Wake up, honey. We have to go.”

Brandon was too drowsy to offer an argument. “Where are we going?”

“These are friends, Brandon. They’ve come to help us. You must do everything they tell you to do. Do you understand?” She slipped his feet into shoes and tied the laces.

Suddenly a face filled the window. “You all set?”

“Yeah,” Bishop said. He moved to the window. “Everyone out?”

The man never stopped scanning the courtyard as he spoke. “All except Williams and Bledsoe, they can’t find the boy.”

“He’s here. Let’s move out before bullets start flying.”

“Bishop!” Ann whispered, pointing to the door that had just begun to open.

Bishop shoved her and Brandon to the floor behind the bed, and then crouched down on a knee with his weapon pointed at the door. A dark figure slipped cautiously into the room.

Bishop relaxed and rose to his feet. “What in hell are you doing? I almost shot you,” he hissed. “Get in here and shut that door.”

Another man followed behind and gently eased the door shut.

“All these bloody blokes are sleeping like babies. We’ve searched this whole house and there’s no sign of—”

“He’s here,” Bishop said. He nodded in the direction of the bed. As if to confirm his words, Brandon peered over the top of the bed, his eyes rounded with excitement.

“Let’s move,” Bishop ordered.

One of the men lifted Brandon into his arms. “Hey, sonny, how’d you like to go for a walk?”

“Is Ann coming?”

“I sure am, honey,” she assured him.

“Let’s go, lady,” Bishop said, and grabbed her hand.

Once outside, Brandon, Marie and Guillaume were lifted onto the backs of three of them, and they started in a run down the jungle path. A fourth man knelt down on a knee.

“Climb on,” Bishop said.

“That won’t be necessary. I jog every day,” Ann said.

She bore another one of his black glares. “Okay, but if you slow us up, I’ll have to carry you.”

A hard run through a jungle in a rain was a far different cry from her usual jogging. Ann’s lungs felt near to bursting when they stopped and uncovered a concealed boat.

Bishop and one of the men crouched down to guard the rear as Ann lingered, saying goodbye to the two servants who were returning to their village.

“When those gunmen leave, we return to house,” Guillaume assured her.

“I’ll contact you as soon as I can,” Ann said.

“Let’s get out of here before someone gets killed,” Bishop ordered, his eyes trained on the jungle.

“God be with you,” Ann said. Guillaume took his wife’s hand, and they disappeared into the jungle.

An hour later, off the coast of French Guiana, Ann smiled up gratefully at the freckle-faced airman, who looked as American as a parade on the Fourth of July, as he reached out a helping hand and assisted her into an unmarked helicopter.

Chapter 3

A single light glowed dimly in the cabin of the helicopter. The squad lay sprawled asleep wherever the men could find room.

Ann felt as if they'd been flying for hours, yet the sun had not risen, so she knew she was mistaken. She raised her arm to check the time and realized she wasn't wearing a watch. She had fled Kourou so hurriedly that morning she'd forgotten to put it on.

The whole series of events remained a mystery to Ann. Clayton's death. The men who tried to abduct her. These men. Where were they taking Brandon and her? They all seemed friendly enough except for their uptight leader. At least she knew their names now, but nothing more.

Dazed, she leaned back against the cabin wall and closed her eyes. How did she lose control of her life in such a short span of time? She was fleeing South America with only the clothes on her back. No money. Not even a damn watch on her wrist!

Relax, Ann. Try to sleep. But sleep was an impossibility. The chopper's rotors were noisy, the vibration jerked the craft, the floor was hard and her legs were cramped.

Lord, how I hate helicopters! What am I doing in this crate flying over the Atlantic...that is, if we are over the Atlantic.

She hugged Brandon tighter against her, readjusting his sleeping head in her lap. His nearness was a warm and gratifying reassurance that she had not lost her sanity.

She suddenly felt a prickly sensation and knew she was being watched. Glancing up, she discovered Bishop staring at her under hooded lids. For a brief moment their gazes locked. His expression remained unchanged, and she blushed before shifting her eyes downward.

She wondered what such a man thought about in quiet moments like this. The next mission? A woman? Fearing his enigmatic eyes could read her mind, Ann closed her eyes.

She continued to feel his intense stare.

Ann awoke to discover the chopper was landing. All the men were awake and alert. From her position on the floor, she couldn't see anything until the freckle-faced crewman opened the door as they touched down. Then the glare of bright sunlight hit her in the eyes.

Two of the men jumped out with pointed rifles, then Bishop got out and swung her to the ground. The other two followed with Brandon.

Bishop took her by the arm while Cassidy moved to her side and put a hand on her elbow, as well. They whisked her toward an unmarked plane standing nearby on the runway. She felt like a prisoner being hustled away to jail.

Curious, she glanced around but all that she saw was a deserted airstrip. No hangars. No tower. Nothing. She couldn't venture a guess as to their location.

Was it possible these men, in fact, were the ones responsible for Clayton's death? Maybe the men at the villa merely intended to abduct Brandon and her for ransom.

Ann felt certain about one thing: the long-on-silence, short-on-explanation Bishop was not about to volunteer any information.

Brandon's boyish laughter penetrated her rumination. Ann turned her head to look back and saw that the one named Bledsoe was carrying the youngster on his shoulders. Thank God there's a spark of humanity in at least one of these men.

Immediately she regretted her callous attitude. She was foolish and ungrateful, allowing her imagination to run rampant. These men had risked their lives to save her and Brandon.

Under a blush of guilt, she stole a glance at the sculpted profile of Bishop, who was walking beside her. Now that he had wiped off the greasepaint, the man appeared to be in his mid-thirties. His nose had clearly been broken at least once, and tiny lines crept from the corners of his eyes; but these features tended to add character to his face, she reflected with the objective eye of a photographer.

A thick mustache nestled above a firm mouth with a sensual lower lip. Seasoned by sun and wind, this was not a handsome face by Hollywood standards—no Brad Pitt or Antonio Banderas for sure. No, indeed. But she was willing to stake her professional reputation that women who had gazed into those melancholy, deep-hazel eyes of his had found the face sensuously irresistible.

Daring to intrude on the thoughts of her taciturn guard, Ann said boldly, “I’d like to know where we’re going, Bishop.”

“You’ll find out when the time comes.” That earlier, welcome-sounding American voice now had a decided growl of irritation. But its huskiness, coupled with those bedroom eyes of his, could still play havoc with a girl’s libido.

For heaven’s sake, Ann, there hasn’t been time enough for you to have developed Stockholm Syndrome!

She had had enough of the whole scene and stopped abruptly, shrugged off their hands and with flashing eyes squared off against the two men.

“I don’t want to appear ungrateful for what you’ve done for Brandon and me, but I’ve tolerated all the pushing and shoving I intend to. Until I start getting some answers from you wardens... watchdogs... or whatever, I’m not going to budge another step.” She folded her arms across her chest to reinforce the declaration.

The party following halted, shuffling impatiently as they looked to their leader. Without saying a word, Bishop swept her up in his arms, carried her onto the plane and then dumped her into what appeared to be a seat.

“Be sure and fasten your seat belt, lady.”

The smug gleam in his hazel eyes taunted her to go for his jugular. However, her dignity prevailed. Instead she bestowed a scathing glower upon him. “Do you have an aversion to heights, Bishop?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You seem to prefer airplanes without windows. Or haven’t you noticed there are no windows in this plane, either?”

“We’ve been told that after this trip we’ll have earned enough frequent-flyer points to rate one that does.”

His sarcasm was exasperating. “What kind of plane is this, Bishop?”

“You writing a book?”

“An exposé. I’ll be sure to spell your name correctly.”

He didn’t even blink. “It’s a C-17.”

“C as in cargo?”

“You’ve got that right.”

“Is it privately owned, or does it belong to the United States? There are no markings on it.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” he said.

He was a very exasperating man. To her further chagrin he sat down beside her.

Determined to ignore him, Ann turned away. An awkward silence developed as they marked time while the others got situated. Brandon was put in a jump seat directly across the aisle from hers. She watched Bledsoe tighten the boy’s seat belt, then pretend to tickle him.

The sound of Brandon’s irrepressible laughter brought a tender smile to Ann’s lips. “Your friend seems to like children.”

He glanced at Bledsoe and shrugged negligently in reply. Ann decided to remain civilized, no matter how much this man irritated her.

“Do you like children, Bishop? Ah, do you have a first name or is Bishop a clerical title?” She thought it was a clever remark. His expression never changed.

“Bishop will do,” he said.

“Do you like children, Bishop?”

A brow quirked. “Never thought about it one way or another.”

Their conversation ceased when the plane started to roll down the runway, and she waited until they were airborne to pose her next remark.

“I think Brandon and I should be sitting together.”

He fixed a condescending gaze on her. “We have a reason for everything we do, Hamilton.”

“Who is ‘we,’ Bishop?”

“You’ll get your answers when we land.”

This time he grinned. Ann figured if she hadn’t been sitting, the devastating shock would have knocked her off her feet.

“Why don’t you try to rest?” His crooked smile was engaging. She quickly turned her head away from the appealing sight. The Stockholm Syndrome wasn’t going to work on her.

Shifting to her side, she leaned her head against the windowless cabin wall of the C-17 and closed her eyes.

Mike watched her as she slept. For damn sure she was a knockout beauty. Looking at her and breathing in that perfume she wore conjured up an image of tropical nights, soft music, the smell of jasmine drifting in from outside—and the two of them in bed making out all night long.

She sure had more going for her than just a pretty face. He’d seen the spark in her violet eyes when she had challenged him, and he liked that. It was a sign she was a survivor. The woman had taken a couple of knockout punches in the last twenty-four hours and appeared to be climbing back up on her feet. Yeah, there was more to Ann Hamilton than just the damnedest pair of eyes he’d ever seen.

Ann woke up in darkness. They were landing but she had no idea how long she’d been asleep or where they were. She felt the touchdown, and then the plane taxied for several minutes before coming to a halt. When the door opened, the light was almost blinding. She shaded her eyes to avoid the glare, and by the time her eyesight adjusted, Bishop and his crew had transferred them into another helicopter. The copter’s rotors were already revolving and within seconds they had lifted off.

This one was larger than the previous one, and had actual seats. She was grateful for that, because her aching body was feeling the effects from the two previous uncomfortable means of transportation.

But where were they, and where were they going now? She reached to shove aside a curtain that shrouded the windows. Immediately a firm hand clamped over her wrist.

“Give it a couple more minutes, Hamilton.”

Ann turned around in disgust. He was leaning across her, their faces inches apart. She sucked in a gasp, and the hazel eyes shifted to her parted lips. For a breathless moment she waited, speechless, then he released her wrist and settled back in his seat

“As much as I hate helicopters, I have to say this one is more comfortable than any I’ve ever been in before. What kind is it?”

“What in hell difference does it make to you?”

“Chapter Two. Have you forgotten?”

Annoyed, he shook his head. “It’s a H-53 Sea Stallion. So now you know. Does that clear it all up for you?”

“No, but I’m impressed. It has windows! Can I peek now?”

He leaned over her again, and she breathed in the husky male scent of him as he shoved aside the curtain to reveal a huge window that offered a panoramic view. The lights below appeared as plentiful as the stars above, but it was too dark and they were traveling too swiftly to distinguish any landmarks below.

Suddenly her heart seemed to leap to her throat as she gasped with joy. Ablaze with light, the alabaster beauty of the Washington Monument pierced the darkness like a shining beacon.

They were in Washington, D.C., United States of America.

Ann turned to Bishop and smiled through the tears of joy that streaked her cheeks.

She couldn't believe it when the helicopter landed on the top of a building. But before she could even comment on it, they were rushed into an elevator and then hurried outside to three parked limos. Cassidy hustled Ann into the back seat of the middle car and then sat down next to the driver. Bolen and Fraser moved to the lead vehicle. Ann looked out the back window in time to see Williams and Bledsoe thrust Brandon into the last car. Before she could protest this latest separation from Brandon, Bishop climbed in beside her and slammed the door.

"We're rolling," he mouthed into the radio clutched in his left hand. The limo shot forward with the smooth glide of an Olympic skater.

"What now, Bishop?" Ann's feeling of complacency at being back in the States was becoming eclipsed quickly by the continued security measures.

"Debriefing."

"Debriefing? Is that where you strap on the electrodes or shoot me full of sodium pentothal?"

She perceived the barest glimmer of a smile—or was it a smirk? Bishop turned his head and stared out the window.

The conversation had ended, but her awareness of the man beside her increased as the male essence of him continued to tantalize her senses as much as his autocracy provoked them.

Chapter 4

Purring like a contented black cat on a velvet cushion, the limo continued to move swiftly on the beltway. After a short ride, they passed through a gate with an armed guard and pulled up at the rear of a building.

Ann and Brandon were whisked up several floors in an elevator and led to an office. Bishop rapped lightly, opened the door and peered inside. Satisfied, he stepped aside for Ann and Brandon to enter and then followed them into the room. As irritating as the man could be, she felt relieved to have his commanding presence beside her.

The two men awaiting their arrival rose to their feet, and one stepped forward to greet her.

“Miss Hamilton, I’m Avery Waterman. I can’t tell you how relieved we are to see you’ve arrived safely.”

His clipped accent was clearly British. He appeared to be in his late fifties or early sixties. Everything about Waterman mirrored refined elegance, from a well-groomed mustache to the European cut of the charcoal-colored cashmere jacket tailored to fit his slim figure.

Waterman shook Ann’s hand, then leaned over and patted Brandon on the head. “And this chap must be our young Mr. Burroughs.”

The move was too aggressive for the confused six-year-old. He slipped his hand into Ann’s. She grasped it securely.

Waterman did not miss the gesture. He straightened up, and his gray eyes focused on Ann. “Please be seated, Miss Hamilton. May I introduce my associate, Jeffrey Baker?”

Baker nodded his head of salt-and-pepper hair closely cropped in a buzz cut. “Miss Hamilton.” The deep guttural greeting seemed to be dredged from the abyss of his barrel chest.

She observed that Baker appeared to be the antithesis of his colleague. Shorter than Waterman by several inches, Baker resembled a retired Marine gunny sergeant. Missing were the familiar string of hash marks running up his sleeve, or rows of combat ribbons lining his chest, but she was convinced the inscription *Semper Fi* was probably tattooed somewhere on the solid brawn concealed beneath his wrinkled, gray flannel suit.

Ann sat down on a nearby couch. When Brandon curled against her side, Waterman addressed the youngster. “Brandon, would you like something to eat?”

Brandon looked to Ann for approval. He grinned broadly when she nodded. Bishop led the boy to the door, and for several moments carried on a whispered conversation with the men in the hallway. Two of them departed with Brandon in tow.

“I hope I’m finally going to get some answers,” Ann declared after Bishop returned, crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

Avery Waterman sat down opposite Ann and settled back with a condescending smile. “Ask away, Miss Hamilton. We’re at your service.”

Yeah, right! She resented the cat-and-mouse game still being played. Within the past thirty some hours Clayton had been murdered, she and Brandon terrorized and virtually spirited out of South America. Now this man had the audacity to patronize her.

“Mr. Waterman, just who are you and whom do you represent?”

She didn’t fail to catch the hasty glance that Waterman exchanged with his associate. “I assure you, Miss Hamilton, you are in good hands.”

“That’s not what I asked, Mr. Waterman.”

“We are an antiterrorist rescue division, Miss Hamilton.”

“Of what? British Intelligence or the CIA?”

His mouth curled in a slight smile. “CIA, Miss Hamilton.”

“Do you know who killed Clayton Burroughs?”

“Not as yet. We were hoping you could tell us.”

Startled by the unexpected voice at her side, as much as by the astonishing remark, Ann turned her head to discover Jeffrey Baker had crossed the room and was now standing next to the couch. She had been unaware he had moved closer, for despite his bull-like physique, the man had moved quickly and quietly.

“Me? How would I know?” she asked, flabbergasted.

Waterman leaned forward. “Miss Hamilton, we are aware of your close association with Mr. Burroughs.”

“Close association? What do you... Clayton and I were close friends...nothing more...” Ann floundered helplessly. She took a deep breath. Why was she allowing these men to put her on the defensive? To intimidate her? Their implications smeared a beautiful friendship.

“I didn’t mean to imply otherwise, Miss Hamilton,” Waterman added hastily. “But we also know you were seen with Burroughs the morning he was killed. Did he say anything that would offer a clue as to the identity of his assailants?”

Ann shook her head. “No. Nothing. He never mentioned he was in danger.”

“Think carefully, Miss Hamilton. Tell us exactly what transpired yesterday morning. Don’t spare the minutest detail.” His tone had lost its loftiness, and his clear gray eyes were bathed in kindness.

Ann allowed her mind to drift back to the dreadful morning. “Clayton telephoned me early and said the situation was urgent. I had never heard him sound so grave. He told me to pack an overnight bag and come over at once.”

Ann closed her eyes, recalling the desperation in Clayton’s voice. “When I arrived at his home, he shoved Brandon into his car and told me to drive to his villa in the north. He would join us there later.” She lifted her hands in despair. “That’s all I know.”

“He said nothing more to you?”

“Oh, there was one other thing.” Both men leaned forward attentively. “He said, ‘I know you’ll take good care of Brandon.’”

“He offered no explanation? And you didn’t ask for one?” Waterman asked skeptically.

“No. Everything happened so fast I just reacted automatically without questioning his motives. Why didn’t he come with us?”

“I suspect he knew whomever was found with him would be killed, too,” Baker said.

Tears began to streak her cheeks. “I feel as if I deserted him...abandoned him. If only I had known he was in danger.”

Waterman patted her hand. “There’s nothing you could have done to prevent what happened.”

She jerked up her head and glared at him. “I could have called the police. They would have protected him.”

“Who knows, Miss Hamilton, the police may be the very ones responsible for his death.”

“You’re wrong,” she lashed out. “French Guiana is a beautiful country—a Shangri-la. There is no corruption there. The people there have an innocence like none other I’ve seen anywhere.”

Waterman stood up. “Well, apparently not all are innocent. Mr. Burroughs’s death testified to that.”

“Clayton was not killed by one of the local citizens,” she declared adamantly. “You must have some idea why he was murdered. The CIA wouldn’t have gone to all the trouble of bringing me here if you thought his death was just a...random killing.”

Waterman moved away and sat down behind a desk. “Miss Hamilton, I must have your promise that whatever I tell you will not go beyond this room.” Ann nodded. “As Burroughs’s aide you must have been familiar with the satellite the Israeli government intended to launch.”

“I assume you’re referring to the launch aborted last month because of a mechanical malfunction.”

Baker nodded. "But there was no mechanical malfunction. We have reason to suspect the satellite had been sabotaged. Burroughs was conducting an undercover investigation in an attempt to find out who was behind that destruction."

Sabotage! Undercover investigation! Ann could not believe what she heard. "Are you saying Clayton was an agent...with the CIA?"

"Let's say that Mr. Burroughs was engaged in undercover work for the government, but he was neither a trained agent nor an employee of the Central Intelligence Agency. He contacted us because of his suspicions."

Ann shook her head to try and clear her befuddled thoughts. "Why would he contact the United States? The satellite was Israeli. Why wouldn't he contact the Israeli government? It was their problem, not the United States'."

"Whatever he was pursuing was linked to the United States. He had found out that much."

"And died because of it," Ann said bitterly. "Clayton Burroughs was the kindest, gentlest man I've ever known. How dare you encourage him in this investigation?" Appalled, her voice rose to near hysteria. "If what you say is true, why didn't you let your own operators investigate this...sabotage?" She glared at Bishop, who had not said a word throughout the whole conversation. "Lord knows you've got enough of them."

Cradling her head in her hand, she refused to give in to further tears. Particularly with three sets of eyes watching her every move.

"You're tired now, Miss Hamilton," Waterman said. "This has been a terrible strain on you. I think you should get some rest."

Ann lifted her head. "Your Mr. Bishop rushed us away so hurriedly that I don't have any money, not even a change of clothing. And, as you saw, Brandon is in his pajamas."

Waterman's smile bordered on a simper. "Agent Bishop's propensity for expediency is what makes him so effective in the field." He assisted her to her feet, put a hand on her back and steered her toward the door. "We'll see that you get whatever you need. And we've made arrangements for you at the Watergate."

Ann stopped at the doorway. "What about Clayton's body?"

"The British government is handling the arrangements. Mr. Burroughs's remains will be returned to England for burial."

"I would like to attend the funeral and then return to Kourou as quickly as possible. Everything I own is there."

"Of course, Miss Hamilton. You'll be free to move about as soon as we are certain you'll be safe. The important thing now is for you and the lad to get a good night's rest." The patronizing attitude had returned.

When Bishop opened the door, Ann saw Brandon curled up asleep in a chair. Her gaze sought Bishop and locked with that of the hazel-eyed squad leader.

"Agent Bishop, come in here a moment," Baker called to him.

Mike Bishop broke their fixed stare and stepped back inside. As the door was closing, Ann heard Baker say, "The woman's no fool. Do you think she's telling us everything she knows?"

The door clicked shut before Ann could hear Waterman's reply. She glanced at Cassidy and offered a nervous smile.

Cassidy grinned and winked in understanding.

Within minutes Bishop rejoined them. Cassidy picked up Brandon and they headed for the elevator.

"We're moving," Bishop said into the radio clutched in his hand. The voices of Bolen, then Williams, acknowledged the message through the transmitter.

"I thought you agents talked into your lapels," she joked lightly.

"Not since I sent my suit to the cleaners," Bishop replied.

“Bishop, you actually made a joke!”

Bolen and Fraser were waiting when the elevator doors opened.

“Tell me, Bishop, are we all checking into the hotel together?” Ann asked when they stepped outside, and Bledsoe and Williams joined them. “I’m beginning to feel like Snow White.” The six men exchanged startled glances.

“Only thing is one of the seven dwarfs appears to be missing. Which one of the little darlings are you, Bishop— Grumpy or Dopey?”

Bishop’s face hardened into a grim frown. “Did anyone ever tell you, Hamilton, what a pain in the ass you are?”

“Oh, lighten up, Bishop, I was only joking.”

Yeah, she was right, he had to lighten up, Mike told himself. But Violet Eyes was unaware of how close her quip had hit home. Or maybe she did. Maybe she knew more than she was admitting. Maybe she knew why Tony Sardino, the seventh member of the Dwarf Squad—code name Bashful—had been killed the month before in Beirut.

Chapter 5

Brandon was still asleep in the other bed when Ann awoke the following morning. She sat up and glanced around the hotel room, her attention drawn immediately to a flight bag on the dresser. The small satchel had not been there when she went to bed.

Bishop must have brought in the bag while I was sleeping. Doesn't he ever sleep?

Dressed only in her underclothes, Ann wrapped the sheet around her and padded barefoot over to examine the bag's contents.

"Bless you, Bishop. I take back every nasty thought I've had of you," she mumbled as she pulled out toothbrushes, toothpaste, a hairbrush, a comb, shampoo, socks, underwear for Brandon and a jogging suit for him, as well. There was even a bottle of her favorite perfume.

Ann stopped momentarily, and her face deepened in a blush when she withdrew the final articles from the bag: a lacy black bra and a matching pair of bikinis.

"Damn you, Bishop," she grumbled, revoking her earlier benediction. "How did you know my size?"

She tossed them aside and eagerly scooped up the toilet articles. Then, frowning, she reconsidered, snatched up the lingerie and disappeared into the bathroom.

After a leisurely shampoo and shower, Ann poked her head out of the bathroom. She cast a fretful glance at her jeans and shirt hanging on the back of a chair across the room. Brandon appeared to be asleep, but dare she chance retrieving her clothes dressed in only a bra and panties? It would just be the time he'd awaken.

He who hesitates is lost, Ann. She dashed across the room and grabbed the garments. When she turned to run back to the bathroom, she stopped abruptly, and the clothes dropped to the floor. Her mouth gaped open in a scream that froze in her throat when she recognized Bishop.

"What...what are you doing here?"

Ann instinctively wanted to cover herself with her hands, but she fought the reflex. After all, she had photographed dozens of lingerie ads, and lingerie revealed less than today's swimsuits.

However, standing in the intimacy of a hotel room, dressed only in a skimpy bra and panties that he had bought, somehow did not equate in her mind to the impersonal professionalism of a photo shoot. Especially with Bishop's hazel-eyed gaze fixed on her.

His damn eyes are like the lens of a camera. They don't miss a detail.

Bishop slowly rose to his feet, bent over and picked up her jeans and shirt and then held them out to her. "I see they fit." His eyes glimmered with smugness.

She snatched the garments out of his outstretched hand and pulled on the shirt. "I don't appreciate this intrusion of my privacy, Bishop."

"Only doing my job, Hamilton."

She jerked up her head. "I thought your job involved rescue operations. Do your responsibilities extend to selecting women's lingerie?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do." He plopped back down in the chair.

"Funny, Bishop." She moved to the dresser. "How did you know my size?"

"I've got eyes."

That you have, Bishop. Disturbing eyes. She could feel the sweep of them as she worked the jeans past her hips.

Dabbing on a few drops of the Chanel he had brought, Ann asked, "And my favorite perfume?"

"I've got a nose."

"And a big mouth." She grabbed the comb and brush and stormed into the bathroom, slamming the door in frustration.

The noise woke Brandon. The youngster sat up and grinned when he saw Mike. “Hi, Mr. Bishop.”

“Morning, kid. Do you always sleep this late?”

“Not always. Just the mornings I don’t wake up early.”

It was that kind of children’s logic that had convinced Mike he’d never make a good father.

Brandon’s smile quickly vanished as he glanced around the room. Panic began to flood the boy’s features. “Where’s Ann?”

“She’s in the bathroom. She’ll be out in a minute.”

Brandon’s face puckered and he began to cry. “I want Ann. Where is she?”

Hearing Brandon’s cry, Ann hurried out of the bathroom and rushed over to gather him into her arms. “I’m right here, honey.” She glared accusingly at Bishop. “What did you say to upset him?”

Mike moved to the door and opened it. “Get the kid dressed, Hamilton. We’re due back at the Agency.”

Baker and Waterman were waiting in the same room, in the same positions as the day before. Only their clothing had changed. Waterman was now wearing a dark-gray, three-piece suit that didn’t have a wrinkle; Baker had on a brown suit that looked as if he had put it on before going to bed last night.

This time she had a strategy. Before either man could try any of their intimidating tactics on her, Ann took the offensive.

“Gentlemen, how much longer must Brandon and I endure these stringent security measures?”

Waterman offered an ingratiating smile. “We understand, Miss Hamilton. My associate and I have conferred on this matter and have reached the decision that any threat to you was left behind in French Guiana.”

She felt a sense of relief until hit by a sudden thought. “Are you suggesting I not return to that country?”

Baker nodded. “Not at this time. I certainly wouldn’t advise you to do so until we clear up the mystery behind Mr. Burroughs’s death.”

“But everything I own...”

Cutting off her protest, he handed her an envelope. “We’ve made whatever arrangements are necessary. Your account has been transferred to a bank here in Washington.”

Ann opened the envelope and stared dumbfounded at the contents. It contained her checkbook, credit card and passport. “Where...how did you get these?”

“We have our ways, Miss Hamilton.” Baker continued to speak as if by rote, sounding like a police officer reading the Miranda warning to a suspect. “We appreciate your past cooperation and apologize for any inconvenience you may have suffered while under our protection. We only had your interests at heart.”

Ann couldn’t believe how these arrangements had been made so quickly, but she felt a great burden had been lifted off her shoulders. “Then Brandon and I are free to leave.”

Her exhilaration was quickly squelched when the two security heads exchanged a guarded glance. Waterman cleared his throat and began to hedge.

“Well, one minor problem still exists, Miss Hamilton. Legally, Brandon Burroughs is a British subject. Her Majesty’s government prefers he remain at their embassy.”

She tightened her grasp on Brandon’s hand. “I won’t hear of it. I’m the only family he has now. He’ll be frightened without me.”

“It will only be for a few days, Miss Hamilton, while a proper investigation is made to determine if the child has any other living relatives. If not, we are recommending he then be placed in your custody.”

“I can tell you right now Clayton Burroughs was Brandon’s last remaining relative. His parents were killed in an accident. His mother had been an orphan. Brandon’s father had been Clayton’s only

son. Clayton's wife and daughter were both dead, and Clayton had no siblings. I've seen his will. He's appointed me Brandon's legal guardian."

Waterman offered an indulgent smile. "Then that should simplify the matter, Miss Hamilton. But we still must follow the proper procedures to determine the legality of the situation for ourselves."

"I can't believe with all your apparent...connections, Mr. Waterman, that you can't cut through the red tape and let Brandon remain with me. He's so young. This will be frightening and confusing to him. Hasn't he suffered enough?"

Waterman's expression softened with understanding, while Baker's remained inscrutable. "We tried, Miss Hamilton," Waterman said.

"May I visit him at the Embassy?"

"Every day, if you wish. I shall make the arrangements myself."

She glanced down at Brandon's upturned face. The young boy knew he was being discussed, but he couldn't follow the conversation. "May I have a moment alone with him?"

"Of course."

After the two men left the room, Ann knelt down and smiled as she straightened his collar. "Sweetheart, I guess we've got to split up for a few days."

"No. I don't want to," he declared.

"Neither do I, honey, but since I'm not your real mother, we have to do what these men say."

"We don't have to listen to these dumb guys, Ann. We can run away from them." He started to sob and flung his arms around her neck. "Let's go back to Grandfather's house. I bet Mr. Bishop would help if we asked him."

She hugged him for several moments. "Sweetheart, I promise that we'll be together again as soon as Mr. Waterman can arrange it."

She kissed his cheek and pulled back, smiling at him through her tears. "Now, you're going to have a real good time while you're staying at the British Embassy. I'll come and visit you every day until you can leave with me."

His little chin quivered. "You promise?"

Her heart felt as if it was being ripped from her chest. "Promise."

As Brandon wiped away his tears, Ann rose to her feet and opened the door. She nodded. "He's ready."

Agents Bledsoe and Williams followed the security heads into the room.

"Come on, lad, we'll stop on the way and get us some ice-cream cones," Williams announced.

Brandon's eyes brightened. "Bye, Ann." He grinned up at Bledsoe. "Can I have a chocolate one, Pete?"

"You bet, lad. A two-scooper."

"I'll see you tomorrow, sweetheart," Ann called out as the two Englishmen took the small boy in hand and led him away.

"We'll notify you as soon as the legalities are finalized, Miss Hamilton," Waterman said. "Will you be remaining at the Watergate?"

Ann nodded. "I'll expect to hear from you."

Bishop followed her to the elevator and pushed the down button. "I'll flag you a cab."

"That won't be necessary. I think I'd like to walk for a while."

A bell chimed, the door swung open and Ann stepped into the elevator. She looked up into his troubled gaze. "I want to thank you for everything, Bishop. I'm sorry I snapped at you this morning."

Before he could reply, the door closed and the hazel eyes were gone from sight. She'd miss them.

Ann had never felt so lonely in her life.

Chapter 6

After the relatively arcadian existence she had been living for the past four years, the sights and sounds of metropolitan Washington were a new experience for Ann. She dodged people and traffic for an hour and then entered a mall. To her surprise the shops were not open, but she saw people using the hallways to do their morning walking and jogging. Ann joined them, perusing the shop windows as she passed.

By the time she finished, she had mentally noted several outfits to try on, and sat down to wait for the shops to open. As she listened to the pleasant music in the mall, her thoughts wandered to Brandon and how he was faring. Remembering the earlier conversation, Ann grinned and shook her head. Good heavens! I wonder if they actually did stop for ice cream at this hour of the morning.

Suddenly she felt an uneasy twinge at the nape of her neck—someone was watching her. She looked around. Several of the nearby benches were filled with the joggers and walkers whom she remembered seeing previously. None of them appeared to be paying any attention to her.

Ann turned back, but the uneasy feeling continued to nag her. So much so, she decided to leave and return later. Just as she rose to her feet, the mall began to echo with the rattle and clang of iron grills as the shop owners began to unlock and open their stores. So instead of departing, she went to the ATM machine and got some cash, then headed for a small boutique to make her first purchase. However, she couldn't lose the feeling of being followed.

Once engrossed in shopping, her anxiety was forgotten with the pleasure of picking out several outfits, hosiery, shoes and nightgowns. She even stopped and selected a few pieces of lingerie. "Without your assistance, Bishop," she mumbled in satisfaction.

Ann immediately chastised herself for allowing her thoughts to stray to that overbearing agent when she should have been thinking about Brandon.

To ease her conscience, Ann hurried to the children's department and bought him several pairs of sweatpants and shirts. As she continued to browse through the store, a gold silk blouse caught her fancy.

"Isn't it lovely? It just came in yesterday," the gray-haired saleswoman remarked.

"Yes, I think I'll try it on."

"The dressing room is right back here." The clerk led her to an alcove at the rear of the store and pushed aside the curtain of one of the stalls. "My name is Janice. Just call out if you need any help."

Ann had just removed the blouse and put her shirt back on when the room was plunged into darkness except for a red exit sign over the door. She quickly buttoned her shirt-front and then groped for her packages in the dark.

Suddenly she had an uneasy feeling that she no longer was alone. Someone had entered the darkened room, and she doubted it was Janice, or the clerk would have identified herself.

Ann felt a sense of peril. Her heart hammered and her senses attuned sharply to every noise around her. She heard a soft shuffle of footsteps at the same instant the distant drone of Janice's voice carried from somewhere farther out in the store. Whoever was there in the darkness with her definitely wasn't the sales clerk.

Her nerve ends tingled as footsteps moved stealthily across the floor. Ann held her breath, but the sound of her heartbeat pounding in her ears was so loud she felt the mysterious intruder could hear it as well. Frozen with fear, she was fearful of moving lest she reveal her whereabouts.

No, I'm not going to surrender to fear again. Whoever's following me is in for a surprise. I'm not going down without a fight.

She groped for her purse in the dark. It was the only weapon she had, and as soon as those curtains parted, she'd swing it at the person's head.

She heard the faint slide of the curtains. He was checking the stalls. If only he wasn't between her and the door she'd make a run for it. But not knowing his exact whereabouts, she might run right into his arms.

And where the hell was that clerk? She should have come back to check on her customer. If I get out of here alive, I'll be damned if I buy that blouse!

She heard a footstep, this time nearer. Now he couldn't be more than a few stalls away. She raised her purse in readiness.

Suddenly a flashlight beam pierced the darkness. "Ann. Ann, where are you?"

She recognized Bishop's voice at once. "Here. Over here," she shouted in relief. The light swung in her direction.

She heard his running footsteps, and the drapes before her parted. With a sob of relief she collapsed against the hard wall of his chest, and his arms closed protectively around her. For several seconds she savored the comfort and strength she felt from the arms enfolding her.

"Let's get out of here." His voice was a husky whisper at her ear. She nodded her response against his chest, and his warm grasp closed around her hand.

Once out of the dressing room, the store was dimly lit by light filtering in from the atrium in the mall. Ann turned to look back at the darkened dressing room. Nothing stirred. She wanted to bolt out of the store, but forced herself to take a deep, calming breath.

"What are you doing here, Bishop?"

"I...ah..."

"So you're the one who's been following me. Damn it, Bishop, you almost scared me to death back there." Anger replaced her former fear. "Why did Mr. Baker lie to me? Lead me to believe it was all over, if he intended to continue playing these cloak-and-dagger games with me?" Her voice cracked. "I was frightened, Bishop. Really frightened."

He didn't offer any word in defense. Instead he took her arm and led her over to a restaurant opposite the shop.

"I haven't been following you, Hamilton," he said, once they were seated in a corner booth, cups of steaming coffee on the table before them as they waited for their sandwiches and fries. "I happened to have been shopping in the same store and saw you enter the dressing room. When the lights went out and you didn't show, well...I..." He faltered in embarrassment.

"Ran to my rescue," she interjected in a voice rife with skepticism.

Irritation flashed in his hazel eyes. "Believe what you want."

"Well, do you have reason to believe it was foul play?"

"Foul play?" He snorted. "Did you pick up that phrase from a Charlie Chan movie, Hamilton?"

"All right then, why did you suspect I was in danger?"

"I'm suspicious by nature." He picked up the cup and took several swallows of coffee.

He has nice hands, Ann reflected, observing his fingers wrapped around the cup. "Am I still in danger?"

"Agency thinks not," he answered in his irritating, succinct fashion.

The answer was too ambiguous for her satisfaction. "And what do you think, Bishop? Because if you weren't following me, someone else sure was."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because I wasn't alone in that dressing room."

She now had his full attention. "Why do you say that?"

"Someone was stalking me. I heard him."

"Hamilton, I didn't see anyone else enter that dressing room but you."

"I know what I heard. There was someone else in there."

The hazel-eyed gaze locked with hers. "How in hell did you get into this mess, Hamilton?"

The question forced her thoughts back to Clayton, and her voice softened with poignancy. “I met Clayton Burroughs four years ago. I was a fashion photographer and had gone to French Guiana on a shoot. The funny thing about it, I didn’t want the assignment in the first place. I felt burned out, after five nonstop years of living out of suitcases and accumulating frequent flyer points. I didn’t want to see another camera or any more gorgeous women in Gucci gowns for the rest of my life. My boss, Barney Hailey, talked me into it by promising me a month off when I finished. So I agreed.”

The waitress brought their order, and as soon as she left Bishop asked, “And how did you get mixed up with Burroughs?”

“Barney wanted authentic, outdoor shots on Devil’s Island. Well, our plane developed mechanical problems, and Clayton was on the island at the time. He offered us a ride back to Kourou in his helicopter.”

Deep in reverie, Ann smiled, remembering Clayton’s thoughtfulness in the weeks that followed. “When we wrapped up the shoot, Barney and the crew returned to the States. Clayton coaxed me into remaining in Kourou.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

His suggestive tone snapped her out of her reflections. “What’s that supposed to mean, Bishop? You don’t get it at all. From the beginning Clayton and I were kindred souls. He was lonely. He had lost his wife and daughter fifteen years before. He thought of me as a daughter, and I envisioned him as the father I had never known.”

“Until you found yourself alone with him one night with his hand up your skirt.”

Her eyes flashed in anger. “You’re pathetic.” She started to gather up her parcels to leave.

“Okay, I apologize. Sit down and finish your lunch. So the old guy was dead from the waist down and the relationship was purely platonic. So how did a photographer get into the rocket business?”

“I doubt that you’re really interested, Bishop.”

“I said I was sorry.” Irritation had crept into his voice. “Finish the story.”

Although she doubted his sincerity, Ann did want to finish the story—for her own sake, not his. Once started on this sentimental journey, it was difficult to stop. This was the first chance she had since Clayton’s death to talk about her feelings to someone...even if that someone was as cynical as Bishop. She settled back down in the seat, and after several sips of coffee Ann continued.

“Clayton was a marvelous raconteur, always relating little anecdotes about the history and culture of the country. When the time came to return to the States he persuaded me to remain as his assistant. He said intelligence and common sense were the only essentials needed to succeed in the position. Well, the whole space program was fascinating to me. I had naively believed that only the United States and the Soviets were involved with outer space. I soon discovered that European markets launched satellites as well. And after the frenetic pace of my old job, working with the relaxing atmosphere provided by Clayton soon cured me of burnout. I even began to enjoy taking photographs again.”

“You gonna finish those fries?” She shook her head and handed him the plate. “What about the kid? Did Burroughs raise him?” he asked, popping a French fry into his mouth.

Her face softened in sadness. “Two years ago Clayton’s son and daughter-in-law were killed in an airplane tragedy, and that’s when Brandon came to live with his grandfather.”

She finished her coffee and smiled. “Well, you asked for it. That’s the whole story.”

Whatever doubts he still harbored remained concealed behind an enigmatic gaze. “More coffee? Dessert?”

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll see you back to your hotel.” He threw down some bills on the table, then gathered up her packages.

Once outside the mall, he flagged a cab and they returned to the Watergate.

“Mind if I come in and check your room?” he asked when they reached her door.

“I thought you said you were off the case, Bishop?”

“After the incident today, I put myself back on it, Hamilton.”

He entered the room ahead of her, and after a quick check in the closet, bathroom and even under the bed, he walked to the door.

“What do you intend doing about dinner?”

“I’m intending to eat it,” she said. He ignored her flippancy.

“Well, there are two selections on the menu—with me or with me watching you. Which do you prefer?”

“Are you inviting me to have dinner with you, Bishop?” she asked, amused.

“Pick you up at seven. Lock this door after me.”

Her gaze followed his broad shoulders and tight buns as he walked away. “I haven’t heard the click of that dead bolt, Hamilton,” he called back without turning.

Smiling, she closed the door, turned the dead bolt and then slipped the chain into place.

The hotel room was lonely without Brandon. In the past two years he’d been such a big part of her life that she’d come to think of him as her son.

Ann plopped down on the bed, grabbed the telephone and dialed the number of the British Embassy, which Avery Waterman had given her. After being shifted from one extension to another, she finally heard Brandon’s “hello” on the other end.

“Hi, honey, this is Ann.”

“Hi, Ann.” He sounded glad to hear her. And just hearing his voice lifted her spirits.

“How are you doing, sweetheart?”

“I’m having a good time, Ann. Mrs. Millen—but she said I should call her Sarah—is real nice. She’s the one taking care of me. We’re playing a game of Old Maid now, so I gotta go, Ann. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, honey. I’ll be there.”

“Bye,” he said, and hung up.

Ann slowly put the phone aside. She felt more depressed than ever. He sounded as if he was having such a good time that he didn’t miss her. Like she never played Old Maid with him. Dear God, what if they found some legal loophole to take him away from her? It would be more than she could bear to lose Clayton and Brandon, too. They were as near to a family as she had. Ann lay back dejected, thinking what her life would be like without Brandon.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.