

IT TAKES A

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THIEF



Liz  
Wolfe

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THIEF

Liz Wolfe



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## DEDICATION:

For John Frey.

Because he convinced me I could do anything I wanted.

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# 1

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September 16, Outside Bethesda, Maryland

“YOU LIED TO THEM? ABOUT your own father?”

“I lied about my entire life to them, Dad. I’m not even using my real name.” Zoe didn’t expect her father to understand.

“What name are you using?”

“Drummond. I’d been using it for a while when I met Shelby.”

“Why were you using a phony name? What’s wrong with Alexander?”

“I told you. I was trying to get out of the life. I was going to school to be a CPA. The few thefts I did were just to pay my tuition.”

“You hate being a thief that much?” Her father looked genuinely hurt. Zoe knew he’d always thought being a thief was an honorable profession. He had his own code of honor that he lived and stole by. Besides, she’d realized that Zeke had wanted a son to follow in

his footsteps. She could steal better than almost anyone, but she couldn't be his son.

"It just isn't for me, Dad. Hey, what happened to that kid you were working with?"

Zeke waved a hand in dismissal. "He didn't work out. No finesse." He stood and walked to the sideboard that held a silver tea service. "What's so bad about me? About your life?"

"Well, we could start with the fact that you're a thief. Then we could add that you raised me to be a thief. Shelby used to be with the FSA and Paige used to be a cop. I don't think they'd really want to work with someone whose father taught her that stealing other people's stuff is an acceptable way to earn a living." Zoe watched her father's hand and saw the telltale tremble. The housekeeper, Agnes, had told her about the Parkinson's her father had developed. So far, it was mild and didn't affect his life very much. And he'd quit doing jobs, so at least she didn't have to worry about him ending up in prison for the rest of his life.

"But you said you were a thief when you met this Parker woman. So, she knows you were stealing." Zeke filled his teacup. "You want some more tea?"

Zoe nodded and held her cup out while he filled it. "I made up a whole life for her. Told her I was an orphan, in and out of foster homes, learning to steal from some other thieves I met. And I really was going

to school to become a CPA, so it looked like I was doing it to survive, like I didn't have any other skills."

"Not like your father used to be the best thief in the world?" Zeke asked.

"Exactly, Dad."

"So, what do you do for these people?"

Zoe set her teacup down and leaned back on the sofa. "Right now, I'm just doing paperwork. Keeping their books, taking phone calls. Stuff like that. But Shelby's training me to be an investigator." She grinned at her father. "I'm pretty good at it, too."

"I'm not surprised. I'll bet some of your thief skills come in handy, too."

Zoe frowned at him. She wasn't about to tell him that she'd used those very skills several times already. Besides, Shelby hadn't been exactly thrilled about it.

"I have to get back to work, Dad. I've been here over a week already."

"And you're not going to tell them your real story? Just going to keep using a phony name? Somehow that seems like you don't have any respect for me."

"It's better this way, Dad. There's absolutely no reason they need to know that I'm the daughter of a master thief. Or that I used to be one myself."

September 29, Portland, Oregon

Shelby punched the conference button on her desk phone and picked up her coffee cup. “Hi, Ethan. Is this a social call?” She leaned back in her chair and took a sip of coffee.

“Not exactly. I wanted to let you know that I’ve been reassigned to Langley for a while.”

“You’re working with the CIA?” Shelby asked. “Must be something pretty important.”

“It’s important, all right. And it’s bad news. The Dominion Order is up to something again.”

Zoe’s ears perked up at Ethan’s announcement. She kept her head bent over the pile of receipts she was logging, hoping Shelby would forget she was there.

“Crap. I thought you took care of them after that last nightmare we went through.”

“I thought I had. But they worked too fast for us. By the time we traced the money transfers, all the accounts had been closed. They managed to get to several of the Eastland executives and Order operatives that we captured. When that happened, the others clammed up.”

“So, what are they up to now and why are you telling me?”

“First of all, I thought you and Paige and Zoe should know, since you thwarted one of their operations. Not that I think they’ll bother trying to find

you. They don't seem interested in revenge," Ethan said.

"What are they interested in now?" Shelby asked.

"I'm still trying to find out. We're hearing rumors that they're looking for a thief. And not just an ordinary burglar. It seems they want the best of the best." Ethan's sigh was audible over the conference phone. "I just wish I knew why."

"I'd think you need to find the thieves they're looking for and keep an eye on them. Then if the Order contacts any of them, you could find out what they want to steal."

"That was basically my thought, too. I've got Jeremy Barstow set up. He'll pull a few high-end jobs under our supervision, then when the Order comes calling on him, we should be able to get the information."

"Jeremy's one of the best," Shelby agreed.

"Barstow's a hack, and if the Order knows anything, they won't be interested in him," Zoe said.

Shelby turned to Zoe. "Just because you used to be a two-bit thief doesn't mean you know everything about the thief world. Jeremy worked with me on a mission once."

"Then you were just lucky. Jeremy always worked with partners. He had the brains for setting up a job but he always blew it when it came to actually getting the goods. His partners were the talent. But they didn't get any of the credit and, knowing Jeremy,

probably not much of the profit either. And I wasn't a two-bit thief." Zoe clamped her lips together. She'd come close to revealing her real identity. And it was too bad that she couldn't. She'd be perfect for what they wanted.

"Is Jeremy the only one you've got, Ethan?" Shelby asked.

"No, actually, I'm talking with Zeke Alexander. Now there's a thief that would get their attention."

"He can't do it," Zoe blurted.

"He says he can. And the man was the best thief in the world for years. Still is, as far as I can tell."

"Why would he want to help you anyway?" Zoe asked.

"I don't know. He said something about it being time for him to earn some respect. I'm just glad he's considering it."

Damn it. Her father had suggested that she didn't respect him and she hadn't really done anything to tell him otherwise. She couldn't let him do it. Not with the Parkinson's.

"Zeke Alexander has Parkinson's."

"What?" Ethan asked.

"How could you possibly know that?" Shelby asked.

"Because I just saw him a few weeks ago. Zeke Alexander is my father."

‡ ‡ ‡

October 9, Fort Meade, Maryland

“Forrester.” Logan tucked the receiver between his ear and shoulder and continued typing a report that was already late.

“I have a message from your uncle.”

Every cell in Logan’s body went on alert. His uncle, Giovanni Castiglia, had disappeared three months earlier during a visit to his nephew. Logan still didn’t know what had happened. He’d left for work that morning after Giovanni had told him he was going to visit several museums. That afternoon, Giovanni had called Logan’s cell phone to tell him that he was returning to Italy. When Logan had questioned the abrupt end to his uncle’s visit, he’d been told to leave it alone. That he’d be in touch soon. Logan hadn’t heard from him since. It was as if the man had evaporated.

Since the death of Logan’s parents several years earlier, Giovanni was his only family. They visited each other every year or so, taking turns flying across the Atlantic. In between visits they called and e-mailed frequently. Logan had exhausted his resources in trying to find his uncle. Most of his resources. He hadn’t called the authorities. Partially because

he knew they would just explain that there was no reason for alarm. Giovanni had told Logan he was leaving, and the eccentric physicist was known to go into hibernation when he was working. Logan also knew that if he raised an alarm he'd probably lose his position at the National Security Agency. The NSA couldn't allow a cryptanalyst to have access to national secrets if his only relative might have been abducted. But even when Giovanni had disappeared into his work, he'd always stayed in contact with Logan. Not this time.

"Take your cell phone outside. I'll call you in ten minutes." The caller disconnected.

Logan locked his computer, slipped his cell phone into his pants pocket, and walked down the aisle. Minutes later, he walked past the security guards in the lobby of the National Security Agency building and out onto the sidewalk. He paced around the corner and waited, checking his watch. How had the man gotten his cell phone number? Two more minutes. Logan pulled his cell phone out and stared at the dark display. The phone chirped, and he flipped it open. The caller ID showed only *Private Number*.

"Yes?"

"He wants you to know that he's all right."

"Where is he? I want to speak to him."

"I'm afraid that's not possible right now. Trust

that he is well cared for and will continue to be so. He has a request for you.”

“A request?”

“He wants you to join us.”

“Who are you?”

“You don’t need that information at this time. You will resign from the NSA immediately. We have need of your services for an indeterminate amount of time.”

The voice was smooth and unemotional. A bark of nervous laughter escaped Logan, and he cleared his throat. “I can’t just leave my job.”

“Of course you can. And you will if you want to see your uncle again.”

Was this man really relaying a message from his uncle? Or was he delivering a veiled threat? Logan fought down the panic and pushed the confusion aside. There was no real choice to be made, but could he buy some time?

“I’ll need to give two weeks’ notice.”

The man’s laughter rumbled in Logan’s ear.

“Oh, please. You’re a cryptanalyst. One of their best, we understand. The moment you *give notice*, the NSA will send a guard to watch you pack your belongings and then he’ll escort you to the door.”

Logan couldn’t argue with the voice. That was exactly what would happen.

“Meet me in the lobby of the Trump Tower in

New York at eight tonight. I'm sure I don't need to tell you to come alone and to not alert the authorities."

"Will my uncle be there?"

"You'll recognize me by a red and black tie. It's identical to the one you're wearing." The caller disconnected.

Logan looked down at his red and black striped tie. How the hell had the man known what tie he was wearing? It had been in his briefcase until he'd put it on for a meeting that morning. He looked at the street and parking lot but saw nothing out of the ordinary. He shook off the creepy feeling and closed his phone. His mind raced over a plan. He opened the phone again and punched in the number of an old college chum.

"Zach Hansen."

"Hey, Zach. That offer of a job still stand?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. I'm all yours. If you still want me."

"Hell, yes, I still want you."

"I'll need a few months to get everything in order here, but I'm leaving the NSA today."

"Hot damn! I didn't think I'd ever be able to lure you away from your spy job." Zach laughed. "Hey, you aren't in trouble there, are you? Selling national secrets or anything?"

"No, asshole. I'm just burned out on it. And your offer is pretty lucrative." Logan laughed and hoped it

didn't sound forced. "Look, the NSA will probably call you. They investigate everyone who leaves. It's no big deal; they'll just ask if you've hired me."

"Sure, no problem."

"Great. I'll call you in a couple of weeks. I'm going to take a vacation, then we'll talk about what you're paying me so much for."

"See you soon, buddy."

At his desk, Logan logged back on to his computer and started a message to his home e-mail address. The few personal documents he had on his computer were sent, then deleted from his hard drive. He typed up his resignation and printed it out on the ink-jet printer on his desk. Another e-mail delivered all his notes about his current project to one of his co-workers. A phone call assured him that his supervisor would be available for the next hour.

He looked around his cubicle. His only personal belongings were a slightly wilted plant, a picture of his Uncle Giovanni and himself when he was about ten, and his coffee cup. He slipped the picture into his briefcase and tossed the cup and plant into the trash can.

The irony of the situation didn't escape Logan. He lived in a world of spies. His job was to find ways to figure out what spies were saying on cell phones and in e-mails. There were others who found ways to keep what U.S. spies were saying on cell phones and in e-mails a

secret. The thought that someone had spied on him seemed ridiculous.

He closed his briefcase, slid the resignation into the outer pocket, and walked down the hall, stopping at the desk of his supervisor's secretary.

"Hi, Maxine."

"I told Greg you were coming. He's expecting you. You want some coffee? I'm getting a cup for him anyway."

"Thanks, but I won't be that long." Logan pulled the single sheet of paper from the outer pocket of his briefcase, and opened the office door. He walked directly to Greg Sullivan's desk and held out his resignation.

"Logan, what did you want to talk about?" Greg took the paper from him and scanned it. His face lost all expression for a moment, then he frowned and looked up at Logan. "No way. I don't accept it." He held the paper out to Logan.

"I'm sorry, but I have to do this."

"Why? If you need some time off, we can arrange that. If you're burned out on the job, we'll move you to another position. We'll work out the problem."

"That's not it. I've accepted a position with Micro Technologies. As a software developer."

"A software developer?"

"I majored in computer science. And I've kept my skill set up to date since I've been with the NSA." Logan

resisted the impulse to shift his feet.

“You’ve been with the NSA for almost ten years, with the CIA for two years before that. You’re one of our best cryptanalysts. Are you sure you want to end your career with us?”

“I’ve enjoyed my work here. But I miss software development.” He grinned at Greg. “And I won’t mind making that kind of money, either.”

“There’s more to job satisfaction than just money.”

“I know. I’ve thought this through and it’s what I want.”

Greg laid Logan’s resignation letter down, lining it up with the edge of his desk. “I guess there’s no talking you out of this?”

“No. But thanks for asking.” Logan allowed himself a smile. He and Greg had always been on friendly terms. He admired the man and respected his position. “My desk is clear. I’ve e-mailed Ron all my notes on my current project. He won’t have any problem seeing it through.”

Greg held his hands up. “I know when I’ve lost an argument.” He picked up the resignation letter. “I’ll put this through. But if you ever want to come back, just let me know. If you’re ready, I’ll walk you out.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.” Greg didn’t have to walk him out. He could have called the security guards to escort him to the front door and take his badge.

“Micro Technologies? I’ve read about them. Pretty impressive company. When will you start?”

“Not for a couple of months. I have to sell my condo here and get moved to Oregon. And I thought I’d take some vacation time.”

“Good plan.”

At the front door, Logan shook Greg’s hand, gave him the clip-on badge that allowed him entrance to the building, and turned his back on a satisfying and stellar career with the NSA. Within hours his network account at the NSA would be deactivated and an investigation would be started. At first the investigation would be intense, but as nothing was revealed, it would become routine. Eventually, a report would be sent to his supervisor and on to the director of the NSA. It would state that there was no suspicious activity on his part. Nothing to worry about. He wasn’t concerned. He’d made sure there was nothing to cause them to look any further.

Logan pushed those thoughts aside and concentrated on what he had to do before his meeting in less than eight hours with a man he didn’t know.

‡ ‡ ‡

October 19, Iraq

Rashid Fadhil Ali stood before the small mirror over the washbasin and lathered his cheeks and neck with aerosol foam. He scraped the razor over his skin carefully, as this was a relatively new experience. Until recently, he'd never shaved his face, only trimming his beard and moustache to keep them neat.

At first he had cut himself often. Especially after the cosmetic surgery that had given his thirty-five-year-old face the loose skin and jowls of a much older man.

Of course, nowadays, more and more Muslim men were shaving. And there was an ongoing controversy as to whether or not shaving was forbidden or only *makruh*, undesirable. If shaving was wrong, he believed Allah would forgive him. He did it only to become a better warrior against the infidels. It was a small price to pay for an afterlife in Paradise.

He finished shaving and splashed water on his face, then patted it dry with a towel. The next step would be laser treatments to create a receding hairline. He ran long slender fingers through his bushy hair. Smooth, supple hands that belied the aged look of his face. They were unadorned by jewelry, but he knew the ring had already been made. It was identical to the wedding band Chief Justice Isaac Jacobs still wore, although his wife had died over a decade ago. He pulled on a shirt and walked down the hall.

“Rashid.” Ziyad Al-Din greeted him when he

entered the front room. "You are well?"

"Yes, Ziyad, very well indeed. And you?"

"The same." Ziyad took a moment to examine Rashid's face and head. "It is coming along nicely, although I believe we will have to use cosmetics to make you look as old as the infidel Jacobs."

"We still have several months. Perhaps it will not be necessary, but if it is, I will learn how to apply them so that no one will even suspect I am not the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court."

"Very good. You have been chosen for very special work for the glory of Allah."

Rashid shook his head. "I am merely fortunate enough to look somewhat like this man."

"Precisely. It is Allah's will. Why else would the Chief Justice Jacobs look so much like you?"

"I am truly blessed by Allah." Rashid smiled. "Are the plans coming together?"

"Oh, yes. Although we have other matters to attend to as well." Ziyad frowned.

"You appear worried." Rashid shook his head. "I do not know how you manage so many things at one time."

"It is sometimes difficult, but we must all do what we are called to do."

"There is a complication?"

"Not with your mission. That is going according

to plan. But Mussad has brought another matter to our attention. A group that is bent on world domination much as the Americans are.”

“What? How is this possible?”

Ziyad waved his hand in dismissal. “We will handle it. They are just some upstart group that believes they can create a world order where they are the rulers. They call themselves the Order. Mussad’s father is one of them.”

“That is a terrible burden for Mussad to bear. To know that his own father is an infidel.”

“True.” Ziyad nodded. “Fortunately for him, his mother returned to the true belief and raised him as a good Muslim.”

“Allah trusts you to see that the world follows the word of the Prophet Mohammad.”

“There are many of us to do his calling. You are also one of them.”

“I give thanks that I have been chosen for such an honor. I pray to Allah that we are successful,” Rashid said. “Our biggest challenge will be to make the switch.”

“We are making the plans even now. It is only a matter of learning his ways; then we will find the perfect opportunity to take him and put you in his place.”

“How far in advance will we do this?”

“Not far.” Ziyad laughed and slapped Rashid’s shoulder. “We can’t put you in the position of actually sitting on the Supreme Court. Although there is a certain humor in that.”

Rashid smiled. He wouldn’t mind sitting in Isaac Jacobs’s place. He could hand down some judgments that would serve the infidel Americans well. But that was not his destiny.

His destiny was much greater than that.

‡ ‡ ‡

October 23, Florence, Italy

Drake Leatherman let his stubbled chin rest on his chest. His mouth hung open and a rivulet of saliva and blood trickled down his chin, but he didn’t move. As long as they thought he was still unconscious, they’d leave him alone. At least for a few minutes. His shoulders ached from having his hands tied behind the back of the chair, and the six-inch gash they’d sliced into his arm burned. One eye was already swollen closed, and he thought a couple of teeth were loose.

“How’s he doing?” Drake recognized the voice of Lieutenant Colonel Robertson again. That stung more than the physical damage they’d inflicted. Hank Robertson had led the Marine Force Recon team that

Drake had served on for seven years. What the hell was he doing with the Order?

“He’s not exactly cooperating.”

“I’m not surprised. He’s not your average agent,” Robertson said. “Might want to step it up a bit. I’ll be back soon.”

Drake could hear Robertson’s footsteps, then the faint swoosh of the door opening and closing. He brought up a mental picture of the room, trying to determine the best escape route if he got the chance. But the room boasted only one door and a single window too small to squeeze through. He hadn’t heard the click of a lock when Robertson left, so at least that was a possibility.

“Yeah, I got something that’ll loosen his tongue. Rico, bring me that pipe.”

Drake heard the pipe clatter on the concrete floor and barely kept from reacting. How much more time could he buy before they started in on him again? Not that it mattered. In the end they’d just kill him. They’d killed the other agents. The best Drake could do was die without giving up any information. Unless they screwed up and gave him an opening.

One of the men kicked the leg of the chair he sat in. Drake cursed himself silently when his body jerked and his head lifted. He opened the eye that wasn’t completely swollen shut and looked at the man.

“Good. You’re awake.”

“I must have dozed off earlier,” Drake said. “How rude of me.”

The man laughed. “You got a smart mouth, you know?” He picked up the pipe from the floor.

Drake smiled, even though it made his swollen lip crack and bleed again. “Wish I could say the same for you.”

The man grunted and scowled at him. Good. Drake wanted to piss him off. An angry man made mistakes. And a mistake could be his ticket out.

“I don’t think you’re going to be laughing much longer.” The man took a knife from the table and hauled Drake to his feet.

Drake didn’t flinch when the man slipped the knife under his belt and cut through it. But when he sliced through his jeans and shorts, Drake’s heart beat faster, his breath came in short, shallow gasps, and sweat beaded on his forehead. He concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths.

The man grabbed a handful of denim and cotton and ripped Drake’s pants away from his body. He pushed Drake back into the chair and looked at Rico. “Go get it.”

“Now?” Rico asked.

“I said to, didn’t I? And give me the pipe.”

“Sure, Mort.” Rico handed him the two-foot-long

pipe and moved to the back of the room.

Drake concentrated on his training and tried to ignore that Mort had exposed his crotch and he was defenseless with his hands tied behind him. Mort walked around the chair, slapping the pipe against his palm. He stopped in front of Drake and grimaced.

“Damn, I hate this part.”

Drake gritted his teeth when Mort reached down and lifted his penis. He could hardly swallow, his mouth was so dry. Elevated blood pressure caused his staccato heartbeat to thrum in his ears and he forced himself to think. What were they doing? Cutting his dick off wouldn't get them what they wanted. He'd pass out from the pain, then die from the blood loss. He felt a flash of relief. They weren't going to castrate him. Probably.

Mort fitted one end of the pipe over Drake's penis, then shoved it so the three-inch-wide pipe was pressed painfully against his pubic bone.

Sweat beaded on Drake's scalp. He'd been trained to withstand torture. He knew what to do. How to think. How to get through it. But a silent scream of horror reverberated through him as he fought for equilibrium.

“Go ahead,” Mort said to Rico.

Rico stepped around from behind the chair. His heavily gloved hand held a large squirming rat by its

tail. Drake inhaled sharply, then forced his mind to detach. He looked at the situation logically, refusing to allow any emotional reaction. Rico would drop the rat into the pipe. The rat would find his penis and start chewing on it. At some point, he would lose consciousness from the pain. Drake wasn't a particularly religious man, but he closed his eyes and prayed that he'd be dead before he woke up again. He felt the pipe move and his eyes flew open. The rat was halfway inside the pipe.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Drake jerked his head around at the sound of Robertson's voice.

"You said to step it up a bit." Mort shrugged. "This is how I step it up."

"Put that thing away," Robertson told Rico, then looked at Mort. "And get that pipe off him. When I said step it up, I didn't mean for you to maim him."

Drake watched as Rico moved to the back of the room where he'd left the rat's cage and Mort and Robertson walked to the wall opposite the door. The door Robertson had left open. It wasn't much of a chance. How far could he get with his hands tied behind his back? He didn't even know how many guards he might run into or if he'd be able to get out without encountering doors that required security codes or key cards. But his will to survive clamored

for him to take the chance.

Drake took a deep breath and blew it out. Robertson and Mort were still talking. Rico was trying to get the rat back into the cage. He wasn't close enough to the door to try anything subtle. His only option was to make a run for it. It was a stupid idea. He'd never get away. There was no way he could run fast enough with his hands behind his back that they wouldn't catch him.

Still, he was going to try. He might get lucky. Maybe he'd find a place to hide until he could get his hands free.

Drake pushed himself to his feet and ran toward the open door. He made it across the threshold and half a dozen strides down the hallway before the pipe slammed into his shoulder. He turned against the pain just in time to see Mort swing the pipe again. His last thought was that Mort moved really fast for such a big guy.

When Drake woke, his feet were bound to the metal foot railing of a hospital bed, his wrists secured to the side rails. His jaw ached and he moved it cautiously and ran his tongue around his mouth, surprised that he wasn't missing any teeth.

He tried to pull against the restraints, but his shoulder burned and his legs felt weak. Why were they keeping him alive? He opened his eyes to a nar-

row white room that contained only a chair and the bed he occupied. Lieutenant Colonel Hank Robertson sat in the chair.

“They tell me that most men scream like an eight-year-old girl as soon as they see the rat.” Robertson shook his head. “You didn’t make a peep. Even when they put the rat in the pipe.”

“Yeah, well, I was trained by the best.” Drake tried to clear his mind. He didn’t know why he was even still alive, and wondered what Robertson had to do with it. Who the hell knew? He’d been sent in to spy on the Order. But his cover had been blown and then Robertson had shown up. He hadn’t seen the man since he’d left the Marines and nothing he knew about his former CO could explain his association with these people.

“You still think I’m the best after what you’ve been through here?” Robertson asked.

“Well, hell, you made Rico pull the rat out of the pipe before it got to me. I don’t know how much more a man could ask from his CO.”

Robertson shook his head. “I had no idea they were doing that to you. I’d never have let them start if I had.”

“I appreciate that.” Drake watched Robertson stand and pace across the room. What the hell was his former CO doing with the Order?

Robertson turned at the sound of Drake's voice. "You can trust me on that." Robertson returned to the chair and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I'll tell you everything I can and then you can decide what you want to do."

"Yes, sir." Drake deliberately let his voice take on the cadence and tone of a marine speaking to his CO.

"I'm a member of a group. We're working to make the world a better place."

"Sounds like something you'd get involved with. I remember in the Corps, you were always talking about each of us having an obligation to make the world better."

"This is different. I've been a member all my life, just like my father. And my grandfather. It's something that's been passed down in my family for generations, centuries."

Drake kept his features passive. But Robertson wasn't making any sense and his words confirmed Drake's belief that the man had undergone some fundamental change over the past few years. And Drake was putting the emphasis on *mental*.

"I can't tell you all of it. Besides, you wouldn't understand anyway. But these are good men. I know that's probably a little hard for you to believe right now, considering your recent experience."

"There is that," Drake agreed.

"We're called the Order. The leaders are men of

vision. Of knowledge. And the time has come for us to help the world. To make a change. To make life better for every single person on the face of the earth.”

Drake watched Robertson in fascination. His former commander sounded like he’d found Jesus or something. Robertson’s eyes were lit with an inner fire as he talked, changing subjects frequently, rarely completing his thoughts.

Drake didn’t understand most of what Robertson said. But he knew brainwashing when he saw it. He was stunned that his former CO would succumb to brainwashing. The man had been his leader and his mentor when Drake was in the Marine Force Recon. Robertson had trained him to endure pain and discomfort far beyond what he’d ever thought possible. Drake had learned perseverance, loyalty, and dedication from this man.

“So, do you understand how important this is?” Robertson asked him. “How this new energy will help everyone? And there’s more than just the energy. A lot more. The Order will soon put an end to poverty and war. For the first time in history we’ll live in peace. Permanent peace.” Robertson smiled at him. “We could use your help, Leatherman.”

“Me? How could I help? It sounds like the Order has everything under control.” Drake knew he had to

tread lightly. He focused on Robertson, trying to find a shred of the man he had once known.

“The Order is very close to some discoveries that will change the world. But we aren’t quite there yet. And there are people, governments that would stop us.” He shook his head. “Sadly, our own government would stop us if they could.”

“Why would they want to stop you? I mean, it sounds like the Order knows what it’s doing. Why would anyone not want an end to poverty and war?” Drake hoped Robertson believed he was buying this.

“The government is fucked up. You’ve known that since you were in Force Recon. I imagine you’ve seen even more evidence of it in the CIA.”

“You got that right. Bureaucracy, red tape, every decision made by a committee. I’m amazed they ever get anything done.”

“Exactly,” Robertson said. “And governments are always afraid someone else will take over because they know what a lousy job they’re doing.”

“And you really believe the Order can change everything? They can come up with this energy source? Stop poverty and war? That would really be something.”

“Absolutely. We’re close, Leatherman. Real close.”

“Then it’d be a shame if anyone stopped them.” Drake watched Robertson closely for any sign that he

didn't believe him. But Robertson nodded in agreement. Drake realized that his former CO believed him because he wanted to. Just another sign that Robertson had been thoroughly brainwashed.

"That's where you come in."

"Me? I don't know what I could do."

"The CIA is investigating us." Robertson laughed. "Well, hell, you know that. They sent you here."

"Yeah. The world works in strange ways, doesn't it? I mean, who would have thought I'd run into you like this?"

"Yeah, it's weird, all right. But we worked together real good back in the Marines."

"*Semper fi.*" Always faithful.

"*Semper fi,*" Robertson answered. "The Order wants to know what the CIA learns about us. We need someone inside who can get that information to us."

"I see. And that's where I come in?"

"That's what I'd like to happen."

"I don't know. I'm not real comfortable with spying on my own country. I mean, I know the U.S. has some faults, but . . ." He almost held his breath waiting for Robertson to answer. He couldn't appear too eager, but he needed to make Robertson think he was convinced. He knew for sure that his life depended on it.

"I understand and I wouldn't expect any less of you."

Hell, I'd be pissed if you caved so easily." Robertson stood and paced across the room again. "I'd never ask you to spy on our country. It's not like that. The only thing I want you to do is let me know what the CIA discovers about us. I wouldn't ask you if I didn't believe it was in the best interest of America. In the best interest of the world. I believe in the Order. We're doing the right thing for the world."

"You make a strong argument, sir."

"I'd like to fix this so you can get back home." Robertson opened the door and turned back to Drake. "Think about it tonight. We'll talk again."

Drake heard the dead bolt slide into place, then muffled voices from the other side of the door.

"You sure you can trust him?"

"I'm sure," Robertson said. "But we don't have to rely on that. We have someone in place who'll let us know if he turns."

## 2

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October 29, German Embassy, Washington, D.C.

ZOE TOOK A CHAMPAGNE FLUTE from a passing waiter and pretended to sip from it while she cased the room. From her position next to a ficus tree, she counted five senators, a dozen congressmen, three Oscar-winning actors, and a rock star with her newest boyfriend. It was an impressive turnout, and the German Embassy knew that the presence of the politicians and stars would ensure coverage in the major newspapers and magazines.

The room twinkled with the flash of jewelry and candlelight; buzzed with the hum of gossip and politics. Chamber music floated through the main ballroom, and tuxedoed waiters moved unobtrusively through the crowd with trays of wine, champagne, and hors d'oeuvres. Guests who preferred hard liquor were served their drinks from the multiple bars placed in various corners of several rooms. The German Embassy had made sure everything was perfect.

The small cubic zirconia–studded watch on Zoe’s wrist showed nine thirty, and she turned her attention to the wide, sweeping stairway. Precisely on schedule, Honoria Bueller appeared at the top of the stairway on the arm of her husband, Ambassador Heinrich Bueller. Zoe walked toward the rear door of the ballroom, keeping her pace fast enough to discourage anyone from approaching, but not so fast to draw attention. Her eyes focused on a point across the room, lips curved in a smile. Anyone watching would assume she was crossing the enormous ballroom to greet someone.

The fact that she’d done this a hundred times before didn’t stop the adrenaline from rushing into her system. She could almost feel the blood pumping into her arms and legs. Her vision seemed sharper as she swept her eyes across the ballroom lit with multitudes of candles and sparkling crystal chandeliers. Her heart thumped a few beats faster than normal and she deliberately slowed her breathing, trying to control it. It was a scary feeling and she liked the intensity. It was better than chocolate. Better than sex—sometimes. Hell, it was probably addictive.

At the far end of the ballroom, she paused at a set of heavily draped French doors and looked back at the room. The guests were turned toward the stairway as the ambassador and his wife welcomed them to the anniversary party. Zoe pushed the doors open

and slipped to the other side, closing them quickly and softly behind her. The wide hallway leading to the kitchen was empty, all the kitchen help currently occupied with preparations for the buffet dinner that would be served later in the evening.

She entered the third door on the left, one of three coed restrooms used by the kitchen staff and servers. Setting her champagne glass on the vanity, she lifted the skirt of her heavy satin gown, pulled a slim plastic rectangle from a holder strapped to her left thigh and opened the door a crack. The hallway remained empty as she slipped the cord of the sign over the doorknob. *Out of Service*. That should keep anyone from knocking at the door and wondering why there was no answer.

She flipped the lock to the on position, unzipped the high-necked, long-sleeved gold satin gown and stepped out of it, revealing a beige bodysuit. After hanging the gown over a hook on the door, she pulled off her rings, watch, and fake diamond necklace, placing them on the vanity. The long, heavy wig landed in the sink and she made sure the nylon cap covering her own red curls was secure.

A flat nylon pouch on her left thigh yielded latex gloves. From an identical pouch on the right thigh, she pulled out a dust mask and placed it over her nose and mouth. She snapped the gloves on and climbed onto the lid of the toilet tank.

The ventilation duct cover came off with a couple of tugs. Zoe laid the vent on the vanity and braced her gloved hands on the inside of the duct. She blew out a breath and hoisted her weight onto her arms, lifting her torso into the duct and tucking her knees tight to her chest. Her legs shot out and landed her butt just on the edge of the duct.

The plans she'd been given showed that the duct traveled along one wall of the kitchen to the rear of the building, then joined a vertical duct that led to the second floor. She crawled along the duct, glancing into the kitchen through the regularly spaced vents. When she reached the vertical duct, she braced her back and feet against opposite sides and inched her way to the second floor of the embassy. She paused for a moment, her breath coming hard from the effort, then crawled down the connecting duct past several guest rooms.

The occupants of the second room had evidently elected to spend their evening pursuing personal pleasure rather than attending the anniversary celebration. Stopping at the fourth vent, she took a moment to check out the large guest suite through the ventilation grate. Empty. Just as it should be. She pressed her fingers through the vent cover and pushed it out.

The cover stuck for a moment, then gave, almost slipping through her fingers. Zoe swore under her breath and tightened her grip on the grate, carefully

lowering it to the leather love seat under the opening. She scooted forward and leaned out into the bedroom of a two-room suite.

The guests of the ambassador were treated to excellent accommodations. The spacious room boasted a king-sized four-poster bed and triple dresser made of carved, nut brown oak. Solid wood from the look of it. No cheap veneer for the German Embassy. She pulled back inside the duct, squirmed around, and backed out, dropping silently to the love seat.

The only light in the bedroom came from a bedside lamp, but it was enough. She moved cautiously to the double doors that led to the sitting room and opened one door a few inches. Dark and quiet. She pulled the door almost closed and turned her attention to the wall with the Mathias Grünewald painting. It was an original, worth thousands. She ran her fingers over the painting, then pulled her hand back. She wasn't here for it.

Zoe swung the painting away from the wall, looked at the ornate twenty-carat gold *R* on the dial, and grinned. A Remington double-walled safe with a group two combination lock.

Not bad. Better than most personal safes.

Zoe took a breath and blew it out, then lightly touched the black dial with her fingertips. She twirled the dial until she felt the first click. Then she turned

it slowly in the opposite direction. Another click. She continued picking up the wheels, her fingers telling her when the drive cam sent the drive pin into contact with the wheel fly. The wheels and notches lined up to let the fence fall. The bolt slid free and Zoe swung the door open.

Velvet jewelry cases were stacked inside along with a sheaf of papers and a wad of cash. She pushed the cash and papers aside and pulled out the jewelry boxes. Ethan had been specific. Rubies, diamonds, and emeralds—only the most valuable jewels. Zoe dropped the appropriate necklaces, bracelets, and earrings into the pouch strapped to her thigh, tossing the less expensive pieces back into the safe.

The last velvet box held a simple platinum chain with a small cross on it. A nice piece, but nothing a self-respecting thief would take.

Just a little something for herself.

Zoe's fingers twitched and a surge of desire pulsed through her body. She'd felt that desire before. Often. And she'd given in to it.

Not tonight. She snapped the case closed and tossed it back inside the safe.

Zoe repeated her actions in the other six guest rooms, then headed back through the ventilation system to the bathroom. Less than an hour had passed since she'd started. She replaced the vent cover,

stripped off the latex gloves, and looked at her image in the mirror.

She was covered in dust from the ventilation ducts. Hair, face, and bodysuit. She washed her hands and used damp paper towels to remove the dust from her face and bodysuit. She pulled the wig on over her hair, replaced the rings, watch, and choker, and stepped into her satin gown. Now all she had to do was leave the party, drop the jewels off with Shelby, go home, and hope that the Order took the bait. She hurried down the hall and opened the French doors.

“I beg your pardon,” Zoe said as the door to the ballroom bumped against someone. Great. Mrs. Weston-Smyth. Three hundred people at this little soiree, and she had to bump into one of the few she’d actually talked to, just as she needed to make her escape. The woman had cornered her earlier in the evening and asked penetrating questions about Zoe’s background. She’d lied, of course.

“Oh, there you are, dear. I was just telling Logan that I wanted to introduce you two.”

“Really?” Zoe asked with a bright smile.

Mrs. Weston-Smyth leaned toward Zoe and placed a gloved hand, heavy with jewels, on her arm. “Logan was educated in Switzerland, too. I thought you two would have a lot in common.” She gestured toward Logan. “Logan Forrester, Zoe Alexander.”

Zoe offered him her hand and gave him a polite smile. Logan was the kind of handsome that usually indicated a lousy personality. Taller than average height, wavy brown hair streaked with gold, dark green eyes. His tux hung from broad shoulders and skimmed over a lean, muscular frame. He smiled and she couldn't help grinning back. She liked handsome men.

But this was a bad time.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

Zoe leaned forward a little and lowered her voice. "I was looking for the ladies' room and got lost."

"I see." He grinned and reached out to brush his fingers against her neck. "There's dirt on your neck."

Zoe's mouth went dry. She wasn't sure if it was from his touch or that he'd noticed the dirt she'd missed. "I opened a utility closet by mistake and a feather duster fell on me."

"I see. Your name sounds incredibly familiar to me. Have we met before?"

"I'm sure I would remember if we had."

"Come along, they're serving dinner soon." Mrs. Weston-Smyth waved them toward the far end of the ballroom.

"Of course. May I escort you lovely ladies to the dining room?" Logan held out an arm to each woman.

"I'm sorry, I can't stay for dinner. I have another engagement." Zoe affected an apologetic look.

“What a shame,” he murmured.

“Oh, dear.” Mrs. Weston-Smyth shook her head. “But I understand. When I was your age, I often had several engagements in one evening.”

“It was so nice meeting you both. I hope we’ll run into each other again.” Like hell, she did.

“Oh, now I remember,” Logan said.

Zoe turned and looked at him, her face a frozen mask of casual inquisition.

“But it was a man’s name that I recalled. Zeke Alexander. Any relation?”

“I really must run or I’ll be late. Good night, Mrs. Weston-Smyth.” Zoe nodded to Logan. “Good evening.”

She moved through the crowded reception hall smiling and nodding, sneaking a glance down to make sure none of the stuff strapped to her thighs was noticeable under the stiff satin gown. The coat check retrieved her velvet stole, and she slipped out the door and into the waiting limo.

Throwing the stole onto the seat, she scrunched up her skirt, ripped off the pouch strapped to her thigh, and tossed it to Shelby.

“There!”

Ethan had asked Shelby to work out of Langley as Zoe’s handler since the CIA was involved in the op. Zoe had been more than a little pleased when her boss had agreed. The stealing was no big deal, but the spy

stuff was scary, and she couldn't think of anyone she'd rather have telling her what to do.

"Well done, Zoe." Shelby opened the pouch and pulled the jewels out.

"Where's my bag?"

"It's in the trunk," Shelby answered, still examining the gems.

"Hey!" Zoe banged the heel of her palm on the window separating them from the driver. Shelby grimaced and pressed a button to lower the window.

"Stop the car and open the trunk," she instructed the driver. The car slowed and pulled over to the curb. Zoe jumped out, grabbed her bag from the trunk, and slammed the lid. She was unzipping the bag when she got back in the car.

"Really, Zoe, are you always this way after a job?"

"It's the hormonal cascade," Zoe explained to her boss as she rummaged in the bag and pulled out a giant-sized candy bar. "You know, there's the adrenaline rush from the fight-or-flight response to the possibility of getting caught. Then you don't get caught and you have all that adrenaline still in your system. The sugar helps."

"All that chocolate can't be good for you." Shelby wrinkled her nose and dropped the jewels back into the pouch.

"What are you going to do with those?"

“They’ll go to a fence who’s about to get out of the business.”

“Willingly?” Zoe asked.

Shelby laughed. “He was recently found in possession of some rather valuable merchandise. In return for this favor and some information, he gets to spend his golden years in a cozy cottage on the coast of Maine rather than in a prison cell.”

“I see. So the word gets out that I snagged the jewels, the fence gets caught with them, everyone gets their valuables back, the fence doesn’t go to jail, and everyone’s happy.”

“It’s a sweet deal any way you look at it. So, how did it go tonight?”

“This was really an easy job. I could have done it when I was ten.” Zoe frowned in thought. “Actually, I think I did one similar to this around that age.”

“It only seems easy to you. To anyone else, it’s a big job that you pulled off flawlessly. It’ll go a long way to establishing your reputation as a thief.”

Her reputation as a thief. Something she’d spent her youth developing and several years eliminating. Her father had tutored her from the age of eight. Or maybe it had been earlier. Six? Five?

She’d accompanied him on her first real job when she was nine. It seemed like a game and the prize for pleasing her father was his attention. Even when Nana

Phoebe had tried to convince her that stealing was wrong, she'd stayed on with her father until he took on an apprentice. A young man who was just about the age her brother would have been had he lived. That's when she knew beyond any doubt that she'd never be good enough for her father. Ever. Because she'd never be his *son*.

After her brief retirement, it was necessary to convince the thieving community that Zoe, the heir apparent to Zeke Alexander, was again active. And that she was as good as she'd ever been. Maybe better.

The weird part was that Zoe could now do the only thing she'd ever been really good at. And she could do it legally. For the government. What a hoot.

"Shelby, do you know anything about Logan Forrester?"

"How do you know Logan Forrester?"

"I hate it when you answer my question with another question. Who is he?"

"Did you meet him tonight?" Shelby asked.

"You're doing it again."

"Did he approach you? What did he want?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and turned to look out her window.

"Crap." Shelby sighed. "Logan Forrester worked with the NSA as a cryptanalyst until a few weeks ago."

“Cryptanalyst? You mean he decodes stuff?”

“Forrester is one of the best. Actually, he *is* the best. He started in the CIA, got through the basic training for field agents at The Farm, and then they discovered his uncanny ability with codes. He was moved to the NSA and quickly became their top cryptanalyst.”

“And he’s left the NSA? Why?”

“Just up and quit. Said he was taking a job with some computer company for a lot more money. But when his supervisor at the NSA tried to reach him at the new job, he was told that Logan wouldn’t be starting the job for another few months. Then his name turned up in connection with the Order.”

“That figures,” Zoe said.

“How did you meet Forrester?”

“Mrs. Weston-Smyth introduced us. I think she was trying to be a matchmaker.” Zoe’s stomach twisted remembering his parting question. “He mentioned my father. Wanted to know if we were related.”

“Did you deny it?” Shelby frowned.

“I didn’t answer either way. It kind of threw me. At first I figured if he was asking about my dad, then I should admit to it. Then I thought that if I jumped at it, he’d think something was wrong. I mean, if I’m really a thief, I wouldn’t be too eager to admit who I am right after pulling a job.”

“Good.”

“Was this planned?”

“For you to meet him? No, not at all.” Shelby shrugged. “We believed the Order would have someone at the event tonight. That’s why we sent you in to steal the jewels. It was just luck that Forrester approached you.”

“What else have you found out about them?”

“What do you know about cold fusion?”

“That it’s an impossibility,” Zoe said.

“That’s not precisely true; it’s just never been done on a consistent basis. There are problems with stability and consistency.”

Zoe sighed. “I understand that. I just meant that most scientists consider it impossible because of those issues.”

“Cold fusion would be an incredible breakthrough. Ideally, it would provide inexpensive energy with no pollution.”

“Sounds like a good thing so far. I’m all for it.”

“Unless it’s developed by the wrong people.” Shelby stared out the dark-tinted window for a moment. “In the wrong hands, cold fusion would be a powerful weapon. Countries wanting to get out from under the control of the oil cartels would be eager to buy it.”

“So, they’d be buying cold fusion instead of oil.” That didn’t seem to be a really big issue to her. In fact,

considering the price of gas, wouldn't that be a *good* thing?

"It's complicated. They could quickly amass trillions of dollars."

"And with the combination of endless energy and unlimited funds they could become a power to be reckoned with?" Okay, now it wasn't sounding so good to Zoe.

"That's the general idea. Basically, they could hold governments hostage."

"You mean they could hold *our* government hostage. So, that's what the Order is doing?"

"We think that's part of it. We don't know what their agenda is or who's in control of the organization. We don't know a lot about them. We certainly don't know enough."

"Has Ethan sent an agent in? I mean, that's what he usually does, right?" Zoe asked.

"This actually isn't an FSA issue. Well, partly it's FSA, but the CIA is involved, too. And the CIA sent several agents in. Unfortunately that hasn't worked."

"Hasn't worked? As in the agents weren't able to infiltrate the Order, or as in the agents weren't able to get back to the CIA?"

"We've lost all the agents we've sent in but one. He returned in pretty bad shape."

Zoe wrapped the uneaten portion of her candy bar

in the wrapper and tossed it in her bag. “So, what *do* you know about them?”

Shelby pulled a photograph from an envelope and handed it to her, flicking on the overhead light. The photo showed three men in business suits walking toward a limo. The black-and-white photo was grainy, and the features of the men weren’t discernible. She certainly couldn’t have picked any of them out of a crowd.

“We believe those three men are the top echelon of the Order. The Triumvirate. Our intel is that they’re locating and obtaining certain documents from around the world.”

“Documents that make cold fusion possible?”

“That’s what we believe.”

“Maybe you should start at the beginning.”

“It’s a long, complex story.”

“We’ve got a long drive.” Zoe shrugged.

“You’re not too tired for a briefing?”

“No way. I’m always wide awake after a job.”

Shelby nodded and leaned back. “An Italian physicist, Giovanni Castiglia, has been missing for almost a year. In spite of the fact that he’s been known to disappear into his work before, we believe this is different.”

“You think the Order took him?”

“It’s possible. Castiglia is brilliant. He studied with Albert Einstein when he was young. But more important, Castiglia is Forrester’s great-uncle.”

“What did he do when his uncle disappeared?”

“Nothing. He didn’t report it to the authorities, never even mentioned it to anyone at all.”

“So, you think he knows where his uncle is?”

“Possibly. He might have not reported it because he knew his security clearance would be yanked. The government can’t afford to have an employee with a high security clearance vulnerable to demands from kidnappers.”

“So, did Forrester leave the NSA to find his uncle or was he in on the disappearance?”

“We have no idea.”

“But you still think his disappearance is connected with the Order?”

“There’s been a rumor about a group of physicists who have worked on different theories for years. These physicists would take on younger scientists and mentor them, eventually passing along all the information they had acquired and developed.”

“Like an apprenticeship of sorts.”

“It was never publicized because their theories went against what most physicists believed. They basically worked in secret. A massive amount of information was supposedly developed and hidden.”

“Where is all this information?” Zoe asked.

“We don’t know. It could be anywhere.”

“But if this information is really old, what use

would it be? Cold fusion has only been a concept since the early twentieth century.”

Shelby raised her eyebrows. “You’ve researched cold fusion?”

“Not really. I just read a lot. I remember that from somewhere.”

“We don’t know what’s in the documents. It’s possible that there’s something in the older documents that doesn’t pertain to cold fusion but could lead to a method to make it stable and predictable.”

“I see. So, this old information combined with newer information, like quantum physics or quantum mechanics, could be a breakthrough?”

“It’s possible,” Shelby said.

“So, why hasn’t someone in this secret society of physicists collected all this data before now?”

“The whole secret society theory is just that. A theory. There’s no proof that it ever existed and if it did, it probably fell apart a long time ago.” Shelby stretched and settled back again. “Which means the documents could be anywhere. And that whoever has them might not have a clue as to what they are.”

“And you think someone has figured it out?”

“The little information we’ve gotten indicates that to be true. Castiglia has always been a progressive thinker. He’s worked on some pretty wild theories. He might be just the physicist they need to put it all

together.”

“How do they know where the documents are?”

“We don’t know that either. If we did, we’d just steal the documents before they did.”

“So, that’s why the Order is looking for a thief.”

“We believe the Order has already gotten some of the documents. But it stands to reason that some of them will be in places with security they can’t deal with.”

“So, who’s been stealing the documents for them?”

Shelby pulled another photo out of the envelope. “Forrester. His basic training in the CIA would have been enough for him to do some of it.”

Zoe took the picture and looked at it. Forrester wore a suit and tie along with a stiff expression. Looked like it was probably the photo from his NSA file.

“That’s him, all right.” She handed the photo back.

“We arranged for your theft to be discovered shortly after you left tonight. Forrester should put two and two together and come to the conclusion that you were the thief. The fact that he asked about your father is a good sign that he’s on the trail.”

“And then what do we do?”

“At this point, we’re just playing it by ear. We need to be really careful.”

“Maybe, but careful doesn’t always get you what you want. Or need.”

“You aren’t a real agent, Zoe.”

“I know. But I’m a real thief. And that’s what they want.”

“Zoe, you’ve got to play this by the book. You need to do what I tell you to do. No deviations, no winging it, no having any good ideas of your own.”

“Absolutely. By the book.”

She didn’t say whose book.



October 30, Outside Bethesda, Maryland

“Halt!”

Zoe froze in place, one foot lifted off the floor, arms stretched out to her sides for balance. What had she done wrong now? She glanced across the training room at her father. Zeke Alexander leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, shaking his head in what she assumed to be disappointment at her lackluster performance.

“You have to be conscious of every part of your body.” He pushed off the wall with a graceful ease a ballerina would have envied. “Use the spray before you trip one of the lasers.”

She shouldn't have had to use the spray again so soon. The idea was to spray the aerosol, which illuminated the otherwise invisible laser beams, then to move around, under, and over the beams from memorizing where they were located. The more she could memorize, the farther she could travel before she had to stop to use the spray again. Zoe hadn't traveled more than two feet since the last spray.

She sprayed the aerosol into the air in front of her and grimaced when the fog revealed a laser beam right where she'd been about to step. She concentrated on the pattern of laser beams her father had set up and moved across the rest of the space without hitting any of them, using the aerosol only twice more.

"You aren't concentrating, Zoe." Zeke flipped off the lasers and walked across the floor to take the aerosol can from her. "What's the problem?"

She padded over to a table and opened a bottle of water without answering. She knew exactly what the problem was. She couldn't stop thinking about the Order. She'd have to be at the top of her form in order to steal for them and find out what they were up to at the same time. That meant total concentration. Which was exactly what she hadn't had during the exercise she'd just completed. Naturally, her father noticed. He noticed everything.

"You never should have left the business," her father

said, walking across the room. Slender and fit, the only sign of his fifty-six years were a few laugh lines around his eyes and a shock of silver hair. Zoe had no doubt that he'd gone prematurely gray from his occupation.

"I wanted out." She turned to look at him. "I didn't want to live that life anymore."

"But you're doing it now."

"I'm working for the government now." She didn't have a problem with stealing. Never had. But she knew that's what her father would assume she meant. He'd never think that she had stopped because she'd realized that she'd never be good enough for him. She wasn't in the mood to enlighten him.

Zeke shrugged. "I don't see that much difference. It's still stealing."

"It's legal. And it's not about the stealing. It's about protecting my country. It's about doing the right thing."

"I don't like it, Zoe." He shook his head. "You're a thief, not a spy. What's Shelby thinking?"

"It was my idea, Dad. I volunteered."

"They're lucky. You're a good thief. Petite, powerful, intelligent." He grinned at her, then shrugged. "Intelligent most of the time. And look at you. You're beautiful just like your mother. Except for your eyes. Damn if I know where you got those gold eyes from."

"I told you, Dad. It's a recessive gene." Why had

she thought it would be a good idea to have her father train her? Because he'd been the best in his time. There still wasn't a thief who could do half of what he'd done in his career. Except for her. And Ethan and Shelby thought it would lend credence to her getting back into the business again.

"Are we done here?" Zoe asked.

"For today, yes." He nodded. "But, Zoe, if you're going to do it, you should put in more time. Practice everything until it's second nature."

He was right. Working for the Order, she'd be stealing from places where Shelby and Ethan couldn't protect her if she was caught.

There would be no safety net.

# 3

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November 3, New York City, New York

“IT’S A MISTAKE,” LOGAN SAID after a moment of consideration. “You need the best.” He leaned over the table and thumped the stack of papers. Background information that had been compiled on a variety of thieves. “Those guys aren’t it.”

“They have assured me they are capable.” Karl Weisbaum stood at the window of the Trump Tower apartment that faced Fifth Avenue.

Logan considered Weisbaum’s back for a moment. Tall and distinguished in an elegant and expensive suit, he looked like the international businessman he professed to be. But there was an edge to him that Logan interpreted as dangerous. Much more so than the other two members of the Triumvirate who ran the Order. Axel von Bayem and Pierre Simitiere sat across the room watching, their eyes and expressions unreadable. Logan suppressed a shudder at the power these

three men wielded.

“If they were capable thieves, then why have they all done time for burglary? They were caught once; it could happen again.” Logan shook his head. “I thought you were serious about this. Maybe I was wrong.”

“Don’t be stupid, Logan.” Weisbaum turned back from the glass wall that looked out over midtown Manhattan. “We must have the items. You know that.”

“Indeed I do,” Logan agreed. “Which is why I don’t understand using second-rate help to get them.”

“What do you suggest, then?” von Bayem asked in a slightly accented rumble as he pushed his bulky frame from the sofa and walked to the small bar. “Is there someone you’d recommend?” He splashed vodka into a cut crystal glass and turned back to Logan.

“There’s only one person who can do all of these jobs and not get caught.” Logan rose from the leather chair. “Zoe Alexander.”

“Zeke Alexander has been out of the business for almost five years. Besides, he’s getting too old.” Weisbaum waved a manicured hand in dismissal.

“He was the first one we thought of,” Simitiere agreed. “Too bad he’s not available.”

“I’m not talking about Zeke,” Logan corrected them. “His daughter, Zoe.”

Weisbaum frowned. “I heard that she left the

business a while back.”

“Besides, she’s just a girl,” von Bayem protested.

“Well, she’s back in it,” Logan said, ignoring von Bayem. “I attended a ball at the German Embassy a couple of days ago. Zoe Alexander was there and shortly after she left, a theft was discovered.”

“Really? Did she take the silver or something?” von Bayem laughed.

“More like half a million in jewelry.” Logan kept his eyes on Weisbaum. “From state-of-the-art safes in rooms in the well-protected guest quarters.”

“So, she was a guest of the embassy.” Weisbaum shrugged. “That doesn’t mean she did the theft.”

“She wasn’t on the guest list. And none of the guests had ever heard of her, so she didn’t come with anyone.” Logan paused. “She was there for one reason.”

“She might be worth considering,” Weisbaum said.

“I don’t know. Can she be trusted?” Simitiere asked.

Von Bayem snorted. “Can any thief be trusted? Once word gets out what we’re looking for, everyone and his cousin will be after it.” He slugged down a gulp of vodka. “I still think you should be doing this.”

Logan sighed. “I told you, I’m not good enough. Not for these jobs.”

“You got the first of the documents without a problem,” von Bayem pointed out.

“Sure. Those were easy. Breaking into homes with practically no security.” Logan shrugged. “But now we’re looking at museums, laboratories. These are places with sophisticated security systems. It’s far beyond my capabilities.”

“Come on, Logan. You were trained as a CIA agent. You expect us to believe you can’t do this?” Von Bayem laughed and shook his closely cropped head.

“I told you. I only went through the general field training at the CIA. I worked at a desk until I moved to the NSA. I’m a much better cryptanalyst than an agent. Or a thief.”

“You better be a good cryptanalyst. Otherwise, we won’t have any need for you.” Von Bayem grinned and it looked truly evil to Logan.

“I’m the best. If I can’t decode the documents, no one can,” he assured them and hoped it was true.

“I’m not worried about her being involved,” Weisbaum said, ignoring the exchange between von Bayem and Logan. “We can keep her in the dark as to the importance of what she’s stealing. Besides, my guess is that she steals purely for monetary gain. I doubt she’d be interested in why we want the items.”

“Exactly,” Logan agreed.

“But will she be willing to do it? After all, she

just pulled a big job. She's set for a while, I'd think." Weisbaum turned back to the glass wall.

"Oh, she'll want the work. My sources tell me that the jewels were found with a fence. He hadn't even broken them down yet, so it's unlikely that she's gotten any money from them. My guess is that she's planning another job already."

"How do we contact her?" Weisbaum asked.

"You won't find her number listed in the phone book." Logan chuckled, earning frowns from all three men.

"I assume you have a way of getting in touch with her?" Weisbaum asked.

"There's a benefit gala being held this weekend at the Friedlander Museum to celebrate the opening of an exhibit of Japanese artifacts from the Heian period."

"The Friedlander has an excellent security system," Weisbaum said.

"Yes," Logan agreed. "But most of it is concentrated on keeping thieves out of the museum. The benefit gala would provide an excellent opportunity for her."

"You think she'll be there?"

Logan nodded.

"Then make sure you're there as well," Weisbaum instructed. "Find out how much she wants for what we need done."

"I'm trying to find her beforehand, but if I don't, I'll be at the gala. I'll call you on Sunday."

“No.” Weisbaum shook his head. “We’ll be in Europe until Tuesday. I’ll get in touch with you.”

Logan shrugged, his expression carefully passive. “Whatever.” He wondered where in Europe they would be, because he was certain that’s where they had his uncle, Giovanni Castiglia.



“I knew he was the one. He had to be. All the signs were there.” Capo stepped out of the shadows of the hallway.

“Christ! I wish you wouldn’t do that.” Simitiere glared and picked up the cigarette he’d dropped. “Can’t you just enter a room like a normal person?”

Weisbaum flinched at the sound of Capo’s voice but recovered smoothly. Von Beyam took his drink and sank into the leather sofa.

Capo was no longer surprised by the three men. He’d worked with them long enough to know their every reaction. Yet they rarely were able to predict his. They should have known that he’d be listening. After all, it was Logan. One of the chosen, an important part of the Legacy. Capo had explained that to them often enough. He spared a brief moment to regret that Logan hadn’t been properly prepared. But everything

happened for a reason. This was only a part of it. He had to believe that Logan wasn't intended to be prepared. Everything was a part of the Legacy.

The Triumvirate he'd appointed didn't understand the Legacy completely. Even though they'd been prepared by their fathers and had grown up knowing about the Legacy and what it meant. They didn't understand that every single piece had to fall into place. But they were learning. He'd be patient with them for now. It seemed that he alone was able to see the overall picture. None of the others had even recognized that this was the time. None of them had been able to locate the Legacy document. After generations of waiting, this was the time for the Legacy to come into power. To save the world.

"This woman, this thief. She's an important part of the equation," Capo said.

"How do you know that?" von Bayem asked. "You get a vision or something?"

Capo turned slowly. "Do I detect a note of cynicism, Axel?" He smiled and lifted a hand to still the response. "No, I understand your reluctance to believe. Sometimes the father fails to properly prepare the son."

"No, Capo." Von Bayem's hand ran across his close-cropped hair, then patted the top of his head in a familiar gesture. "It's not that. Just my smart-ass

mouth. I didn't mean anything by it."

"I understand." Capo turned to Weisbaum. "See that we enlist her services."

"What if Logan can't contact her?" Weisbaum asked.

"Oh, he will. I have no doubt of that. Logan will do whatever is necessary." He turned back toward the hallway. "I need more sleep. These transatlantic flights exhaust me. When do we leave for Italy?"

Weisbaum checked his watch. "In six hours, Capo."

"Good. I need to get back to the lab." There was so much to do, so much to take care of. *All in good time*, he reminded himself. This had been waiting centuries.

‡ ‡ ‡

November 5, Outside Bethesda, Maryland

"You are one tough woman to get a hold of."

A shiver of excitement skittered up Zoe's spine when she heard Logan's soft, masculine voice on her phone. "Maybe that's because I don't want to be gotten a hold of," she replied smoothly.

"I wanted to tell you how much I admired your work at the German Embassy."

"You're mistaken. I don't work at the German

Embassy.”

He laughed softly. “Well, not officially, of course. I’m speaking of your work at the ball last week. Very impressive.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. In fact, I have no idea who you are.” She pressed the *off* button and laid the phone down. It rang in five seconds. She waited until the fourth ring before picking it up. “What?”

“I have an offer for you.”

“Not interested.”

“You haven’t heard it yet,” he argued.

“Whatever it is, Mr. Forrester, I can assure you I’m not interested.”

“Ah, so you remember me?”

“Of course, I remember you. However, believe me, you have nothing to offer that I’d be interested in.”

“I beg to differ.”

“I like it when men beg, but it won’t change anything.”

“You won’t even listen to the offer?”

Zoe sighed, making sure he could hear her. “Fine, I’ll listen, if it’ll get you off my phone.”

“I’m in business with some people who need some items procured.”

She said nothing.

“I’m convinced you’re the one who can procure

these items.”

“Not interested,” she said.

“How much would you want?”

“I said I’m not interested.”

“I heard that. But everyone has a price. What’s yours?”

“You don’t seem to understand, Mr. Forrester. I work alone. By myself, for myself. I’m not interested in work for hire.”

“Not even for a million?”

Zoe hesitated, as she’d planned to do when money was offered. Not being prepared to hear that number made it easy.

“How long does it take you to steal enough to make a million dollars?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business. I don’t do work for hire. Under any circumstances. You need to find someone else.”

It was his turn to sigh and he did a good job of it. “Fine. Forget I asked. But how about dinner Saturday night?”

Just the opening she’d been hoping for. “Sorry, I have a benefit gala to attend in New York on Saturday night.”

“A gala? Sounds interesting. I don’t suppose you’d like an escort?”

“It’s not that kind of evening for me.”

“Ah, work then. I certainly understand.”

“If there’s nothing else, Mr. Forrester, I really have to go.”

“Of course. Maybe we’ll run into each other again.”

“Highly unlikely,” she said.

“Still, you never know.”

“Good-bye, Mr. Forrester.” She hung up the phone and waited five minutes, but it didn’t ring again. She picked it up and punched in Shelby’s number.

“You were right,” Zoe said when Shelby answered.

“Forrester contacted you.”

“Just a few minutes ago. I told him no, and alluded to the gala I’ll be attending on Saturday night.”

“Are you really sure about this, Zoe? It’s not too late to back out. The FSA or CIA could send in a seasoned agent,” Shelby suggested.

“They don’t have an agent who can do what I can do. It won’t work.”

“You could train them.”

“Shelby, it takes years. I can’t train an agent to be a thief in a few weeks. Dad trained me for four years before I ever did my first job.”

“Fine, you’re right, I suppose. What if Logan doesn’t show?”

“He’ll show. He sounded desperate.”

“And how are you going to get him to make you another offer?”

“Easy. I’m going to let him rescue me.”

‡ ‡ ‡

November 7, New York City, New York

Zoe pulled on a dark blue bodysuit and regarded herself in the mirrored closet door of her suite in the St. Regis Hotel. Her back was bare to her waist except for several thin cords that crisscrossed over it. She pulled on the sheer kimono-style jacket and turned to check out her rear view in the mirrored closet doors. The diaphanous Japanese print swirled about her calves and did nothing to hide her body. She slipped her feet into flat ballerina slippers, momentarily regretting that she couldn’t wear the kind of heels that would make the outfit even more stunning. But she knew exactly what she would be doing tonight, and heels were out of the question. The salon had twisted her red hair into a French braid, leaving a few wisps to curl around her face. The cosmetician had applied creams, powders, and pencils until she barely recognized her own face.

She picked up the specially constructed bamboo purse and pressed a fingernail into the recessed slot under the handle. A slender drawer slid smoothly out of

the bottom of the purse. All for looks tonight. The only thing she'd be snagging was Logan's attention. The phone rang and she answered it to hear the concierge say that her limo had arrived. If it wasn't for dealing with the Order, she could get used to this lifestyle. She thanked the concierge and headed to the lobby.

Fifteen minutes later Zoe slipped into the elegant crowd in the main room of the Friedlander Museum and looked for Logan. She moved from room to room, pretending to view the displays, but after almost an hour of mingling she still hadn't spotted him. The sparkly spandex was starting to itch; the pile of make-up felt heavy on her face. She felt the beginnings of a frustration she associated with failure.

"I hope whatever you're stealing is really small if you plan to hide it somewhere in that outfit."

Logan's breath whispered across the back of her neck, and the hairs on her arms stood up. The frustration eased. Her quarry had arrived.

"What makes you think I'm here to steal something?"

"I see." Logan moved to stand beside her. "So, it's merely a coincidence that an internationally known thief is attending an exhibit of priceless Japanese artifacts?"

"Internationally known?"

Logan grinned. "Well, not by the general public, of course, but certainly the major law enforcement

agencies.”

“Wouldn’t it be foolish for such a well-known thief to attend a function and then commit a theft?”

“Foolish?” He shrugged. “Perhaps. Or daring.”

“There’s another term for a daring thief.”

“What’s that?”

“Convicted felon.” She turned her attention to the glass case before them.

Logan grinned. “You arrived rather late. The gala will be over in an hour or so.”

“Then I’d best enjoy the exhibits before we’re all ushered out. Excuse me.”

Zoe turned and walked across the room to stand before a display of metal war fans. Taking a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, she moved from one exhibit to the next, comparing the floor plan with the one Ethan had sent her. It all checked out and she relaxed a bit.

She had another half hour to get Logan where she wanted him. She wandered about the spacious main room of the museum, chatting with other guests about the exhibits. Logan was never far from her, and that was exactly what she wanted.

The gala was winding down and everyone was being directed from the small exhibit rooms back to the main gallery where there would be a series of speeches thanking everyone and acknowledging

the more generous patrons of the Friedlander. Zoe waited until the room was almost empty, then slipped behind an exhibit, making sure Logan saw the move. She ducked under the red velvet rope and ran silently down the hall to the double doors leading to the small gallery that held the priceless *emaki*. The thousand-year-old picture scrolls weren't being displayed tonight. The Friedlander wouldn't take a chance with such a valuable exhibit.

The doors to the gallery were locked, but in deference to the socialites in attendance, no guards had been posted. Zoe pulled her lock picks out of the lining of the bamboo purse and quickly unlocked the door. Slipping into the room, she removed the kimono duster and knotted it around her waist to keep it out of the way.

From the schematics of the alarm system that Ethan had provided, she knew that cutting the white wire was all that was necessary to deactivate the alarm. But it had to look complicated to Logan. He had to believe that she'd made a mistake. She moved to the display case and ran her hands over it to locate the thin wires, which is what she'd have done if she were really going to steal the *emaki*.

Considering the value of the exhibit, Zoe didn't think the museum had installed adequate security. They were probably counting on exterior security to keep thieves out, which wasn't altogether wrong. Most

thieves would wait and break into the museum after hours. She would have.

She barely heard the door open and close. He was quiet, she'd give him that.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Logan asked.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Zoe whirled and planted her fists on her hips in an imitation of outrage.

"Just watching."

"I don't need an audience. Leave."

"I'd rather stay. Always wanted to see a master thief at work."

She shot a glance toward the door, trying to look nervous. Which wasn't all that hard, considering what she was attempting. Ethan had offered to set the ruse up with the museum, but Zoe had refused. The more people involved, the more likelihood of it looking like a setup. Logan had to believe everything that would happen tonight, and you just couldn't beat reality. She turned back to the display case and knelt down, feeling for the wires at the bottom of the case.

"Then don't get in my way. Open that door a crack and see if anyone's around. If you're going to stay, at least you can be helpful." She snipped the red wire, then stood and lifted the glass.

Alarms jangled and even though she was prepared for them, adrenaline still shot through her body. She dropped the wire cutters and sprinted for the door,

grabbing Logan's hand to pull him out of the room. He looked stunned, which was just as she'd intended.

Zoe pulled him down the hallway and shoved him into the men's room ahead of her. She could hear boots pounding down the hallway as she yanked open the door to one of the stalls. Stepping up onto the toilet seat, she launched herself into the air and threw out her arms and legs. Her toes pressed against the rear of the stall, her palms against the door, wedging her into place.

"Drop your pants and sit down," she ordered Logan.

"What?"

"You heard me. Do it!" She inched her way up to the top of the stall, which rose almost to the ceiling. "And lock the stall. Look like you're taking care of business."

Logan unbuckled his belt, dropped his pants, and started to sit.

"Briefs, too."

He scowled at her.

"The idea is to appear that you're in here for a legitimate reason," she explained. "You want them to think you're taking a dump in your shorts?" She settled her palms against the door frame, careful that they weren't in the way of the door opening.

"Who?" Logan asked just as she heard the door to the men's room swing open.

She shook her head and pursed her lips to let him know to be quiet. Logan dropped his briefs and sat down just before a heavy hand banged on the stall door.

“Hey, anybody in there?” a male voice called.

“Well, yes, actually,” Logan answered.

“Open up.”

“Excuse me. I’ll be done in a moment.”

“Open up now!”

Logan reached out and flipped the locking lever on the stall door, letting it swing open to reveal two guards.

“You see anyone come through here?”

“I’m not exactly in a position to see anyone, but I haven’t *heard* anyone come in. What’s this about?” Logan asked.

“One of the alarms got tripped.” The guard looked around the stall suspiciously. But he didn’t think to look up, which Zoe had counted on.

“Well, no one’s in here with me. Now, if you don’t mind?” Logan’s voice held just the right tone of indignation and she grinned down at him.

Her arms and legs trembled with the effort of keeping her body in place. She remembered her father chastising her for skipping a couple of gymnastic training sessions. Okay, she’d skipped seven. Over the past month. She pressed her hands and feet harder against the laminate and promised herself that she’d

never miss another one.

The guard looked down at Logan's pants and underwear pooled around his ankles. Logan put his hand over his stomach and groaned. She silently cheered the ad lib.

"Yeah," the guard said. "Sorry."

Zoe listened to the guards check the other stalls and then leave. Her arms and legs were visibly trembling from holding her position for so long.

"You can pull your pants up now," she said. "Then get out so I can get down."

Logan zipped up his pants and looked up at her. "I'll catch you."

"No, just get out so I can get down."

Logan reached up, put his hands around her waist, and lifted her down. He let her body slide down his.

"That wasn't necessary," she said. Pleasant, though.

Logan grinned at her. "What happened?"

"The schematics I had for the alarm system were wrong." She unwrapped the kimono from her waist and pulled it back on. "Or they changed something at the last minute."

"So, will you try again later?"

She frowned at him. "I doubt it. They'll step up security now."

"The *emaki* would have brought you a tidy sum."

"Yeah, I could use it, too. Check to see if anyone's

outside.”

Logan opened the door, looked down the hall, and shook his head. “All clear.”

She linked her arm with his, scooted them out of the men’s room, and strolled down the hallway back to the main gallery. Most of the guests had left. She picked up a champagne glass and sipped until they heard the announcement that the gala was over and the building would be locked in fifteen minutes.

“I guess they want everyone to leave, then,” Logan said.

“No doubt.” She set the glass down and they strolled to the front door. As soon as they were outside, she pulled her arm away from his and headed for the line of cabs pulled up to the curb.

“What’s your hurry?” Logan grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “It’s still early. Let’s go have a drink.”

“I don’t—”

“The job’s over. For tonight, anyway. And you’re completely hyped-up.” He pulled her along toward a cab. “Besides, I find you interesting.”

Just what she wanted. She let him hand her into the cab.

“Here we are,” Logan said as the cab stopped in front of the St. Regis. Zoe wondered if it was just a coincidence or if he knew she was staying there.

Logan paid the cab driver and led her through the revolving doors, across the lobby to the bank of elevators. They stepped inside and rode up in silence. Zoe breathed a silent sigh of relief when they got off on the eleventh floor instead of the fifteenth, where her room was located. Logan slid his key card into the lock and pushed the door open. Zoe walked inside, and behind her Logan flipped a couple of switches that turned on lights and started the gas fireplace. The setup made her jittery, looking a little too much like a seduction scene.

“What would you like to drink?” Logan asked.  
“Brandy, wine, champagne?”

“Brandy sounds good.”

“So tell me about tonight.” Logan splashed brandy into an oversized snifter and held it out to her, taking a seat on the sofa facing her.

“What about it? Other than the fact that it was a bust?”

“Yes, that must have been hard to take, considering.”

“Considering what?” She frowned at him for good measure.

“I understand the fence you used for the German Embassy heist was arrested before he could move the jewels.”

“Really?”

Logan smiled. “I just assumed that with that loss,

the job tonight was important.”

“I have a buyer who will be very disappointed about tonight.” She lifted a shoulder in what she hoped was a sign of indifference.

Logan swirled the brandy in his glass and sipped. “I thought you didn’t do work for hire.”

“I made an exception. Why all the interest in my career?” she asked.

“I thought I’d made that obvious.”

“You’re referring to your offer?”

“I figure that with two jobs that didn’t work out, you might be getting a little hungry.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, your bank accounts show that you’re getting a bit low on resources.”

She hadn’t expected him to check out her bank accounts. Damn it! Was nothing sacred anymore?

“It appears you’ve been checking me out pretty thoroughly,” she said. “Tell me why you need a thief so desperately.”

“The Triumvirate doesn’t need *a* thief. They need the *best* thief.”

“The Triumvirate?”

“The Triumvirate is the governing body of the group.”

“And they need a good thief.” She held up a hand. “The *best* thief.”

“You’re the best in the business right now.” Logan sipped his brandy. “Since your father retired, anyway.”

“I was trained by the best,” she acknowledged.

“You were out of the business for a few years.”

“That’s the gossip, anyway.”

“Oh, it’s more than gossip.” Logan splashed more brandy into their glasses although she’d hardly touched hers. “You worked for a security company for several years. After they laid you off, you enrolled in college for a while.”

“You *have* done your homework.” She sipped the brandy. “However, you haven’t answered my question. Why do you need the best thief so desperately?”

Logan shrugged. “What we need to procure is very important. We don’t want to take a chance with a less skilled individual.”

“You’ve got my interest,” she said.

“Great. What’s your price?”

“Not so fast. First of all, I want a face-to-face with the powers that be. Then, when I know exactly what’s involved with the job, I’ll let you know what my price is. My terms are cash. Half up front, half on delivery of the item. And expenses, of course.”

“There will be a series of jobs. And a face-to-face meeting might be a problem for the Triumvirate.” Logan frowned.

Zoe shrugged. "I like to know who I'm doing business with. That's how I work."

"Then I'll see what I can do."

She took another sip of the brandy, set her glass down, and stood. "It's been a pleasure. You know how to contact me."

"I'll see you to your room." Logan stood and gestured to the door of his suite.

"My room?"

"Fifteen twenty-nine, I believe. You've been there for the past two days and plan to check out tomorrow."

She arched an eyebrow at him and hoped he couldn't see that she was freaked out at how much he knew.

Logan grinned. "We like to know who we're dealing with, too."

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