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**Reconcilable
Differences**

ANA LEIGH

Mills & Boon Vintage Intrigue

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Reconcilable Differences

«HarperCollins»

Leigh A.

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SIX YEARS VANISHED IN A HEARTBEAT...as Dave gazed down at the unconscious Patricia Manning. But the squad commander of the Special Ops unit had to steel himself against this irresistible woman who'd walked out on him...and was now up to her beautiful neck in a deadly game of international terror.HOW MANY NIGHTS HAD SHE DREAMED ABOUT HIM?Dave Cassidy was back in her life, sweeping her from harm's way, but he believed she was part of a global conspiracy and she had to prove him wrong. Winning his trust again was Trish's most important mission as danger and desire collided between a man and a woman determined to turn the mistakes of the past into a promise for the future....

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His fingers itched to brush aside the strands of jet-black hair that clung in silky tendrils to her forehead and cheeks.

Six years had not marred the patrician perfection that was Patricia Hunter, thought Agent David Cassidy.

She had those same high cheekbones, delicate jaw and full lips. And he knew that beneath those thickly tipped lashes lay the most incredibly blue eyes he'd ever looked into. Eyes that could mesmerize a man's soul as easily as they haunted his mind.

But this no longer was the woman he had worshiped. The woman who had lain in his arms as they planned their future together—pledged their love to one another with words and their bodies. This was not the woman whose memory he'd fought unsuccessfully to exorcise from his heart.

The Trish Hunter he'd known no longer existed. The woman before him, Patricia Manning, was a stranger to him....

Reconcilable Differences

Ana Leigh



www.millsandboon.co.uk

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 New York Times 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 Patti,
the heroine of all my novels.

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Chapter 1

Patricia Manning leaned back in her chair and stared with contempt at the man seated opposite her. The audacity of Robert Manning held no limitations. “Go to North Africa with you! You are completely insane.”

The mere sight of her husband turned her stomach, despite his suave handsomeness. Everything about Robert Manning was smooth, from the top of his three-hundred-dollar haircut to the tips of his imported Italian leather shoes.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m busy.”

“You are so impetuous, my dear. At least listen to the proposition I have to offer before jumping to your usual hasty conclusions.”

“Save your propositions for the hookers who service you, Robert.”

His thin lips narrowed in an amused smile. “Still the same uptight, frigid princess you always were, aren’t you, Trish?”

“And you, Robert, are still the same perverted degenerate whom I can’t bear to have touch me. Now that we’ve recounted both of our ‘virtues,’ let’s not waste any more of my time. I have work to do. Good day.”

He didn’t budge when she reached for her telephone. “How badly do you want a divorce, Trish?”

What a joke that was! She paused dialing long enough to offer a contemptuous glance. “Some more of your sadism, Robert?”

“I’ll give it to you if you go with me.”

“Is this another of those cat-and-mouse games that you delight in playing, Robert?”

“I’m serious. It’s important you go with me.”

She replaced the phone in its cradle and leaned back in her chair. “Why is it so important I go with you?”

“Appearances. A lot’s at stake here.”

“Is this company business?”

“Certainly. Your father’s aware of it. He thinks it’s a good idea for you to go with me.”

“He hasn’t mentioned it to me.”

“The situation just came up.”

Trish picked up the phone and punched the quick dial to her father’s personal line. After a quick conversation with him, she hung up and once again leaned back in her chair.

“When did you want to leave?”

“Friday.”

“Separate rooms?”

“If you insist.” His tone was as taunting as his smirk.

Trish still had reservations, but was so desperate to divorce him that the offer was tempting enough to make her consider. The last two years had been a nightmare. She had found out on their honeymoon what a disastrous mistake she’d made marrying him. The six months that followed the wedding were the most degrading and embarrassing ones of her life. She had not let him near her since his perverted demands on their honeymoon and had immediately returned home and moved into a separate bedroom. To get even with her, he flaunted his mistresses in public, humiliating her at every opportunity.

Trish had wanted out of the marriage from the time they’d returned, but he had refused to give her a divorce and had threatened to expose her father’s misdealings if she tried to divorce him.

To make the situation worse, her father had not denied the accusations when she confronted him with the threat; but he had told her nothing about his crimes other than that they would destroy his business and he’d end up in jail.

So she had continued to endure her marriage in name only because of her love for her father—the same reason she had forsaken her chance for happiness six years earlier. After six months, attempting to live under the same roof with Robert had become so unbearable she had moved back into her father’s house.

This could be the opportunity she had hoped for—prayed for.

“All right, Robert, I’ll agree, if you sign the divorce papers before we go.”

“How do I know you’ll keep your word if I do sign the papers?” he said.

Trish snorted. “Oh, please, Robert! We both know it’s more likely I’ll keep my word than that you would keep yours.”

“Very well. I’ll have Chandler draw them up.”

“It won’t be necessary to involve your lawyer. I had my attorney draw them up the day I moved out. All we have to do is sign and date them. We signed a prenuptial agreement before we married, we do not own any joint property, and even though you earn three or four times as much annually as I do, I am not asking for alimony. No strain or pain. Quick and painless.”

“Painless?” He clutched dramatically at his chest. “How can you say that, dear wife, when you’re breaking my heart?”

“Hardly, Robert. You don’t have one.”

She pushed a button on the intercom. “Libby, get my attorney, Carter Powell, on the phone.”

Dave had a bad feeling about this mission. The expressions on the faces of the secretary general and deputy secretary only added to his unease; both Jeff Baker and Mike Bishop looked grimly contrite as they spelled out the mission.

“You saying you can’t put us down any closer than five miles from the target?” Dave asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Mike Bishop said. “We both agree a chopper could be seen and heard too easily if we got any closer. That would give the target a chance to get away. We figure the chopper can go in and lower you by rope, then pick you up again. And the closest position to try that is the coordinates we gave you.”

Dave shook his head. “A five-mile hike with little cover. If there’s a full moon, and luck is against us, we’ll be spotted easily before we even reach bin Muzzar’s palace. McDermott will be long gone by the time we do. That is if we do. Who in hell is this Colin McDermott anyway?”

“He belongs to a splinter group of the IRA. He murdered a member of the CIA in Belfast last month,” Baker said. “Intelligence has traced McDermott to the home of Ali bin Muzzar in Northwest Africa. The Moroccan sheik’s known to be sympathetic to the Irish cause, any terrorist cause for that matter. According to intelligence bin Muzzar has a private army of about two hundred. We’re hoping you’ll be able to get in and out without being observed or identified.”

Yeah, right! Easy for you to say! Dave thought.

At that moment Baker’s phone rang. After a short conversation the secretary general slammed the phone down and the ex-marine let out a string of expletives as long as his tattooed arm.

Dave and Mike Bishop exchanged meaningful glances. “Bad news, sir?” Bishop asked.

“Couldn’t be worse. Intelligence just reported that in addition to McDermott, a Robert and Patricia Manning arrived today at the palace. Manning’s an American businessman and a former Harvard classmate of bin Muzzar.”

“You figure this Manning has a connection to the IRA?” Dave asked.

Baker shrugged. “Hard to say. His name or picture hasn’t popped up on any database. Neither has his wife’s. Could be just a matter of bad timing on this Manning’s part. Try to avoid the couple.”

Baker got up and walked around the edge of his desk to Dave. “Good luck to you and your squad, Agent Cassidy. We want this guy badly.”

Dave recognized a dismissal when he heard one. He stood up, the two men shook hands, and then Dave headed for the door. Mike Bishop followed him out.

“So how’s Ann?” Dave asked.

“Pregnant and contented—and even more beautiful. I don’t think Barney Hailey will ever get her back behind a camera again. She loves motherhood.”

“And what about the impending father? How does he like the prospects of becoming a parent?”

“What do you mean prospects? I am a father. Brandon and I have a great relationship. I love the kid,” he said, referring to the six-year-old Mike and Ann had legally adopted. “And I can’t wait for our daughter to be born.”

Dave shook his head. “Why can’t I visualize you bouncing a baby on your knee?”

Chuckling, Mike slapped Dave on the shoulder. “Three more months, pal.”

Then Bishop’s grin faded. “Dave, be careful. Regardless of what Baker said, if it gets too hot, get out of there fast. We can get McDermott another time. What do you think of Addison?”

“Seems young.”

“He’s twenty-seven. That’s older than some of us were when we joined.”

“Right now I feel every day of my thirty-four years,” Dave said. “The kid seems to get along well with the rest of the team. Since this is his first mission with us, I’ll feel better when we get back.”

Mike slapped him on the shoulder. “Hey, pal, didn’t we all have to go through our first mission at one time or another?”

They shook hands and Dave headed back to where his squad waited to be briefed.

The following night as they neared the North African coastline Cassidy thought of that conversation with Mike Bishop. Addison looked nervous. But Mike was right. All the guys on the squad had gone through it. Besides, Bishop never would have assigned Addison to the squad if he didn’t think the kid was ready.

Mike Bishop had been the leader of the Dwarf Squad, considered to be the elite special ops team of RATCOM—the Rescue and Anti-Terrorist unit of the CIA—until six months ago, when he’d been promoted to deputy secretary. At that time Dave had been moved up to squad leader.

The squad had been together for years. He, Bishop, Bolen and Fraser were all ex-SEALs. Williams and Bledsoe were Brits who had formerly served in England’s SAS. They’d become a close-knit brotherhood and they trusted one another implicitly, in or out of combat.

Justin Addison had a rough road ahead of him before he’d gain that kind of trust from the squad. He’d grown up in the Bronx and was street-smart and tough enough physically, but it was yet to be proven if he had the kind of smarts needed for the job. It took a lot more than just physical strength and courage to be on a special ops squad. And even though he had trained with the navy SEALs for a year, he had never been on a mission, so he was still an unproven commodity as far as Dave was concerned. But Baker and Bishop must have seen something in Addison to offer him the opportunity to become a member of the CIA’s legendary Dwarf Squad.

Well, Addison’s first real test now lay ahead because there was no longer any time to ponder the issue. The airman opened the chopper door and dropped down two ropes. The squad moved to the door and lined up. Dave led off on one, Bolen on the other. Once on the ground they regrouped and within seconds were on their way.

When Trish came downstairs she was surprised to discover there were only four for dinner, and she was the lone woman. Had she known that, she would have feigned a headache and remained in her bedroom.

The other guest was an Irishman named McDermott. He was very reticent and made no attempt to join the dinner conversation. For that matter neither did she. Robert and Ali were doing all the talking.

As she observed them, she realized the three men were as different as day and night. She couldn’t imagine what they might have in common.

Granted, Robert and Ali had been classmates at Harvard, but physically they were opposites. Robert was tall and blond, very handsome, suave and socially charming. It was these characteristics that had foolishly attracted her to him to begin with.

Ali, on the other hand, was dark, squat and obese, with a lecherous gleam in his dark eyes. She wanted to shower every time he looked at her. He made no attempt to conceal his attitude about women; one that she openly challenged. His amused smile always indicated how seriously he took her objections. The arrogant chauvinist was as obnoxious as Robert.

At least Colin McDermott appeared to find both Robert and Ali as unlikable as she did, as well as seeming anxious to get out of there. She couldn't fault him for that, since it paralleled her own thinking.

McDermott appeared to be about six feet tall with the pale skin of a redhead and a blue-eyed gaze that he kept shifting around. He looked like a trapped ferret. He expressed his impatience when Ali called for another bottle of wine.

"It'd be to my liking to be getting on with the business I've come here for," McDermott said. "I've given the diamonds to Manning to examine, and I'd like to finish the transaction and get out of here."

"I haven't had time to examine them, Mr. McDermott," Robert replied. "I'll do so first thing in the morning."

"Patience, my friend," bin Muzzar said to the Irishman. "Tomorrow we can conduct our business. Tonight we have the pleasure of a lovely dinner companion. We don't want to bore her with such mundane conversation."

"Then I'll be going to my room. I want an early start in the morning, bin Muzzar." The Irishman stomped off without any attempt at graciousness.

"I have to say, Ali, your friend is not much for manners," Robert said.

"But he makes sense," Trish said. "I would like us to have an early start tomorrow, too, Robert. So I think I will retire to my room."

"Oh, not until you taste this wine, my dear," bin Muzzar said. "It's been aged to perfection." He poured some wine into a silver goblet and handed it to her, and then filled his and Robert's goblets.

"To a very pleasant evening that can only become more delightful," he said.

"Here, here!" Robert said in agreement.

Trish's gaze swept the room over the top of the silver goblet as she took a sip of the vintage wine. Bin Muzzar's palace was a mixture of wealth and tastelessness.

Exquisite Oriental rugs embellished the fastidious marbled floors. Stained glass beautified most of the windows. In direct contrast, gold-encrusted nude figures of males and females in various stages of congress lined the sixteen-foot-high dome ceiling supported by ornamental pillars and columns adorned with leafy vines of woven gold.

Pure decadence! At best it resembled something out of a cheap Hollywood Arabian Nights production, or the garish interior of a Las Vegas hotel.

She shifted her glance to Robert. He'd already had too much to drink. So had the sheik. Old classmates! Birds of a feather! No wonder they got along so well.

Trish had met Ali only once before when he had come to the United States to be Robert's best man at their wedding. The night before the wedding the loathsome little toad had tried to hit on her, even though she was to become the bride of his dear classmate the next day. When she had complained to Robert about it, he'd merely laughed and shrugged it off. That should have been the warning sign to her. On their wedding night, Robert had suggested a ménage à trois with Ali. When she refused, he and his dear classmate left to spend the night with one of Robert's former girlfriends.

Trish thought of the painful days that followed. Of course Robert had claimed he had been too drunk to know what he was doing, and had begged her to forgive him. She had naively believed him.

Now, finally, after two miserable years of having to bear the embarrassment of being his wife legally, she'd have her divorce. Signed, sealed and hopefully filed—by the time she got back. She had honored her word and accompanied him here, but why it was so important to do so was still a mystery to her.

Trish took another sip of the wine. As soon as she finished it, she would go upstairs to her room. The two old classmates could stay up all night drinking and talking about old times as far as she was concerned.

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I have a headache, so I’ll retire for the night.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, darling,” Robert said. His concerned look was a convincing act, but it was wasted on her.

Trish stood up, and her knees buckled. Robert grabbed her arm before she could fall. “Let me help you, darling.”

“I’m fine,” she said, jerking free from him. His touch repulsed her.

“I insist.”

Robert took her arm again. The room began to spin and she found herself unable to walk. Ali came over and took her other arm.

“Let me be of assistance, my dear.”

Trish had never felt like this before. She had no strength in her arms and her legs could not support her. Unable to walk, she was forced to allow the two men to literally carry her.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured. “I don’t understand. I feel as if I’m drug—”

The truth hit her and she felt the rise of panic. “No, let me go,” she cried. “What are you doing to me?” She tried to struggle, but it was useless. By now she couldn’t even raise an arm.

Robert laughed, and lifted her into his arms. “We wouldn’t want to disappoint our gracious host, darling. He’s been looking forward to this evening for the past day and a half. Haven’t you, Ali?”

Bin Muzzar laughed. “More like two years, my friend. Normally, Patricia, I’m not this patient waiting for a mere woman, but Robert promised me the wait would be worthwhile. Despite your current condition, I am sure, my dear, you will enjoy what is to come as much as we will.”

She tried to scream, but even her vocal chords were paralyzed. Her voice was barely louder than a murmur. “Let me go. You can’t do this. Robert. Please.”

“Since our marriage will be severed, darling, I can’t think of a fonder memory to carry with me when we go our separate ways.”

She managed a weak scream when they reached her room, but it was drowned out by the laughter of the two men as Robert carried her to the bed.

Trish felt herself slowly begin to slide into unconsciousness and prayed for the merciful darkness to overcome her swiftly. But for now she could only lie helplessly, staring up, horrified, into the lascivious faces of the two men who had begun to strip her of her clothing.

They pivoted in surprise when the door suddenly burst open. Through her drugged haze she imagined the face on the tall figure in the entrance—an image that had haunted her conscience, as much as her dreams, for the last six years. Was he real or was this just a wishful figment of her imagination again?

Dave! her heart shouted joyously.

Help me, Dave. Please help me, Trish cried out in a soundless murmur before blackness enveloped her.

Chapter 2

Dave stared at the two men. He recognized bin Muzzar from his picture at the briefing, but the other man was not McDermott. From his coloring and clothing, Dave figured the second man had to be the American, Robert Manning. He was aware of a woman on the bed but ignored her. None of these three people were his target.

Up to now, there was no way bin Muzzar would know he was an American. He wore dark clothes and his face was covered with greasepaint in the hope of not revealing his nationality, since the British government was after the terrorist as well as the CIA. The sheik would have no way of knowing for certain who was behind the raid. The less said, the better.

In Arabic, Dave asked bin Muzzar which room McDermott was in.

Bin Muzzar turned on Manning and issued a string of curses accusing him of betrayal. Manning attempted to deny them, but bin Muzzar did not believe him and warned Manning he'd pay for his treachery. He then strode from the room and Cassidy followed.

The sheik was further incensed when he saw the rest of the squad. Their presence set him off into another tirade and, ranting violently about the armed invasion of his home, he led them to a closed door at the end of the hall.

Dave didn't like the situation at all. The mission was taking too long. It was too noisy. The whole damn palace had to hear bin Muzzar shouting at them. And they were on the second floor—a definite disadvantage if the sheik's army became involved and put up a resistance.

To shut bin Muzzar up, Dave made a threatening motion with his rifle, and the sheik drew back and quieted. However, by this time the damage had been done. There was no doubt in Dave's mind that McDermott couldn't have helped hearing the commotion, and would probably be waiting with a weapon in hand.

Dave turned the handle. The door was unlocked. He shoved it open and then ducked back. When there were no shots fired, he cautiously peered in. The room was dimly lit, but it appeared empty.

One by one the men slipped into the room. The bed showed signs of having been used, McDermott's backpack was still in the room, but there was no sign of the Irishman.

"Dammit!" Dave cursed when he discovered that bin Muzzar had slipped away, too. A quick check of the remaining rooms on the floor produced the same results. No McDermott or bin Muzzar. They were all empty except for the one that Manning and the woman were in.

"What now?" Don Fraser asked.

"We get the hell out of here," Dave said.

"Shouldn't we search the rest of the palace for him?" Addison spoke up.

"How long you figure that would take, sonny?" Bledsoe asked.

"We've wasted enough time. Grab McDermott's pack and let's get out of here."

At that moment Manning came running down the hall. "You've got to help me. Ali thinks I've double-crossed him and that I'm working with you. I know him, he'll kill me."

"Suck it up, pal," Dave said. "In the future, I'd be more selective whom you pick for a friend."

Manning looked desperate. "I can tell you're an American. My name is Robert Manning. I'm an American citizen. I demand your help."

"We're not the Red Cross, Manning."

The whole mission had turned into a disaster. But, no matter how Manning was involved with bin Muzzar, Dave knew he couldn't leave an American citizen to the mercy of the sheik.

"What about your wife, Manning?"

"Ali won't hurt her," Manning said.

"Where is she now?"

“She’s the woman in the bed.”

“You mean the woman you two were about to...? Seems we spoiled your plans for the night.” He couldn’t stand to look at the bastard. “Hurry up and get her out here.”

“There’s a problem,” Manning said. “She’s had too much to drink. She’s passed out.”

“Then carry her. We’re getting out of here now.”

Manning rushed back to the room and while they waited, Dave pulled the squad together.

“The mission’s fallen apart. Bin Muzzar’s probably alerted the palace guard by now. Most likely we’ll have to fight our way out. Addison, you’ll probably have to carry the woman. That SOB she’s married to isn’t worth a damn. Get Manning and his wife out of here now. If they’re not ready, leave them behind. Bledsoe and Williams, take the point.”

The two men moved ahead cautiously. The lower floor appeared deserted. Dave had no idea where the sheik had disappeared to. Undoubtedly he had gone for help.

“Bolen and Fraser, cover Addison,” Dave ordered when the others came out of the bedroom. Addison had the woman slung over his shoulder. Dave had started down the stairway when Williams gave them an all-clear sign. He was followed by Addison who carried the woman. Manning was beside Addison. Bolen and Fraser brought up the rear.

They made it out of the building without encountering any servant or armed opposition and moved cautiously toward the gate in the stone wall surrounding the palace. There was no sign of the gatekeeper.

Dave halted them in the cover of some trees in the garden. “Stay alert,” he ordered. “This reeks of an ambush.”

“Why not engage us before we’re out of the gate?” Bolen said.

“Most likely bin Muzzar doesn’t want any damage done to his palace,” Dave replied. “They’re probably waiting to hit us when we’re in the open.”

“Maybe the sheik hasn’t had time to organize his men yet?” Fraser said hopefully.

“We can only hope,” Dave mumbled.

“Why have we stopped? Let’s get out of here,” Manning blurted out, interrupting them.

“Shut your mouth, Manning, and get back where you belong,” Dave declared. He’d loathed the bastard on sight. His presence at the palace at the same time as McDermott was no coincidence. Bin Muzzar’s outburst had revealed Manning and he were involved in some kind of foul play. Financing terrorists, no doubt. On top of that, even though Dave was no moralist, the two of them playing sex games with the guy’s wife disgusted him, even if the woman had apparently cooperated. So much for the mother of your child. Maybe they didn’t have any children. A blessing if they didn’t. People were becoming sicker by the day. It was no wonder the world was so damn fouled up.

He shrugged aside his wayward thoughts. Why in hell was he moralizing? The damn fool things that went through a man’s head when he’s scared were ridiculous. Their sex lives weren’t his problem. Getting his squad out of this mess was.

“All right, let’s move out. Bledsoe, Williams.” The two men nodded and Dave watched them shift from tree to tree as they worked their way to the gate. Seconds passed like hours as he waited for a sudden outburst of gunfire. His grasp loosened on the rifle he clutched, and he wiped his sweating palm on his pants leg, then shifted the weapon to the other hand and did the same.

Williams reappeared at the entrance of the gate and waved them on. They moved out.

Once they cleared the gate, they broke into a run. The extra hundred-plus pounds Addison was carrying didn’t appear to slow his stride. Now it was a foot race to cover the five miles and get back to the extraction point. There was no doubt in Dave’s mind that bin Muzzar would pursue them. Fraser’s guess was right, he was obviously rallying his army.

At least the terrain was flat and they were making good time. They got another break when the moon disappeared behind drifting clouds. It was a temporary respite, but he welcomed any help he could get. They were nearing the coast when the moon’s silver rays once again streaked the countryside

just as they heard the distant sound of approaching vehicles. AK-47 cartridges had begun kicking up puffs of dirt around them by the time they'd reached the cover of the rocky coastline.

"What in hell should we do?" Bolen shouted as bullets ricocheted off the rocks around them.

"Take cover and hold your fire."

At that moment a rocket-propelled grenade exploded nearby.

"Now they're launching RPGs at us and we aren't supposed to shoot back?" Addison shouted.

"We've got no choice now," Dave said. "We'll have to take out the ones with the RPGs before they blow us apart. No spraying. Use your rifles' laser low lights and thermo-sightings to pick your targets."

A bullet ricocheted off a nearby rock. "How are we going to get out of here?" Addison shouted, trying to be heard above the steady clatter of gunfire. "They'll pick us off like fish in a barrel."

"Just hold them back until I can get us some help."

Dave pulled out the encrypted cell phone. Knowing that everything he said would be scrambled into code during the transmission, he identified himself and their coordinates, and then shared the bad news.

"We're in the rocks and taking heavy fire from RPGs and AK-47s to our west." Another grenade exploded nearby to reinforce the seriousness of his report. "We need close air support. We have two American civilians with us. Repeat. We need close air support."

"We're gonna be out of ammo before any help can reach us," Addison mumbled a short time later as he changed the clip in his rifle. "This is my last clip."

"What are we going to do?" Robert Manning cried out. He appeared on the verge of hysteria.

Dave tossed Addison one of his remaining clips, and then glanced with loathing at Manning huddled behind the shelter of a boulder.

Addison had placed Manning's wife under the same shelter. She was lying unconscious on her stomach. Her cowardly husband wasn't making any effort to protect her body from a possible ricochet.

"Was she hit?" Dave asked.

"No, sir," Addison said. "She's been out cold since before we even left the palace. I ain't seen her move a muscle or heard a peep out of her."

"It shouldn't be much longer. When I contacted them, they'd already launched a couple of F/A-18s from a carrier in the Mediterranean."

Dave had no sooner uttered the words when two low-flying jets screamed past, the red glare of their backburners welcome fiery beacons overhead. Dave flashed the signal to identify their position and the jets circled and flew past again.

"What if they start firing at us?" Manning said. "You hear about friendly fire all the time."

If the bastard didn't shut up, it sure as hell wouldn't be friendly fire that killed him.

"Don't sweat it, Manning. They've got a GPS fix on us now."

"What's that?" Manning asked.

"A global positioning satellite," Kurt Bolen said quickly to shut Manning up. "Those pilots know exactly where we are now."

Infrared sights exposed the position of the attackers and the pilots opened up with their guns, spraying the ground ahead of them with a warning hail of bullets.

It was enough to rout the pursuers. Before the jets could circle again, the roar of the retreating car engines signaled the battle's end.

Dave had just gotten the all-clear sign on the phone when the sudden whirl of rotors announced the arrival of a helicopter.

Within minutes they were airborne, and Dave contacted Mike Bishop.

"The mission was a bust, Mike. The target escaped."

"Did you all make it out okay?"

"Yeah. No casualties."

“Why in hell did you kill bin Muzzar?” Mike asked. “He wasn’t your target.”

“He’s dead? It wasn’t intentional. We were taking heavy fire from RPGs and AK-47s. All we were doing was holding them off.”

“According to our sources the sheik died at the palace. His throat had been cut.”

“Then it wasn’t one of us.”

“Maybe McDermott killed him. Figured it was a double cross.”

“Could be. Bin Muzzar accused Manning of one before the sheik disappeared. That’s why we had to bring out Manning and his wife. We did bring McDermott’s pack with us. Maybe it will turn up something.”

“Glad you’re all safe. See you when you get back.”

“Right. Roger and out.”

Dave hung up the phone and shifted back to join the others. A couple of the men had already fallen asleep. Manning was sitting with his back against the wall chewing on his lip. He’d have a lot to explain when they got back to the States. He’d been consorting with a known terrorist. He was certain to pull some jail time for that. Dave hoped the government would lock Manning away and lose the key.

He wiped the greasepaint off his face and shifted over to Addison’s side. The kid had done good. Followed orders and kept his cool under fire. But he looked so damn young. Right now Dave felt as old as Methuselah—or at least ancient enough to join the Rolling Stones.

“How’s the lady doing?”

“She’s been sleeping peacefully, sir.”

“Through the whole thing?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, Manning said she’d been drinking heavily and passed out.”

“That’s what he said, sir. But it sure doesn’t seem right to me. She never moved a muscle even on the run.” Addison glanced down at the woman. “She’s the hottest woman I’ve seen in a long time. I’d have thought she could do better than that jerk she’s married to.”

“Birds of a feather, kid. You saw what we walked in on. Let this be a good lesson. Looks can fool you.”

“Sir, please don’t call me ‘kid.’”

“It’s a deal providing you quit calling me ‘sir.’”

Addison grinned. “Clear, sir...ah, Dave.”

“Now why don’t you grab some shuteye? It’s been a long day.”

“Guess I will.” Addison looked down again at the sleeping woman. “But she sure is hot, sir. ‘Bout the prettiest I’ve ever seen.” He shifted over, leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

Other than a quick glance in her direction when he’d entered the bedroom, Dave had not had a close look at Patricia Manning.

Curious, he leaned over to see if Addison had exaggerated. He sucked in his breath from the sudden punch to his gut when he recognized the face that had haunted him for the past six years.

Bombarded by memories, Dave stared transfixed at the woman. How often had he gazed down at that sleeping face? Caressed the softness of it. Breathed the intoxicating essence of her or tasted the sweetness of her lips?

Gradually, reasoning pierced the barrier of shock. He glanced around guiltily, thankful that no one appeared to be watching him. He knew he should move away, but he couldn’t resist the tempting draw.

His gaze clung to her face. She looked ethereal in the dim light of the cabin. His fingers itched to brush aside several strands of jet-black hair that clung in silky tendrils to her forehead and cheeks.

Six years had not marred the patrician perfection of those same high cheekbones, delicate jaw and full lips. And he knew that beneath those thickly tipped lashes lay the most incredible blue eyes

he'd ever looked into. Eyes that could mesmerize a man's soul as much as they haunted his mind, pierced his heart.

But this no longer was the woman he had worshipped from the moment they met. The woman who had lain in his arms as they planned their future together—pledged their love to one another with their words and bodies. The woman whose memory he'd fought unsuccessfully to exorcise from his mind and heart.

Trish Hunter no longer existed.

Now only this pathetic facade of that woman remained.

This woman was the wife of a loathsome cad. This woman consorted with terrorists. Indulged in sex orgies. Drank herself into oblivion.

This Patricia Manning was a stranger to him.

A faint roar slowly penetrated the dark void that swaddled her. The sound heightened as blackness slowly faded into a grayish haze and Trish struggled through it to regain consciousness.

With this slow return of her sensibilities came a feeling of uneasiness. Fright. Why? She strove to remember. Then the horror of it swept through her as leering images of Robert and Ali bin Muzzar swirled around in the muddled confusion of her thoughts like demonic specters.

The need to scream rose within her and a responsive spasm racked her spine. Overwhelmed with panic she opened her eyes. The scream froze in her throat, but this time it wasn't drugs that prevented the outburst; it was stunned recognition. She stared into the eyes fixed on her. Those beautiful, compelling brown eyes she remembered so well, had imagined before she passed out.

"Dave," she murmured softly.

There was shocked recognition in his eyes as he stared back at her. Was he all part of the same hideous nightmare?

"Manning, your wife's awake," he said, and moved away.

She'd know that voice anywhere—and that same hard tone he'd used the last time they'd spoken six years ago.

Trish closed her eyes and felt the salty sting of hot tears on her cheeks.

When Trish next awoke, the effects of the drug had worn off fully, and she became aware that she was in a helicopter about to land. For several minutes she remained lying still, trying to distinguish in her mind what had been real and what had been part of the nightmare.

She jerked up to a sitting position and looked around when she recognized Dave's voice. But what was happening? What was he doing issuing orders to a huddled group of men preparing to disembark. Could she still be dreaming?

She closed her eyes and pinched herself hard. It hurt and she opened her eyes. He was still here. She hadn't imagined it. It was true. Dave was here. Close enough to touch.

Shifting to her knees, she felt a thousand needle-pricks in her arms and legs. Now there was no doubt. She wasn't still dreaming, that was for sure. The pain was too intense to be imagined. She started to get up to shake it off.

"Ma'am, it's best you remain seated until we touch down," the man who sat beside her said.

"Where are we?"

"Rheinmein Air Base, ma'am, in Frankfurt, Germany."

"Germany!"

Their voices attracted Dave's attention and he glanced over to them. "Trouble, Addison?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Manning is awake and wanted to know what was happening."

Outside the plane, crewman swung the door open, and several of the men jumped out. The revolving red light of an emergency vehicle flashed through the opening and someone outside handed a stretcher into the helicopter.

"If you lie down, ma'am, we'll get you out of here."

"I don't need a stretcher," Trish said. "I'm fine, now."

She moved to the door, and as she tried to step down, her knees buckled. She fell forward into Dave's outstretched arms.

For a hushed moment they stared into each other's eyes, and she fought the urge to fling her arms around his neck and never let go.

"Mrs. Manning, there would be less chance of your getting injured if you would lie down on the stretcher," he said.

"I'll be fine. I just have to shake off the numbness."

Dave released her, and joined the squad who were piling into a military vehicle. Addison led her to a sedan, assisted her in and then joined his squad. Robert and two other men climbed in after her.

The car pulled out and the military vehicle followed behind. They drove to a building located right on the base.

Once inside, Trish was taken to an office where two men and a woman were waiting.

"How do you do, Mrs. Manning," one of the men said. "Please sit down." He nodded to the woman and she turned on a machine.

The woman identified herself, announced the date, time and location, and then said, "The following is an interrogation of Patricia Diane Manning. Present are Agent Roger Reteva, Agent William Moore, and Mrs. Patricia Manning."

To Trish's further surprise, the woman followed it with her father's Georgetown address. Why would these people know her father's address?

"Mrs. Manning, I'm Agent Reteva," one of the men said. "And this is my associate William Moore. We'd like to ask you a few questions if you don't mind."

"Who do you represent, Mr. Reteva?" Trish asked.

"I don't think that's germane to the issue, Mrs. Manning."

"I'm afraid I do. If you expect me to answer any of your questions you will have to answer mine first."

The two men at the table exchanged meaningful glances. "We're with the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States, madam."

Trish gasped in surprise. "The CIA? What is this all about?"

Reteva's lips curled in a slight smile. "That's what we are trying to find out, Mrs. Manning. Your name is Patricia Diane Manning?"

"Yes."

"Your maiden name was Patricia Hunter, and you're a citizen of the United States?"

"Yes, I am," Trish replied. "Will you kindly tell me why I'm being interrogated?"

"It is our understanding you were a house guest for the past two days at the home of Sheik Ali bin Muzzar. Is that correct, Mrs. Manning?"

"Yes."

"Was this a business or personal visit, Mrs. Manning?"

"I was told it was a business trip," Trish said. "Although, the sheik and my husband were classmates at Harvard University. It has been my impression that they have maintained a friendship since then."

"Were there any other guests present at the time?"

"Yes, a Mr. Colin McDermott."

"Had you met Mr. McDermott previously to that time?"

"No," Trish said.

"Was Mr. McDermott also a Harvard classmate of your husband?"

"I have no idea."

"A business associate?"

"I've never heard the name before, but it doesn't rule it out since I'm not active in my husband's business affairs."

“Your husband is a vice president at the firm of Hunter International Banking Incorporated in Washington, D.C., is that correct?”

“Yes it is,” Trish replied.

“And your father Henry Jonathan Hunter is the president and majority stockholder of that firm. Is that also correct, Mrs. Manning?”

“The last I heard he was,” Trish said lightly, to disguise her irritation. She was thoroughly confused. Why was she being interrogated like a common criminal?

“It is our understanding that as American citizens, your life and that of your husband would have been threatened if you had remained at the home of Sheik bin Muzzar. Is that correct?”

“I don’t know. I passed out. When I awoke, I was in a helicopter and on my way here.”

“Before you ‘passed out,’ Mrs. Manning, did you witness any business exchange, conversation or threats between your husband, Ali bin Muzzar or Colin McDermott?”

“No. On the contrary, my husband and bin Muzzar were close friends. I only met Mr. McDermott for the first time at dinner that evening. He retired to his room early because he said he intended to leave the following morning. I did the same.” She could not embarrass herself by telling these strangers what had actually transpired between her and those two degenerates after McDermott had departed.

“And that was the last you saw of Mr. McDermott?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Manning, you’ve been most cooperative.”

The woman turned off the machine, and the two men stood up.

“Until Sheik bin Muzzar’s death is cleared up—”

“Ali is dead?”

“Yes, Mrs. Manning. Until we have all the details, you will have to remain in our custody. We will be returning you to the United States tomorrow.”

“I don’t understand, Mr. Reteva, am I under arrest?”

“Mrs. Manning, there has been a crime committed, so for the time being consider yourself under our protection. If you have been straightforward with us, you have nothing to worry about. Enjoy your brief stay in Germany, madam. If there is anything you need or wish, we are at your disposal.”

Trish was taken to a reception room where several of the squad were playing cards. There was no sign of Robert, but Dave was stretched out on a bench in a far corner with his eyes closed. She wanted some answers and wanted them now. She strode over to him.

“Dave, I want to talk to you.”

He opened his eyes, gave her a disgruntled look and then sat up.

“What do you want?”

“What happened at bin Muzzar’s palace after I passed out?”

“Hmm...let me think. Oh, yeah, your husband and his friend invited us to join the party, so the whole squad jumped you.”

His sardonic smirk made her angrier than his words. “Your attempt at humor fails miserably, General Cassidy. I once believed that kind of humor was beneath you.”

“I might say the same about you, Mrs. Manning. So it would seem we were both wrong about each other. By the way, it’s Agent Cassidy. I’m not in the military, Mrs. Manning.”

He lay back down and closed his eyes.

“Agent? You mean you’re one of these CIA agents, too?”

With a resigned sigh, he opened his eyes and sat back up. “I work for the CIA if that’s what you’re asking, Mrs. Manning. I’m not with intelligence.”

“I think I have a right to know what went on there, since the CIA apparently believes I’m involved in the murder of Ali bin Muzzar.”

“I can assure you, Mrs. Manning, you weren’t. Bin Muzzar was still alive after you passed out. I informed them of that during the debriefing. Now, if you don’t mind.” He stretched out on the bench again and closed his eyes.

“I suppose your squad killed him?”

He stiffened with annoyance and sat up. “No, my squad did not kill him. Ask your husband, Mrs. Manning, maybe he can tell you.”

“Are you saying Robert killed Ali?”

“I didn’t say that. I can only tell you that the last time I, or any member of my squad, saw bin Muzzar he was still alive.”

At that moment Robert Manning came into the room and took a seat. Trish made no move toward him, but went over and sat down on an empty chair.

They waited another half hour until all the squad members were debriefed, and then they were driven to a hotel.

Chapter 3

Trish balked when they started to assign her and Robert to the same room. She insisted upon a separate one and won the argument.

Once alone, she flopped down in relief on the bed. Despite everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, the hardest thing to bear was the change in Dave.

Seeing him again had been the answer to her prayers. But he was so different from the man she remembered. Granted, he had good reason not to greet her with open arms, but remembering the love and tenderness they had once shared, it was hard to believe he held so much bitterness toward her.

She yearned to sit down and just talk to him again. After all, even if they were ex-lovers, they also had been good friends. They had always enjoyed each other's company. They had not only loved each other, they had liked each other as well.

But now, she could see the loathing in his eyes when he looked at her. And that hurt. That hurt badly. She was helpless to avoid reacting negatively to it, so they'd ended up snarling at one another.

As if that wasn't staggering enough, there was all this mystery surrounding Ali's death. Could it be that Robert had killed Ali?

Trish shook aside the thought. Ali was probably the only friend Robert had. And although she held no one in lower esteem than Robert, she couldn't see him in the role of a murderer. Liar, conniver, rapist, yes. But murderer, no.

A light knock sounded on the door and the chambermaid came in.

"Frau Manning, I am Helga, the chambermaid. The gentleman in the next room told me to bring you these items." She handed Trish a brown paper bag.

"Thank you. Helga, I'm so sorry," Trish said, embarrassed. "I don't have a purse with me. Perhaps I can put a tip on the bill."

"That is not necessary, Frau Manning. The gentleman has taken care of it. If you need anything else, just ring for me. Have a pleasant evening, madam."

Trish gratefully dumped the goody bag on the bed and out dropped a plethora of useful items: a comb, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste, a compact of pressed face powder, a tube of lipstick, a pair of panties and a bra. There was even a black and white jogging suit in her size.

Trish was so grateful she could have shouted with joy, and the thoughtful gesture was so unlike Robert. As difficult as it would be, she would have to swallow her pride and thank him.

She gathered up several of the items and headed for the shower.

After fifteen minutes of hot water and swirling steam, Trish felt like a new woman. She dried off, combed her hair and while it dried, she rinsed out her underclothes and hung them up to dry.

As she struggled with the decision of whether to go down to dinner or settle for room service, the telephone rang.

"Mrs. Manning, this is Justin Addison. We're going down to dinner soon and Dave wants to know if you're ready."

"I was just considering ordering room service," she said.

"One moment, ma'am."

She could hear him consulting with someone in the background, then he came on the line again.

"Ma'am, Dave says that's not a good idea. We've been ordered to keep an eye on you, so if you don't go down to dinner, a couple of us will have to remain up there with you."

"And you'd have to be one of them, isn't that right, Mr. Addison?"

"I'm afraid so, ma'am," he said.

Apparently the decision had been made for her. "Okay, I'll be ready in five minutes."

The new underwear and jogging suit were a perfect fit. Leave it to Robert to be able to appraise a woman's figure.

She pulled her hair back into a plain ponytail and tied it with a piece of white ribbon that had been wrapped around the jogging suit. After adding a light dusting of powder to her nose and cheeks, a dash of gloss to her lips, she was ready when the rap came on the door exactly five minutes later.

Dave, Justin Addison and the agent they called Kurt Bolen were in the hallway.

“Gosh, gentlemen, are you sure three of you big, macho males are enough to keep li’l ole me from escaping?”

“I guess we’ll just have to risk it, Mrs. Manning,” Dave said. “Your husband preferred to eat earlier so we were forced to split up the squad.”

She was pleased to hear she wouldn’t have to have dinner with Robert. Two consecutive nights facing him across a table would have been a tough row to hoe. Granted, she was grateful for the goody bag, but it fell far short of erasing the sordid memories of the past two years.

Deciding to try a restaurant elsewhere, the group strolled along casually, peeking into shop windows. They finally settled on a quaint rathskeller several blocks from the hotel.

Despite her hunger, Trish was unable to finish the tasty baked apple stuffed with pork that she had ordered. The men however had no problem consuming large plates of thick slices of sauerbraten served with plump dumplings and steins of dark beer.

When it came time for dessert, Kurt insisted they order one called Zwetschkuchen. The guys went along with his selection, and as they drank steaming hot cups of strong coffee, the waitress brought them the dessert.

Trish already had had enough to eat, but Kurt insisted she try a small piece.

“You’ll love it, Mrs. Manning. When I was young, I remember my German grandmother used to make it all the time. I haven’t had a piece since she died.”

Trish relented. “Well, out of respect to your dearly departed grandmother, Kurt, I’ll take a tiny piece.”

“This isn’t bad,” Justin declared after taking a hardy bite. “What am I eating?”

“It appears to be a puff pastry and the filling tastes like plum,” Trish said.

“Trouble with plums, Mrs. Manning, no matter how juicy and sweet they taste, they shrivel up into prunes,” Dave said.

The comment was too deliberate to be casual. Then she recalled he’d talked of plums and prunes the last time they’d made love. She raised her head and looked at him. His gaze was fixed on her. So he too was remembering that—and the tragic ending to that day.

“Don’t you agree, Mrs. Manning?” he said.

“I suppose they do, Agent Cassidy. But at least they’re sweet while they last.” Right back at you, David Cassidy!

Trish raised the fork to her mouth and slipped a piece of the pastry between her lips.

“Dave, do you mind if the kid and I kind of check out the town for a little while?” Kurt said. “We’ll be pulling out of here first thing in the morning.”

“What time is your watch?”

“Not until midnight.”

“Then you better make sure your butt’s in that hallway when the clock strikes twelve.”

“Thanks, sir,” Justin said, jumping to his feet. “Let’s go, Kurt.”

“Are you ready to leave, Mrs. Manning?” Dave asked, after paying the check.

Now that they were alone, Trish was so tempted to challenge his attitude. To try and have him get out whatever was on his mind. But she just couldn’t get the right words out either. They were at an impasse.

“Yes, any time you are.”

Once outside they saw the weather had taken a turn for the worse. Fog had moved in, and it was difficult to see more than a short distance ahead.

“Our being alone puts you at a disadvantage, doesn’t it, Agent Cassidy?”

“Now why would you think that, Mrs. Manning?”

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll try to escape?”

“It’s not going to keep me awake worrying about it, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“What reason would I even have to try?”

“I have no idea. You brought it up, Mrs. Manning.”

“And even if I’d succeed, what good would it do? I don’t have anything except these clothes on my back.”

She was babbling and she knew it, but she was too nervous to remain quiet.

“Glad to see they fit.”

The truth hit her like a lightning bolt. She stopped abruptly. “So it was you!”

“What?”

“You’re the one who got me this jogging suit and the other supplies.”

“Somebody had to do it.”

She should have guessed from the beginning that Robert would never consider anyone’s interests but his own. “Thank you, Dave. It was very thoughtful of you.”

“Don’t blow it out of proportion, Mrs. Manning. I’d have done the same for anyone. You’re under my protection.”

“Protection? I’d say it’s more like under suspicion, Agent Cassidy. Prisoner, more realistically. Where do you think I could go? I have no passport, money, charge card or identification. I don’t even have the money to make a phone call.”

“You could always call Daddy collect. I’m sure he’d send the corporate jet to slip in under the radar and rescue his little princess.”

“Do you really hate us that much, Dave?”

“I don’t hate anybody, Mrs. Manning. Not you, your father or that schmuck you married. I’ll just be glad when all of you are out of my life.”

His cell phone suddenly beeped and he pulled it out of his pocket.

“Sneezy here,” Kurt Bolen said, using the code name the agency had assigned him. “Looks like you’ve picked up a friend. We’ve got a make on a guy who appears to be following you.”

“Give it to me.”

“Five eleven. Dressed in jeans and a black jacket. We’re too far away to see much more than that in this fog.”

“Stay with him. We’re about two blocks away from the hotel. Call Dopey and tell him to meet us in the lobby. Sleepy and Happy are to remain with Donald Duck.”

“This soup is getting thicker, so step it up,” Kurt said.

“Donald Duck, Dopey, Sleepy, Happy! That was the most stupid conversation I’ve ever heard,” Trish declared when he slipped the phone back into his pocket. “I hope it was more intelligent on the other end. Do you fellows actually use those ridiculous names? Furthermore, you’re mixing up your toons. Donald Duck is Mickey and Minnie’s friend. The Seven Dwarfs prefer the company of Snow White. I hope you gave me a name, too, in this game.”

“We didn’t have time, but I’d recommend Cruella DeVille.”

Dave took her elbow and hurried her along. She practically had to run to keep up with him.

Suddenly several thuds slammed into the building beside them.

“Dammit! He’s got a silencer!” Dave cursed. He grabbed her hand and they started to run. Another bullet bounced off the sidewalk at their feet.

They ducked into an alley and Dave motioned her to silence. Then he pulled a pistol out from under the leg of his jeans.

Trish’s heart was pounding in her chest. She had no idea what this was all about, but trusted Dave and remained silent. It all was too much to try and absorb. Four days ago she was sweltering in the bright sunshine of Washington, D.C. Now she was crouched in a swirling fog in an alley in

Germany with Dave Cassidy—the last man she expected to see holding a gun in his hand. This had to be the mother of all nightmares.

They heard the sound of running feet and Dave shoved her lower and raised his weapon. He gave two short whistles when he recognized the two men who came into view.

Kurt Bolen and Justin Addison ducked into the alley and joined them.

“Sorry, Dave, we lost him in the fog,” Kurt said.

They made it to the hotel without any further incident. Don Fraser met them in the lobby.

“How long have you been down here?”

“A couple minutes,” Don said.

“Anyone come in?”

“Not since I arrived. What’s going on?”

“Is Manning okay?”

“Yeah, Pete and Rick are with him. Manning didn’t like being pulled away from some fraülein he was hitting on at the bar. He’s a real piece of work. Am I the only one who can’t stand that guy?”

“There’s a big fraternity,” Dave said. “Let’s get upstairs.”

After checking out her room, Dave proceeded to give Trish explicit instructions. “Keep the door locked. A couple of us will be outside it all night, so don’t worry.”

“Are you saying someone is trying to kill me?” Trish asked. “How do you know the man wasn’t shooting at you?”

Dave shook his head. “No reason to make me the target. At first I thought it was CIA keeping tabs on you until the shooting started. At this point, we still want to keep you alive.”

“Why would anyone want to kill me?” she asked. “I don’t even know what this is all about.”

“I bet your husband knows. The shooter may have been sending him a message. By the way, stay away from the window. Whoever it was is still out there somewhere.”

“Thank you, Agent Cassidy,” she grumbled. “I’ll try not to keep that thought in mind when I attempt to fall asleep.”

Trish soon found out that truer words were never spoken. After several hours of tossing and turning, she finally managed to fall asleep, only to awaken a short while later to a ringing telephone and bright sunlight streaming through the window.

The call was from Justin Addison, who informed her they would be leaving for the airport in thirty minutes.

Trish jumped out of bed, took a quick shower, then dressed in the jogging suit again. She stuffed her other clothes into the paper bag and was ready when the knock sounded on the door.

Robert was with them. It was the first time she’d seen him since they’d arrived at the hotel. If he was aware of it, he didn’t mention or make a pretense of showing any concern over the attempt on her life last night.

She’d like to tell him a thing or two. He owed her a big apology—not that he’d ever offer one. But thanks to him she now was the target of an assassin.

While waiting for the plane to be gassed up, Dave came over and handed her a paper cup of hot coffee and a Danish pastry packaged in plastic.

“Sorry, this is the best I could rustle up.”

She smiled gratefully. “Thanks.” She took a deep draft of the hot brew. It was perfectly sweetened to her taste. She smiled in appreciation. He hadn’t forgotten.

A short time later they boarded a cargo plane without any further delay and all of them slept most of the way back to the States.

As soon as they landed at Andrews Air Force Base, they were met by the CIA and taken to a room on the base. Same modus operandi, same questions and the same answers from her. The only difference this time was that her interrogators were a Mr. Baker and Mr. Bishop.

By the time Baker and Bishop had finished questioning her, the squad had dispersed. Robert was also nowhere in sight. A polite driver in a black limo drove her home to Georgetown.

Nothing was as comforting as the sight of home. She had a lot to hash out in her mind, but the physical exhaustion and emotional stress of the last few days had drained all her energy. She'd have to think about it tomorrow.

"Now you know how Scarlet felt, Trish," she murmured.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," the driver said, offering his hand to assist her out of the car.

"Oh nothing. Nothing at all," she said.

Julie, the maid, and Trish's dog Ayevol greeted her at the door with his usual enthusiasm. The cocker spaniel's wagging tail beat a hearty welcome. She wrote a short note to her father, then took a quick shower and climbed into bed.

Ayevol jumped up on the bed and stretched out with his head on her thigh.

"You won't believe who I've been with the last couple of days," she said, scratching him behind his ears. She rested her hand on the dog's head. "I was with him, Ayevol. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow, sweetheart." She patted the dog on the head. "After all, 'tomorrow is another day.'"

Right on, Miss Scarlet.

With a pleased smile, Trish closed her eyes and slept.

The first thing Trish did when she woke up was reach for the telephone and call Deb. She hadn't spoken to her best friend for a week and could not wait to tell her the news. They agreed to meet for breakfast.

An hour later Trish smiled with pleasure as she watched men's gazes follow the tall, willowy blonde crossing the floor of the restaurant to join her.

The two women had been inseparable companions since childhood, had attended a Swiss boarding school together in their early teens and later had graduated from Wellesley together. Soon after, Deb had married Dr. Thomas Carpenter, ten years her senior and a successful brain surgeon. Two years ago, she and Deb had formed an interior decorating business, which had begun to build up a respected reputation.

"Darling, you are absolutely glowing," Deb said when she sat down. "I know it can't be that you're pregnant, so what is it?"

The salutation was Deb's usual greeting to everyone. It was a convenient affectation that she carried off so well that most people never suspected that often it served a double purpose. Through the years, the greeting had become a signal between them for Trish to recognize by the tone of voice in the way she said it, when Deb either liked or distrusted an individual. This had often proven to be very useful in dealing with people, both socially and in business.

"Deb, you are not going to believe this." With a smug smile, Trish handed Deb a copy of her divorce papers, then sat back and laughed at her friend's reaction as she perused it.

Deb squealed with joy. "The scourge finally signed the divorce papers!" She glanced at Trish askance. "What did you do, hold a gun to his head?"

"Now you know I'm more up close and personal than that," Trish teased. "I held a knife to his throat."

"We've got to celebrate this." Deb motioned to the waiter. "Darling, a couple of Bloody Marys, please."

"Can't we settle for orange juice?"

"Not on your life. Tom and I have been waiting for this day as much as you have. Let's hear all the delicious details."

Trish told her of her agreement to accompany Robert to Morocco. As much as she hated to withhold anything from her friend, she honored her word to the CIA and kept out of the conversation any mention of their involvement or the rescue by a special ops squad.

Deb whipped out her cell phone. "I've got to tell Tom. He'll be ecstatic."

“Hold up. I have something more to tell you. I ran into Dave Cassidy.”

Debra’s green eyes widened with disbelief. “You’re kidding! Where?”

Now what? She hated lying to Deb. “He was on the same plane as we were coming back from Germany.” At least that was the truth.

“You mean he came here on business?”

“Apparently he lives here.”

Deb threw her hands up in the air. “Tom and I go away for a week, and this is what happens. Is he married?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“You didn’t ask!”

“I noticed he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring.”

“That doesn’t always mean anything. You know some men remove them when their wives aren’t around.”

“Debra, I’m talking about Dave. Mr. Straight-and-Narrow Cassidy.”

“Trish, that doesn’t sound like you. When did you become so cynical?”

She sighed. “Yeah, I know. That’s how my father contemptuously refers to Dave.”

“Henry has his own agenda.” Deb reached over and squeezed her hand. “So how did it go?”

“Horribly.” Trish looked up desolately. “He’s very bitter, Deb. I think he hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you, Trish. Good Lord, anyone who ever saw the two of you together knows Dave could never hate you. He’s probably carrying the same torch that you are, and when he found out you were married, it probably made matters worse.”

“I am not carrying a torch for Dave Cassidy. I just want us to be friends again.”

“Right. He’s as ugly as sin, as mean as a junkyard dog and could never function below the waist, anyway. I’m glad we’ve got that settled. However, darling, having said that, I question if you read his body language correctly. Dave more likely is more jealous than bitter. And if that’s the case, it’s a darn better sign he’s not married than the fact that he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring.”

“Easy for you to say,” Trish murmured and lowered her head in dejection.

“Did you tell him you’re a free woman now?”

“That would have been difficult to explain since I was with Robert. Besides, I think I’d be wasting my time. He clearly is not interested in having me in his life.”

“You’ll never know unless you try. Don’t you know by now, darling, men don’t understand the game of love. They go blundering through it like storm troopers. It always takes the right woman to explain it to them.”

Laughing, the two women clinked their glasses. “Men,” they said in unison.

“Hey, what is that?” Trish reached over and grabbed Deb’s wrist. “New, isn’t it?” she asked, staring at the diamond and gold bracelet on Deb’s wrist. “Did you and Tom raid Tiffany’s when you were in New York?”

“Just a little bauble Tom gave me for our eighth wedding anniversary,” Deb replied, tongue-in-cheek. “Cute, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes. Cute, Deb. There are enough diamonds there to…” Diamonds. She suddenly remembered Colin McDermott had mentioned diamonds to Robert in Morocco.

“To what?” Deb asked.

Trish snapped back to awareness. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“You were saying there are enough diamonds to what?”

“To blind a person, Debra Carpenter. Shame on you.”

Deb took a long look at the bracelet. “There are a lot, aren’t there?”

“I’ll say. It must have cost a mint.”

Deb’s smooth brow creased in a frown. “You don’t suppose Tom is having an affair, do you?”

“Yeah, right!” Trish scoffed. “When mules fly like Pegasus.”

The two women looked at each other, broke into laughter, and once again clinked their glasses together.

As soon as Trish returned home, she looked up the telephone number of Kim Harrington in New York, and was lucky enough to catch her at home. In loyalty to her brother, Kim refused to give her Dave's address. After Trish explained they had run into each other again, and she had to talk to him, Kim finally conceded that at age thirty-four her big brother was old enough to handle his own problems. She relented and gave Trish Dave's telephone number and address.

Thoughts about McDermott, Robert and diamonds kept running through Trish's mind for the rest of the day. She had forgotten about the diamonds entirely and realized she had never mentioned them to the CIA. From what she remembered of the conversation between Robert and McDermott, the Irishman had indicated Robert had the diamonds in his possession. He would still have to have them because he and Ali had never left her before Dave and his squad showed up. And since they'd been transported home on military planes, Robert could easily have smuggled the diamonds into the country. She was curious enough to try and find out.

Trish rooted hurriedly through a dresser drawer, found what she was looking for, and hurried back to her car.

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