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Sealed with a Kiss

Kristin Hardy

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Sealed With A Kiss

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John “Bax” Baxter is stunningly hot and the best private eye in the business. Joss, Gwen’s feisty sister, knows he’s her last chance to find the missing multimillion-dollar stamp.Bax wants nothing to do with the corrupt case. But could a saucy encounter with Joss change his mind?

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Sealed with a Kiss

Kristin Hardy

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To Ewa and Anna,
tack så mycket for all the help
and to Stephen kärlek

Dear Reader,

The stories I write are often influenced by my surroundings. When I found out I was going to go to Stockholm last autumn, I immediately began working on a way to bring that experience to my characters. I had great fun prowling Stockholm, searching out locations. Who knew they had a postal museum? And what a surprise to find in their collection a pair of post office Mauritius stamps, the very stamps featured in *Her High-Stakes Playboy*.

I hope you'll drop me a line at Kristin@ kristinhardy.com and tell me how you liked reading a Blaze® novel with an international location. Sign up for my newsletter at www. kristinhardy.com for contests, recipes and updates on my recent and upcoming releases.

Have fun,

Kristin Hardy

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Prologue

San Francisco, July 2005

"WHAT DO YOU THINK of this one, Brandon, sweetie?" The woman looked at her towheaded young son, who sat like a spoiled prince in his tall chair. "It's got an airplane."

Maybe seven or eight, he thumped down his Game Boy and poked bad-temperedly at the stamps she showed him.

"Please don't touch them with your fingers," Joss Chastain said sharply. "They're easily damaged."

"Oh, Brandon doesn't mean anything by it, do you, sweetie?"

Brandon scowled. "I wanna play my Game Boy."

"In a minute, sweetie. This is something special you can do with Grandpop."

It gave Joss a twinge. She'd never collected stamps with her grandfather. Instead, while he'd been on vacation recently, she'd let a collection of the most valuable of his many rare stamps be stolen.

Giving her head a brisk shake, she laid a stamp collector's kit on the counter. "This has all the basics he'll need for collecting: an album, tongs, a perforation gauge, a magnifying glass and some nice starter stamps."

"Oh, this is perfect. He's got to join a club at school," she explained to Joss. "We thought stamp collecting would be good for him."

Meanwhile, Brandon's sister sat quietly on a chair nearer Joss. She was maybe three or four, quiet and big-eyed in a way that reminded Joss of her own sister. Joss smiled to herself and used sleight of hand to make the pen she held disappear.

The little girl's eyes widened. Her mother and brother bent over the merchandise, oblivious.

Joss winked at her. Enjoying herself, Joss made the pen reappear, then seemingly put it up her nose. She held her nose and blew, and brought the pen out of her ear and held it up.

The girl giggled.

"Don't bother the nice lady, now, Sarah," the mother said and the girl subsided obediently. Joss guessed she was often the quiet one in the background while darling Brandon got what he wanted.

Finally, the woman made her selection and Joss rang it all up. "That will be forty-three sixty-five," she said, making a mental bet that the purchase went in the back of the closet for good as soon as Brandon got home.

The woman handed her three twenties and Joss made change. "Here you are, that's ten, fifteen, sixteen ten and…hmmm, I seem to have lost the quarter somewhere. Do you see it on the ground?" Joss leaned over the counter and looked on the burgundy carpet. Sarah looked down, shaking her head.

"Nope," Joss said, "it's not here and it's not on the counter." She leaned toward Sarah. "I know, maybe it's here." Joss reached out and pulled a quarter from behind the ear of the little girl, who giggled delightedly. "Yep, that's it," Joss said, dropping it in the palm of the astonished Sarah.

She was still alternately staring at the quarter and looking at Joss over her shoulder as they walked out the door.

When the phone rang a moment later, Joss picked it up, still smiling. "Chastain Philatelic Investments."

"It's me," said a leaden voice.

The pleasure over entertaining children vanished in a sharp wave of concern as she recognized her sister's voice. "Gwen. My God, what's happened? You sound like hell." Gwen, who had spent the last three weeks in Las Vegas, as she tracked down the thief who'd stolen the rare stamps valued at four and a half million, and which represented their grandfather's retirement.

"It's done." Gwen let out an audible breath.

"You've found them? What happened? Did Jerry have them hidden in his room where you thought?" Jerry was the slick little hustler they'd hired to help Joss at the store while Gwen had traveled to some stamp auctions. It still made Joss burn in impotent anger to remember the way he'd conned her and broken into the safe to steal the stamps while her back had been turned.

"Brace yourself. Jerry wasn't working on his own. He was hired by Stewart."

"Stewart Oakes?" Joss repeated in shock. "How can that be? He worked for Grampa. He was Grampa's friend."

"He's not anyone's friend," Gwen said flatly. "Joss, he shot Jerry. I saw him do it. He was going to shoot me, too."

Joss groped for the chair behind her and sat. She swallowed. "Let me get this straight. Stewart pulled a gun on you?" On her little sister? She was going to hurt him, Joss vowed grimly. She was going to find him and wring his neck. He'd been like a big brother. No wonder Gwen sounded so shattered. "What was he thinking?" Joss demanded.

"I don't think he *was* thinking at that point. They said he owed money to some leg breakers and thought he'd pay them off with the commission fee he got from a collector who wanted some of Grampa's stamps. Only Grampa said no sale, and Stewart had already spent the money."

"He couldn't explain and pay the guy back over time?"

"I don't know. He won't say who the collector is but he sounds scared spitless."

Joss shook her head. "God, Gwennie, I just can't believe… I'm so sorry you had to go through this." She dragged a hand through her hair. "And I'm just sitting here being a lump. You could have been killed."

"I wasn't, though."

"As long as you're safe, that's what's important. And you got the stamps back."

"I didn't get them all. Stewart already sent one of the stamps to the collector."

"Not the Blue Mauritius?" Joss whispered, her hand tightening on the phone. The Blue Mauritius, their grandfather's prize. It was one of the most valuable stamps in the world, worth some one million dollars at auction.

"I got the Blue Mauritius back okay."

Joss closed her eyes in trepidation. "I hear a really big 'but' coming."

"The stamp that's missing is its companion, the one-penny Mauritius." Gwen hesitated. "If anything, it's worth even more."

1

San Francisco, two weeks later

"HEY, GWEN, I'm going to have wild sex on a jetliner today." Joss announced. She was sprawled on one of the chairs in the back office of the store, coffee in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

Gwen, blond and poised behind her desk, merely raised an eyebrow as she sat on hold. "And here I didn't even know you were going on a trip."

"It says so, right here," Joss said, pointing to her horoscope. "'Love and romance are in the air. Travel likely. Big dreams will come true if you leap for the stars.' And yours says, let's see, oh, yeah, 'Hunky, adoring sportswriter will sweep you out for dinner and wild sex in his marina condo afterward.'"

"You don't say." Gwen's tone was dry. "Horoscopes have gotten a lot more interesting, lately."

"So has your life," Joss observed, pointing to the photo of Gwen's new boyfriend smiling out at them from the sports page of the newspaper.

Gwen grinned, then snapped to attention as someone apparently came on the line. She cleared her throat. "Yes, this is Gwen Chastain of Chastain Philatelic Investments. I'm calling to check on the progress of the investigation of my grandfather's stamps."

Joss listened for a few minutes, then abandoned the effort. Better to wait until all was said and done and Gwen could fill her in. In the meantime, she took a sip of coffee and stared at the print on the paper.

Big dreams will come true if you leap for the stars.

Or maybe not. After seven years of leaping for the stars in pursuit of a career in music, she'd finally fallen to earth with a resounding thud. Four bands, four breakups, a résumé dotted with gigs at bars and small clubs around the Pacific Northwest. Along with doing street theatre magic shows, it had paid the bills, but not much more than that. At twenty-six, she wasn't a single step closer than she'd been as a nineteen-year-old with big dreams. She had nothing, no career, no money, not even a car. Maybe it was time to admit that she wasn't going to find the lucky confluence of circumstances that was going to let her perform for a living.

At twenty-six, maybe it was time to look for something else.

All things considered, she was probably fortunate that the most recent band implosion had taken place in San Francisco, home of her sister and her grandparents. After all, it had been a place to stay and a place to work while her grandparents went on their three-month tour of the South Pacific. For a few weeks, she'd pitched in without complaint, trying for once to fight off the inevitable restlessness and get on her feet.

And then everything had gone to hell in a handbasket.

"Dammit!"

Joss jumped at the sound of Gwen slamming down the receiver in the cradle. "You've gotten louder since you came back from Vegas, that's for sure. What's up?"

"Interpol," Gwen said, investing the word with an immense amount of disgust. "They're dropping the investigation of the one-penny Mauritius." Her voice vibrated with frustration. "A million dollar stamp, one of the rarest in the world, and they're just giving up."

"How can they drop the case? I thought you knew who had the stamp."

"I have a theory, even a name, but apparently that's not enough."

"They're investigators, aren't they?" Joss set down her coffee. "Can't they figure it out?"

Gwen pushed back from the desk in annoyance. "They can't find any leads. They say there's nothing to follow up on."

"I suppose Jerry could have just cooked up the story to make Stewart look bad," Joss speculated.

Gwen shook her head. "It doesn't make sense to me, not the way they were talking that night in the hotel room. I mean, Jerry says he stole the stamps for Stewart because the collector wanted them. It makes sense that Stewart might have slipped and said too much to him. They were buddies."

"Is that why they're testifying against one another?" Joss asked wryly.

"I think Jerry took it kind of personally that Stewart shot him."

"Sensitive. So Interpol doesn't believe that Jerry's Swedish collector is the same guy who tried to buy the two Mauritius stamps from Grampa?"

Gwen shrugged. "I don't know if they don't necessarily believe it, but they can't find anything to substantiate it." She rose and stalked over to rip a photograph of the smiling Stewart off a bulletin board and toss it in the trash can. "The stamps Stewart had stolen from Grampa's collection were for Karl Silverhielm, I'd bet money on it," she said, crossing back to her seat. "He's got a reputation for being obsessive and he's been after the Post Office Mauritius pair for the past five years."

It mystified Joss that anyone could be that hung up on little squares of colored paper. "What's the big deal about the Mauritius, anyway?"

"There are two of them—the one-penny and the twopenny. You know the two-penny stamp, it's the indigo one."

"The Blue Mauritius."

Gwen nodded. "The one-penny is a kind of red-orange."

"The Orange Mauritius?" Joss guessed.

"No one calls it that. They just say the one-penny Mauritius."

"Does anything about stamp collecting make sense? I mean, how can a measly stamp be worth over a million dollars? Why does anyone care?"

Gwen smiled. "They're over a hundred and sixty years old, for one thing, and they've got a story. It was all a big mistake, see? That's where the most valuable stamps usually come from."

"Like the upside down airplanes?"

"Sort of, only whole sheets of the Inverted Jennies are out there. Only a handful of Post Office Mauritius stamps exist."

"So what's the big deal? What was the error?"

"They were made by an island printer when the local post office ran out of stamps. The postmaster told him to print 'Post Paid' on them but he screwed up and put 'Post Office' on them, instead."

"The wrong words? That's what a million dollars of fuss is all about?" Joss shook her head in amazement. "You collector types."

"Silverhielm wants a Post Office Mauritius pair, badly."

"So why didn't Grampa sell? He's ready to retire, why not take the money?"

"I don't think he liked Silverhielm," Gwen said slowly. "There's something a little off about him and I think Grampa sensed it. Besides, his offer was only a million for each."

"I thought that was what they were worth."

"Separately. Together, they've gone at auction for as much as three million."

It paralyzed Joss to think about that kind of money. It paralyzed her that she'd been the one responsible for losing at least part of it. "Did Grampa have any idea they'd be worth that much?"

"He got them from his grandfather and they probably weren't cheap when he got them. Like investing in gold bars. Expensive, but worth it."

"Except that it's not so easy to stick gold bars in your pocket and walk away with them the way Jerry did with the stamps." Joss stared moodily into her coffee cup. "It kills me to think about telling Grampa about this."

"It's not as bad as it was," Gwen said softly. "We got most of them back."

"You got most of them back, and you almost got shot doing it." Joss picked a quarter up off the desk and began rolling it in her fingers. "So why is Interpol dropping the case? Didn't they look into Silverhielm?"

Gwen nodded. "They say they've done some investigation but their hands are tied at this point. They can't just walk in and search his house or his safe-deposit boxes."

"I suppose not, but have they interviewed Stewart?"

"He doesn't know anything."

"Or won't say." He was a thug and a liar. As far as Joss was concerned, there was no reason he might not be a coward. Still… "Why don't you try talking to him?" she asked suddenly. "He might tell you."

"I'm not sure I could do it," Gwen said, resting her chin against her hands. "It's too hard, knowing what he did and seeing him again. He was practically family."

Fresh anger coursed through Joss. Stewart had worked at the store when Gwen had been a gawky fourteen-year-old, looking up to him. She'd trusted him. They'd all trusted him and gotten only betrayal for their troubles.

Gwen shook her head. "Anyway, even if he confirmed that it was Silverhielm, what am I going to do, fly to Stockholm and camp out on the guy's front porch?"

"Stockholm?" Joss blinked and sat up. "Wait a minute, isn't the International Stamp Expo in Stockholm next week?"

"Yes, but I've got too much going on here. I can't go."

"No, but I could," Joss said, her eyes flashing. "Remember? *Travel is likely*."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Why is that ridiculous? You did it." A chance, she thought, a chance to make things right.

"I went to Las Vegas. This is Stockholm. You don't even speak the language," Gwen said in exasperation.

"I'll find someone who does. Hell, I'll hire a translator. Look, Gwen, all of this was my fault."

"It was both of our faults."

Joss shook her head. "If I hadn't left Jerry in the store with access to the safe, he'd never have had the chance to steal everything."

"He would have gotten to them sooner or later," Gwen countered. "I should never have hired him."

"Which you did because of me. I'm going." In an instant, it had gone from a passing thought to something Joss wanted passionately. Needed passionately.

"There are other ways."

"How?" Joss jumped to her feet and began pacing. "You've done all the work here. I've just sat around doing nothing." And it had rankled her, every minute. "I want my chance to make it right. You already had yours."

"And I almost got a bullet in my brain, remember?" Gwen said hotly. "It's too risky. Silverhielm isn't just some rich guy. He had Stewart hurt, Joss. He scared him to death. It's not a job for us. It's a job for the police."

"The police aren't doing anything," Joss flared. "Do you want to just write off a million dollars of Grampa's retirement? I don't. I can't, Gwen. I couldn't live with it."

"You may not live if you try to get it back."

"So I'll get some help."

"Like who?"

"I don't know," she snapped. "I'll call my friend Tom, the promoter at Avalon."

"A music promoter's going to be able to go with you to Stockholm and get stolen property back from a criminal?"

"Why not? A sportswriter helped you. Look, Tom knows this town inside and out. He might be able to point me to someone who could help." Joss sank back down in her chair and looked at Gwen pleadingly. "I want to do this, Gwen. I need to."

Gwen sighed. "Well, we've still got most of my poker winnings as a war chest. We've got the money to do it, but only if you find someone who can really help you," she warned. "Not the music promoter. Someone who'll know what to do when you hit Stockholm."

"Okay." Joss reached out for her coffee and took a sip. "Can he be cute?"

"Wait a minute. You didn't cook all this up just so you could have sex on an airplane, did you?" Gwen asked skeptically.

Joss laughed. "Who, me?"

2

JOHN BAXTER leaned back in his chair and stared at the check in his hands. Smack in the upper end of the five figure range. Not bad for three months' work, he thought in satisfaction. For the first time since he'd started his executive security business two years before, he'd banished the wolf from his door. Not just banished it, kicked its ass from here till Sunday.

It was about time for a vacation.

The corner of his mouth curved a bit at the thought. It was an uncompromising mouth, some might have said hard, as they might have called the planes of his face hard with the high cheekbones, straight nose and taut jaw. Lines of care had been etched into his forehead and bracketed his mouth, but those who looked closely enough would see lines of humor as well.

Always, it was a face that was impossible to read. He'd cultivated the look in the seven years he'd spent working for the FBI and then Interpol. Even now, two years later, his eyes could still flatten into cop eyes that gave away nothing.

He hadn't left because he couldn't handle the work, he'd left because he'd been sick to death of politics and the endless levels of supervision and interference. Then again, he'd always done his best work alone.

He tore the check along the perforation and endorsed it, laying it on top of the deposit slip he'd filled out so he could hit the bank on the way home. His office was spare, the mahogany desk clear of nearly everything but a blotter, the check and the phone that now burbled at him.

He picked up the receiver. "Baxter."

"Bax, Simon Fleming."

"Hey, Si." Simon Fleming, his contact at Mayfield, Cross and Associates. The young attorney was quick, a little cocky and hellaciously good at one-on-one basketball, as Bax regularly found out the hard way. Bax was under retainer to do occasional investigations for the law firm and they, in turn, sometimes steered clients his way. Like the client who'd written the hefty check Bax was currently admiring. "I didn't think you lawyers worked this late."

"Are you kidding? I'm trying to make partner. This is lunchtime."

Bax grinned and leaned back in his chair. "So what's up?"

"I'm sending someone over to see you. She's a friend of one of our clients, needs some work done."

"She?"

"Damsel in distress. Isn't that what you P.I. types live for?"

"I'm not a P.I., I'm an executive security specialist."

"So that's why your rates are so high."

"My rates are high because I'm good." Bax scrubbed at his wavy brown hair, kept cropped short for convenience. "So what's her problem?"

"Like I would know? I'm just trying to help out a client. It's your job to make me look good."

Bax grinned. "Is that covered by the retainer?"

"Making me look good? You know it, buddy."

"Then I want a bigger retainer." A light flashed on the phone. Bax frowned. "Wait a minute, she's not coming over here now, is she?"

"Dunno. Depends on how desperate she is. I talked with her a little while ago."

"Hell, Si, it's the end of the day. I'm surprised the receptionist is even still out there to page me."

"Maybe you'd better go check it out."

"Whatever she wants, it's going to have to wait," he warned Simon. "I just finished the last job you threw my way. I'm taking a couple of weeks off." His first vacation in over three years, a trip to Copenhagen to see his cousins, maybe, or a jaunt to Prague.

"It's no big deal. A slick guy like you can probably figure it out while you're still booking your flight." He cleared his throat. "You make my client happy, you'll make me happy."

Bax snorted. "Next time we go back to contract, I'm upping my rate."

"Whatever you say, buddy, whatever you say."

Bax hung up the phone and stepped out into the hallway that led to the reception area of the communal office suites. So maybe having space here cost a couple hundred more in rent than a one-room office somewhere, but it gave him access to a receptionist, mail room and a slick conference room. More important, it gave his business an established air that reassured the kinds of clients he sought. Just because he worked without a staff didn't mean he had to look like a one-man show.

As long as he *was* a one-man show.

"MR. BAXTER will be with you in just a moment," the blond receptionist told Joss, punching the button on her console with one red-lacquered nail before she pulled off the telephone headset and prepared to go home.

Joss turned to the deep, pewter-colored couches that lined the walls. A receptionist? Who'd ever heard of a private eye with a receptionist? Then again, who'd ever heard of a private eye having a lobby with ice-blue carpet so thick you could snag a heel in it? And five-foot-tall ficus plants? Weren't P.I.s supposed to work out of tiny offices with venetian blinds and half-glassed doors, in tired old buildings on the wrong side of town?

Tom's lawyer was going to have a lot of explaining to do. She should have known better than to trust his referral. Simon Fleming had told her his investigator might be able to help her out. He'd neglected to tell her the guy was going to be some corporate clown.

An expensive corporate clown.

Scowling, Joss stalked over to the wall of windows that overlooked Montgomery Street, now pooled with shadow in the late afternoon. She didn't like the idea of telling her problems to some pretentious twit who'd look down on her. She knew the type—if you didn't have a brokerage account and an MBA, they wouldn't take you seriously. She could just imagine the kind of private eye who'd have an office here. He'd probably be short, for starters, pasty and soft. And balding, with a comb-over that didn't hide anything.

"Are you here for Executive Security Consulting?"

Joss jumped and whirled.

He didn't look soft at all, was her first thought. He'd come up behind her so quietly on the plush carpet that she hadn't heard a thing. Then again, he looked like he always moved silently. There was something about him that reminded her of a panther, dark, sleek and dangerous.

Then he smiled and the impression evaporated. He looked, if not entirely friendly, at least approachable.

"I'm John Baxter."

Tall, she thought, tall enough that she had to raise her chin to meet his eyes as he came closer. Not lanky, though. Self-possessed and lean, solid without being bulky. He looked like the kind of guy who could snatch flies out of midair or explode into violence if the need arose. Confident, capable and eat-him-with-a-spoon sexy.

She squared her shoulders and held out her hand. "Joss Chastain."

BAX WASN'T sure what he'd expected, but it wasn't her. She looked like nothing so much as a gypsy in her long flowered skirt and cropped T-shirt, her dark hair sweeping loose and wild down her back. It had red highlights, he noticed, then frowned at himself.

"Simon Fleming sent me over." Her hand was softer than he'd expected, and stronger. When she tugged it away from him, he realized he'd been holding it for far too long.

"I know. He called me. Come on back to my office."

He led the way down the winding hallway with its crown molding and subdued lighting.

"Pretty fancy digs for a private eye," she commented.

"I'm not a private eye. I'm a security consultant."

"Which means?"

"I check out security setups and do some investigative work—legal, industrial espionage, that sort of thing. My kind of clients expect to see this kind of office."

"Are you saying that I'm not your kind of client?"

Prickly, he thought. Nerves, maybe. Sometimes people got that way before they had to spill their story. Or maybe she was just feisty. She had that look. "I usually deal with corporate personnel. They're more comfortable with this sort of look."

"But you're not a cop?"

He opened his office door. "No. Strictly private sector."

"Exactly. Private eye." She walked past him, leaving a whisper of scent in her wake that had every one of his hormones sitting up and panting.

Now he was the one feeling prickly. Bax crossed to his desk. Taking his time, he studied her. She had the kind of bone structure that you saw in old Italian paintings, the mysterious arch above the eyes, the haunting hollows in the cheeks. Something in the set of her shoulders told him that she was very used to having her way. Her mouth was wide, the upper lip just a bit more full than the lower. When he'd first seen her, it had given her the look of a mistreated child, but now it made him think of stolen kisses in the darkness. He wondered suddenly what she looked like when she laughed.

"Let me know when you're finished," she told him, shifting to get more comfortable in his client chair, draping an elbow over the back. The trouble was, she didn't look like any client he'd ever had before and she was playing hell with his concentration.

Bax leaned his elbows on the desk and tried to ignore the taut belly exposed by her T-shirt. "So why are you so dead set on getting a private detective?"

"I need someone who's good at finding things. Are you?"

"When I decide to be. What do you need to find?"

She studied him in her turn. Finally, she nodded to herself, apparently deciding he passed muster. "A stamp."

"I've got a whole roll of them here in my drawer."

"Cute. This particular stamp is worth a bundle. It was stolen from my grandfather and I want to get it back."

"Why isn't he the one here?"

"He's on an extended vacation with my grandmother. My sister and I have been taking care of his business and the theft happened on our watch." She pushed the tumble of dark hair back over her shoulder. "I want to get the stamp back before he comes home."

Just for a second, that anxious kid expression came back. The urge to wipe it away flickered through him. "Do you know who stole it or where it is?"

"I have an idea. A colleague of my grandfather's, Stewart Oakes, was approached by a Swedish collector who wanted my grandfather's prize pair, the Blue Mauritius and the one-penny red-orange Mauritius."

"I've heard of the Blue Mauritius," Bax said slowly.

One of the most valuable stamps in the world, as he recalled. "It's extremely rare, isn't it?"

"And worth a bundle. About three million for the two of them together."

Bax whistled. "I can see why you want them back."

"It. We got back the Blue Mauritius. It's only the one-penny Mauritius that's still missing."

"What happened?"

"The Swede made an offer, my grandfather said no. So Stewart hired a thief to get a job in the store and steal the stamps."

"Some colleague."

"Ex-colleague." Anger tightened her voice. "My sister was able to get most of the stamps back, and Stewart and Jerry—the thief," Joss elaborated, "are in jail."

"Sounds like something for the cops." The twinge of regret he felt surprised him. "It should be pretty easy to track since you know who the collector is."

"Well, that's just it. Stewart claims he doesn't know, just that maybe the guy is Swedish. He only met a go-between. As far as the police are concerned, the trail has dried up." Again, that look of desperation flickered across her face.

Bax shook himself irritably. No matter how vulnerable—and touchable—she looked, she was not for him. "You still have to leave it to someone like Interpol."

"They've given up on it. My sister is pretty sure she knows the identity of the collector, but Interpol said they'd investigated him and can't find any evidence to substantiate a theft or to allow them to search. They're on to more important things, I guess," she finished bitterly.

"Or maybe you don't have the right collector," Bax commented. Joss fixed him with a look that would freeze water. Definitely feisty. Amused, he leaned back in his chair. "All right, so, what do you want me to do?"

"Investigate, if you think you're up to it." She gave him an appraising look. "Simon said you'd worked in Europe and spoke a bunch of languages. I want to go over to Stockholm and check out the collector, see what we can find out. There's a stamp expo over there next week and we can—"

"Whoa." He held both hands up. "Hold on there just a minute. One, I haven't agreed to take on your case yet.

Two, if you hire me, you have to let me do the job. There is no 'we.' I work alone."

"Well, maybe you're going to have to change the way you work. I can be a good partner." The corner of her mouth curved and for a fraction of a second he found himself putting a whole different translation on that phrase. "Besides, Simon said you'd help me."

"Simon's wrong." And he was way out of line sitting here getting hot for a possible client.

"He says you have a contract with him."

Simon had been saying entirely too much, Bax thought with annoyance, shaking himself loose. "But it doesn't guarantee referrals. All it says is that I'll talk to you." He pushed his chair back a little, preparatory to getting up. "It's an interesting case but I just finished a big job and I've got some time off coming. And even if I did decide to take you on as a favor to Simon, I don't let clients work as assistants. It's not a game." The hurt kid look was back on her face, he noticed with discomfort.

His comments didn't dent her determination, though. "You want time off, come to Stockholm. Once we get the stamp back, you can jet off to anywhere you like. Who knows, we might have fun."

Then she smiled and the punch of sexuality blasted through him. Her smile was generous, radiant and filled with naughty promises. He found himself almost ready to say yes without thinking, just for the chance to see what came next. Still… "This isn't audience participation. If there's a crime, there's danger. I can't babysit and investigate at the same time. I can't have you involved."

"You have to," she blurted, then took a breath. "Look, you need me for your cover."

"What cover?"

"I've got it all figured out. We go over there together, as lovers. I'm Jerry's girlfriend—or ex-girlfriend, actually, only I've still got the Blue Mauritius that he's stolen and I'm trying to fence it." She rose and began to pace around the office intently, creating a picture with her hands as she walked. "I dangle it in front of the collector and tell him that for a small fee, he can have his property." Like her face when she smiled, her body in motion was a fascination that made it impossible for him to look away.

"*His* property?"

"You know that's how those people think."

He nodded as he folded his arms across his chest. "Oh, of course. And what happens after that?"

Her hands dropped. "I haven't figured that part out yet. But I'm working on it," she added hastily as he shook his head.

"No way."

"It'll work," Joss insisted. She leaned a hip on the corner of his desk, entirely too close for his comfort. "It'll at least let us confirm that he has the one-penny Mauritius and get a dialog going. You know how these criminal types work, Simon said you used to do undercover work. We can play like we're a couple, get a room together, all that." She gave him that smile of temptation again, like Eve holding out the apple. "Jerry's a hustler, through and through. I figure the type of girlfriend he'd pick would glom onto whatever guy could help her. Jerry's in the slammer? She'll find someone else useful."

He didn't want to want her. It had no place here. He groped for reason as her scent spread around him in an invisible net. "So why do I feel like *I'm* getting glommed onto as someone useful?"

"Of course you are. I'm trying to hire you, although you're making it difficult. What's it going to take with you?" Impatience filled her words. "I have to get that stamp back and I need your help to do it. Why not go over there and play pretend?" She leaned forward until she was just inches from his face. "Or do I have to make it for real? Would you do it then?"

It would take so little to close the distance between them. "Maybe." He regretted the response the minute it was out of his mouth. What the hell was he thinking?

He wasn't thinking, that was the problem.

A smile slid slowly across Joss's face. "Really?" she said, stretching the word out like it was hot taffy. "If I said I'd be your lover, no strings, the entire time we were in Stockholm, you'd do it?"

The situation was rapidly slipping out of his control. "Look," he backpedaled, "It's not that simple."

Something predatory entered her eyes. "Sure it is."

Before he could react, she'd risen to step in front of him, pushing his shoulders back against the chair.

"What are you doing?"

"A feasibility study," she told him and placed one knee on either side of his thighs, straddling him. Her eyes were deep and dark enough to dive into. Her scent wound around his thoughts. He watched without moving as she leaned in.

And when her mouth touched his, all he could feel was a hot, slicing arousal.

He had no business doing this, Bax told himself even as he closed his eyes. She was a client, or a potential client, they were in his office, at his desk and oh hell, he thought and gave himself up to it.

He'd kissed women before, even thought he'd loved one once, but he'd never felt anything like this. She was all he could touch. She was all he could feel even though she tempted him only with her lips on his, with the warmth of her thighs bracketing his own.

Her mouth was warm and mobile, her lips parted and ready to go deeper. With one impetuous move, she dragged him into want, into need. He wasn't used to needing anyone, but even as he struggled against it, she beckoned to him with her mouth, her hands and her body.

And he followed willingly.

SHE'D NEVER been able to resist a dare, Joss thought hazily as she let the taste of him flow over her. She'd planned to kiss him until his head spun, until the little head began to overrule the big head and he gave in and agreed. Maybe she'd been a little curious, too. After all, if she could give them what they both wanted physically and get him to Stockholm at the same time, what was the harm in that? She'd expected kissing him to be good and sexy.

She'd never in a million years expected the taste of him to rock her back. She'd never expected the feel of his hard shoulders under her fingers to set up a drumming demand in her head for the rest of him, naked. She'd never expected desire to take control. All too quickly, the kiss stopped being about persuasion. It existed for itself, for the tempting brush of his tongue, the soft slide of his mouth, the touch of his hands sliding up her back.

More. She wanted more. She wanted to toss aside caution and dive into this heady sensation, dive into him. And somewhere in there, she might lose control. Trembling, she pulled back.

"Well." She resisted the urge to press her fingers to her lips.

Bax stared at her as she walked back to the client chair. "What kind of a game are you playing?" he asked hoarsely.

"Just making sure we had chemistry." She sat because her knees wouldn't hold her. "So, do we have a deal?"

BAD IDEA, he told himself as his system refused to level. She was trying to play him and he was walking right into it. And yet, looked at a certain way, it made sense. Why not? Why not take

the case? Solve her problem, make a little money and get a free trip to Stockholm and a warm and willing woman in his bed in the bargain. “Maybe,” he found himself saying. “I’ll think about it.”

She ran her tongue over her lower lip. “You’ll think about it?”

What could it hurt, he thought. “All right.”

“Great. And you’ll let me be part of the investigation?”

Not on his life. “Only if you can demonstrate to me that you know what you’re doing,” he hedged.

Joss rose and leaned over the desk to brush her lips against his. “Oh, I know what I’m doing, all right, Bax. Just wait and see.”

3

“YOU’RE KIDDING.” Gwen stared at Joss across the table at Rose Pistola that night, while the waiters bustled back and forth behind them. “You’ve promised to go to Stockholm and sleep with some guy you don’t know from Adam?”

Gwen didn’t sound nearly as horrified as she once would have, Joss reflected. Vegas had certainly changed her. “It’s no worse than a one-night stand, which you’ve had recently yourself. Besides, I sort of know him from Adam. He comes with references anyway.”

“How about blood tests? This is pretty out there even for you, Joss.”

Joss forked up a bite of salad. “Why? The guy is sexy as hell. Why shouldn’t I have a fling with him? You and Del just did out in Vegas.”

“That was different.”

“How? You might be serious about each other now, but it wasn’t that way at the beginning. Look, we’ll get the job done and have a good time while we’re at it. Besides, you know the saying—if you’ve got ’em by the ’nads, their hearts and minds will follow.”

“Ah. So, you’re going to sexually enslave him and have your way with him, is that the plan?”

Joss considered. “It has its advantages.” She leaned forward and the humor vanished. “The guy’s good, Gwen, and we need someone good for this job.”

Gwen looked at her, lips twitching. “Just don’t bonk his brains out so much that he can’t do any detecting.”

“I sincerely doubt that’ll happen, although you never know.” Joss thought of the hard swell of his shoulders under her fingers. “If he was that good with his tongue when he was kissing, who knows what else he’ll be good at.”

Now Gwen did grin. “You’re so bad.”

“Oh, come on. Tell me the thought hasn’t gone through your head when you’ve first kissed a guy.”

“So, what’s he like?” Gwen asked, ignoring her.

Joss considered. “Confident,” she said finally. “Maybe a little bit of a control freak. Hot, though, really hot. He’s serious but he’s got this wonderful, strong face and you just know if he’d let loose, he’d be…” She thought of the way he’d looked after they kissed. “I got to him at the end, I could see it in his eyes.”

“Watch out that you’re not the one who becomes enslaved.” Gwen pulled some bread out of the basket on the table.

“He’s a guy. They’re pretty easy to manage,” Joss said carelessly, giving the busboy such a brilliant smile he accidentally overfilled her glass, slopping water on the tablecloth. “I’m not worried about it.”

“So you fly to Stockholm together and then what? I mean, you can’t just wander around asking everyone you meet questions.”

“You said you knew this Silverhielm guy has the stamps.”

“I said I *thought* he had the stamps. Not the same thing as knowing.”

"Well, I hope you're pretty certain, because I've got a plan for getting in good with Silverhielm. It means taking a risk, though."

"How do you mean?"

Joss hesitated. "I need to take the Blue Mauritius."

"You're out of your mind." Gwen's reply was immediate. "That stamp is in the bank vault where it belongs, and that is where it's going to stay."

"We've got to have it to smoke out Silverhielm," Joss argued and outlined the plan, leaving out the fact that Bax had had doubts.

"It's too risky," Gwen almost wailed. "Do you know what it would do to the value of that stamp if it got so much as creased? Let alone wet or torn. It wouldn't even be worth the price of a replica. We can't take that chance."

"We have to," Joss told her. "It's the only angle I can think of. Don't you want the one-penny Mauritius back?" she coaxed.

Gwen pressed her face into her hands. "I can't believe I'm even considering this. You swear you'll be incredibly careful with it?" she demanded, raising her head.

"I swear."

"And you'll put it in a bank vault over there until you need it?"

"Don't worry about it, Gwen."

"Oh, like that makes me feel better. You need to take this seriously, Joss."

"I *do* take it seriously. Haven't I been different since I came back this time? Haven't I?" she demanded.

Gwen nodded grudgingly. "You've done a good job at the store. Frankly, I expected you to be gone a long time ago."

"I've changed, Gwen, I really have. Letting Jerry steal the stamps was a screwup by the old me. I need to make it better. Anyway, we've got Bax on the case, remember? He knows what he's doing."

"And what is he doing so far to earn his exorbitant fee?"

Joss shrugged. "He doesn't go on the clock until we leave, and that's got to wait for me to get my passport. Right now, he's looking into Silverhielm's background. I figure I'll see what I can find out, too."

"How are you going to do that?"

"Get a briefing from you, for starters. I need everything you know about the stamps Silverhielm has, who he deals with, where he lives, anything. If you've got it electronically and can send it to Bax, so much the better."

"That's not going to help you find him, though," Gwen pointed out.

"I know." Joss paused. "I need to go see Stewart."

Gwen sat absolutely still for a long moment. "Why do you need to go see Stewart?" she asked finally. "I told you before, he says he doesn't know anything."

"I don't believe that. Maybe nothing obvious, but I bet he knows some little nugget that will help us."

"He's in Las Vegas. It'll mean driving or flying."

"I know."

"It's not free, Joss," Gwen said with an edge to her voice.

"I *know*. You said we could use your winnings from the poker tournament to pay for Stockholm and Bax. I found a ticket that's twenty-nine bucks each way. I'll fly down in the morning and back in the afternoon. You won't even have to pay for a hotel."

Gwen drummed her fingers restlessly on the table.

"What makes you think he'll talk to you?" she demanded. "He'll barely remember you."

"That might make it easier. He's probably so stir-crazy in the slammer that he'll see anyone just for something different. Besides, he's already pleaded guilty. At this point, he's just negotiating

with the Vegas and San Francisco D.A.s, so it's not like anything he tells me will make a difference. What's he got to lose?"

Gwen mulled it over as the waiter set her grilled trout in front of her. "I feel like I should be the one doing it, but I just can't." She swallowed. "Do you understand?"

Gwen had always been so self-sufficient that she sometimes seemed more the grown-up than Joss. Seeing her vulnerability now, Joss felt fury at Stewart Oakes anew. "Of course. Don't worry about it. I've got it handled." She stared at her sister. "I'm going to bring back the one-penny Mauritius, Gwen, I swear it."

"Well, you'd better be quick about it. Grandma and Grampa are due back in a month."

Joss grinned. "Hey, with me and Superhunk on the case, it's a done deal."

JOSS SAT in the visitation room at the Clark County jail, waiting for Stewart. Even though she was on the outside, there was a heaviness in the air that made her shiver a little as she sat in front of the Plexiglas window at her assigned booth. She was here voluntarily. She could leave at any time. What must it be like to be inside, to be without a choice?

Except that an inmate like Stewart Oakes had made his choice long since.

Around her, the faces of the other visitors largely mirrored her unease. The expressions were sober, mostly, and distracted. It wasn't a happy room. People came here because there was trouble. Only the children seemed blithely unaware of the tension in the air.

For a while, nothing happened. Then she heard the faint sound of a door opening and the prisoners began to file into the visiting area on the other side of the Plexiglas, under the watchful eyes of the guards.

She wasn't sure what to expect. She'd had no recent connection with Stewart as Gwen had had. Then again, knowing him hadn't protected Gwen from nearly being shot, so Joss wasn't sure it really mattered. He'd either show or he wouldn't, he'd talk or he wouldn't. Either way, she'd at least know she'd tried.

The man who sat down, wearing tired-looking orange coveralls, looked nothing like she remembered. Joss had seen a photo of Stewart pinned to the office bulletin board. In it, he'd been laughing, his arms around Gwen and their grandfather. Despite the streaks of gray at his temples, he'd looked young, lighthearted.

He didn't look lighthearted now. Jail had not been kind to him. Age sat heavy on his shoulders. Dark smudges underlay his eyes and his skin looked grainy, his expression defeated. Some of her anger morphed to pity. She picked up the phone on her side of the transparent barrier.

Stewart blinked at her and scowled, picking up his phone in turn. "What do you want?"

"I'm Gwen's sister Joss. I was hoping we could talk."

He studied her. "Is Gwen here?"

Joss shook her head. The disappointment that flickered over his face erased her pity and aroused her anger all over again. "Are you surprised? Stewart, you held a gun on her."

He closed his eyes for a moment and then shook his head. "I wrote her a letter. Did she get it?"

"I don't know." She wasn't going to give him an inch, not here. After the damage he'd wrought, a letter of apology was laughable. "You put her through the wringer. She's still getting over it." Joss watched him rub his temples. "It looks like you're doing the same."

He gave a humorless grimace that might have been a smile. "That's all right. I've got lots of time to work on it. But then, you're probably not here to talk about me." He frowned. "Exactly why are you here?"

Joss studied him. "Trying to undo some of the damage. I'm hoping you might be able to help."

Before she even finished the words, he was shaking his head. "No. No way. Not without a lawyer."

"Stewart, you're already pleading guilty. It's all over but the shouting."

"Yeah, well, that shouting you're talking about could mean the difference between doing a year or rotting in here for five to ten. Besides, like I already told the detectives and inspectors, I don't know anything."

"Maybe you know more than you think, something that could help us."

"You got no business coming here." His voice rose and he started to get up.

"I've got no business coming here?" Joss snapped like the crack of a whip. "You threatened to kill my sister, you stole millions from my grandfather, you betrayed us all and *I've* got no business coming here?" She clenched the phone receiver, fury making her dizzy. "I don't give a damn what kind of a sentence they hand down to you. That's not why I'm asking. I'm trying to undo the damage that you've done. I'm trying to get back the one-penny Mauritius and you're the only one who can help me."

"How do I know you're not taping this?" he demanded.

"How could I be?" She gestured at the phone. "Anyway, what would be the point? It wouldn't affect your case, except to help you. You think they're not going to look a little more kindly on you if my grandfather has back all his property? Come on, use your brain."

"My lawyer would kill me."

"Your lawyer's not here now and neither is the D.A. It's just you and me, Stewart," she said persuasively. "You can't erase what you did to Gwen but you can help make things better. Don't you want to? Don't you want to try to fix it?"

She waited in silence, hoping that she'd read him right.

Finally, Stewart sat back down and rubbed his eyes wearily. "You don't understand. I couldn't help if I wanted to. I dealt with an intermediary the whole time. I never even found out the client's name."

"Don't sit there and tell me you didn't at least have an idea. Gwen thinks it might be Karl Silverhielm."

Stewart's gaze skated off to one side. "I told you, I don't know. I only dealt with my contact."

"What did he look like?"

"It's all in the police report."

"Save me some work. What did he look like?" she repeated.

Stewart shrugged. "Light hair, tall, blue eyes. One of those Nordic faces."

"What was his name?"

Stewart snorted. "Do you think for a minute he gave me his real name? You can bet it was a fake."

"What was it?"

"Michael Houseman." When she rolled her eyes, he shrugged. "I told you, there's nothing I can give to help you."

"Was there anything else about him, anything that would let us identify him?" Joss persisted. "Think about how he moved."

"He didn't look like a thug. He was smooth, classy, even. And he moved like he was trained, like a boxer or something."

"Can you remember anything about him that couldn't be changed, his ears, maybe, or the shape of his fingers?"

"Nothing that stands out. His features were normal, nothing unusual about them. His hands were—" He stopped.

"What?"

"Well, it might not be important."

"Let me decide that. What?"

"His right hand. There was a scar on it, between the thumb and the forefinger. I noticed it when we were shaking hands."

"What was it shaped like?"

"A jagged line, like a knife had slipped or something."

"Nice company you keep," she said dryly.

He bristled. "Look, you wanted me to help, I'm helping."

"I'm sorry. You're right. Look, you've given me something that might be useful."

"And my lawyer would knock me in the head if he knew I was talking to you."

"You did the right thing, if it helps."

He gave a brooding stare. "Little enough of that lately."

"Stewart." Joss hesitated. "This'll mean something to Gwen."

"Tell her…" The tone signaling the end of the visiting period rang. He waited until it was silent. "I'd give anything to have done things differently," he said finally. "Tell her that, would you?"

4

BAX SAT in his chair with his feet up on his desk, rubbing the back of his neck. He'd spent too much time on the phone that day, trying to clear up business so he could leave for Stockholm. And wondering if he were nuts. Now, as the afternoon bled away, he was trying to decide whether to write up his notes or just call it a night. He hadn't slept well the night before, waking in the darkness from dreams of unfulfilled cravings and dangerous pursuit.

And Joss Chastain.

The bargain they'd struck the previous day had been absurd, he knew that. He'd given her his word that he'd take on the case and he'd hold to it, but there'd be no charades of being lovers, no charades of being partners. His better judgment might have been overruled at the time but it had reappeared and he needed to do the responsible thing.

With a thump, Bax dropped his feet to the floor just as Joss swept through the door, all color and light in a pleated royal blue miniskirt and a stretchy blue and silver striped shirt that wound around her body.

"I've found something," she announced.

She was something, something he'd fought all day not to dwell on. Now, with her standing in his office practically vibrating with energy, their agreement seemed just a way to make a formality of the chemistry that flowed between them. The wide ebullience of her grin tempted him to taste. The curve of her waist begged him to touch. In a whirlwind second, she filled the room with her presence and completely destroyed his concentration.

And it pissed him off. "Now what?"

"I just got back from Las Vegas and I've got a clue."

"Let me guess. You figured out that we'll all be better off if you leave me alone to do my job?"

"Not that kind of clue." She gave him a withering stare and sat in his client chair, taking her time getting comfortable. The getting comfortable involved lots of shifting and stretching that made him only more aware of her body. "Now, if you're nice, I'll share with you. If not, I'll just keep quiet and let you tell me what you found out today."

Irritating, he thought. "Let's get something straight—"

"As your client, I've got a right to a report on anything you've found out," she reminded him serenely.

What she didn't have was a right to blow in here smelling of summer and seduction and completely fracturing his ability to think. "As my client, you pay me to do the investigating. That means if anyone was going to Vegas, it should have been me."

She didn't rise to his tone. Instead, she gave him a smile that made his pulse bump. "Some things need a woman's touch. Anyway, in two days we'll be flying all the way to Stockholm. Vegas is small change, by comparison."

"You still should have told me before you went. I've already got the police report." He held up a thick bundle of paper and slapped it back down on his empty desktop. "You wasted your time."

"Not at all. I went to the Las Vegas jail to visit Stewart Oakes."

"Who told you to take a flying leap, I hope." Bax frowned. "His case is still in progress. You shouldn't be talking to him."

"His case is a formality at this point. He's copping a plea on both sets of charges. Talking to me won't change that. Besides, I can be persuasive when I want to be."

Didn't he know it, Bax thought, tearing his gaze away from her mouth. "All right, Nancy Drew, what did he tell you?"

Amusement crossed her face. She obviously knew where he'd been looking. "Well, I tried to get him to say something about the Swedish collector, but he played dumb."

"Now there's a surprise."

"Not dumb enough. I mentioned Silverhielm's name and his eyes shifted. Even if he doesn't know for sure it was Silverhielm, he believes it is."

"You flew to Vegas for that?"

Joss bristled. Good, he thought. Keep her at a distance.

Don't let her get close with that gypsy hair and those eyes that promised everything. "No. I've got information about the intermediary."

"Right. Houseman or whatever his name was."

"Stewart said the guy looked Nordic, moved like an athlete."

Bax gave a dismissive shrug. "That's all in the police report."

"And just exactly how did you get your hands on the police report, anyway?"

"A friend or two in the right places." And his good fortune that San Francisco had jurisdiction over the larceny portion of the case.

"Did the report also mention the scar on his hand? Ooooh, I guess it didn't," Joss singsonged with enjoyment and walked over to lean against the edge of his desk, facing him.

Bax looked at her. "There's a perfectly good chair over there." And he'd be much more comfortable with her at a distance.

"I'd rather talk face-to-face." Mischief lurked in her eyes.

"You're on my desk."

"Good." She leaned on one hand. "Something ought to be. There's something slightly disturbed about a person having such a clean desk."

"I like things uncluttered." Which meant not sleeping with clients, he reminded himself, but he couldn't stop staring at the long, lean lines of her body.

"Sometimes clutter is a lot more fun," she purred and touched the tip of her tongue to her upper lip.

Bax cleared his throat. "What about the scar?"

"Well, obviously it's an identifier. If we find Silverhielm, we look at his soldiers and try to find the guy with the mark."

"It's a long shot."

"It's something concrete. Anyway, what did you come up with today, Phillip Marlowe?"

"My Interpol contact didn't know a whole lot but he promised to ask around. He was able to pass on a few interesting tidbits, though."

"Such as?"

"Our boy has his fingers in a lot of pies. Officially, he does import/export. Jewelry, mostly. He seems to consider himself a connoisseur of the finer things. Lives on a private island in the archipelago to the east of Stockholm."

"Nice. Has he been in trouble with the law?"

"Nothing that showed up on any of the systems my contact could access. He's rumored to be responsible for several ugly murders. Word on the street is that he's not to be crossed."

Joss nodded thoughtfully. "Interesting."

"Interesting? How about disturbing?"

"Are you scared?"

"No, but you should be. If Silverhielm is involved, you have no business coming to Stockholm with me."

"But how else are we going to be lovers?" Joss sank down to lie across his empty desk, propping her head on one hand. "Why Bax, a person would think that you've forgotten all about our agreement."

He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. "I've changed my mind."

"But how can that be?" She slid her hand over her hip. "Oh, I know, I forgot about your retainer."

IF HE THOUGHT he was backing out of their deal, he was dreaming, pure and simple. She was going to Stockholm with him and she was going to be part of getting the one-penny Mauritius back. And if it took sex to make him putty in her hands, well, then sex it would be.

Small sacrifice for the cause.

Joss moistened her lips. "Something about an office has always given me the urge to misbehave," she murmured, trailing her fingers down her neck, into the deep vee of skin exposed by her blouse and over the soft swells of her breasts until she saw Bax's eyes darken.

Fluidly, she rose and crossed to the door. "Perhaps I'll just lock this." She flicked the bolt with a metallic *snick*, then turned to face him. "Well, now that we're not likely to be disturbed, how much of a down payment do you require?" she asked. "Enough to need one of these?" She rummaged in her purse to pull out a condom.

Without asking, she walked over to Bax's side of the desk and sat across his lap. Then she laughed, a low, husky sound of delight as she felt the unmistakable shape of a hard-on beneath her.

"That's enough, Joss," he ground out.

"Oh no, Bax, surely your services don't come so cheaply." She slid her hands around to the back of his neck and into the springy waves of his hair. "And if you'd wanted it to be over, you'd have stopped me long before."

Joss leaned in to nibble his neck, tasting the taut skin, roving to the hard line of his jaw and cheek. His chest rose and fell unevenly, as though he'd been running. His hands sat still and loose at his sides. With the tip of her tongue, she traced the line of his mouth, absorbing his flavor, teasing him.

"Poor Bax. You try so hard to be good." She pressed her forehead against his. "But you want this as much as I do. Why don't you just admit it?" Her lips were a hairbreadth from his, her breath blending with his. "Why don't you just give in?"

And in that instant his control snapped and he claimed her mouth with his own.

The kiss was hard and deep and heedless. Her head fell back, inviting him to devour. She might have done the tempting but it was he who laid claim to her. He didn't ask permission, he just took. Hard and proprietary, his hands roved over her back, along her side and hip, then up under her blouse to curve over her breast. He touched her as though she were already known, already owned and he could amuse himself at will.

Joss gasped at his touch and pressed against him. "Mmm, more," she whispered. She felt his mouth curve against hers, then felt the trail of his fingertips up the inside of her calf, the inside of her thigh. She shivered as the light touch traveled up under her skirt and higher still, searching for that place at the apex of her thighs, that place where she was already slick and hot and craving his touch.

And then his fingers dipped in under the satin barrier and Joss jolted against him, moaning into his mouth.

Outside, in the hallway, voices sounded, footsteps thudded as people walked home for the night. Within the room there was only the two of them, touch and taste, sound and scent.

Bax's fingers slid against her, teasing, tormenting her with each stroke. When they slipped inside her, his tongue dipped into her mouth and a coil of tension began to build, tightening with each stroke. "Oh my God," she whispered.

And she heard the low rumble of his chuckle. “I’m not nearly done,” he murmured, then gathered himself and rose, still holding her. Taking a step, he laid her back on the desk.

She felt the wood, smooth and cool beneath her shoulder blades. When he reached up and stripped the satiny fabric of her thong down her thighs, it was another kind of cool and another surge of excitement. Both were overshadowed by the warm stroke of his hands up her calves, over her knees as he knelt before her, dragging her thighs over his shoulders. Joss caught a breath of anticipation. He folded back her skirt, blowing on the sensitive folds of skin. And then the heat of his mouth was on her.

He didn’t waste time teasing her and she didn’t want it. His mouth was relentless, driving her, taking her up until all she could do was feel. She wanted it hard and urgent, she wanted the orgasm that curled in her, still half-formed. As he brought her close, though, he slowed down to leave her balanced on the edge, half gasping with pleasure, half delirious with want. And a fraction before the point of inevitability, he stopped and stood.

“No!” Joss cried out.

“Oh yes,” he said softly. She heard the clink of his belt, the growl of his zipper, the crackle of plastic and his slow exhale as he sheathed himself.

The tip of his cock brushed against her, making her jolt. She stared at him, at his face drawn in taut lines of concentration as he positioned himself. And then he pistoned his hips to slide into her, fast and deep, and she gave a strangled cry.

Hard and urgent. She wrapped her legs around his waist. It was what she’d craved, this rush of sensation. His hands were unwrapping her blouse, pulling up her bra to find her bare breasts. The feel of his cock possessed her, the fullness, the slick rub against her tender inner flesh as each move teased her clitoris, tormented, inching her closer and closer to orgasm.

Bax caught at her ankles, straightening her legs, pulling them apart to watch as he buried his cock deep in her tight, warm wetness. Stroke after stroke, he got thicker and harder, thicker and harder as the orgasm gathered. He gritted his teeth, holding on, promising himself one more stroke, and one more until she began to shudder and shake and cry out as orgasm burst through her. And when it was done, he let himself follow.

“I DON’T KNOW about you, but I’m thinking we’ll be able to do a pretty believable job of pretending we’re lovers,” Joss said lazily as she pulled her clothing back on.

With her hair loose and wild and that light of satisfaction in her eyes, she looked more enticing than ever. If there had been a bed in the room, Bax would have been giving serious thought to tumbling her back into it.

“Too bad you don’t have a couch in here,” Joss commented, as though she’d overheard his thoughts. “Just think about Sweden.” She leaned over for a quick kiss, and topped it off with a bawdy wink.

Bax tucked in his shirt. “I don’t like the idea of you going over there,” he said. “Silverhielm and his guys are too dangerous. Do you really understand what you’re getting into?”

“It’s not your decision. I’m going over there, whether you want me to or not,” she told him. “Now, if you want to be involved and work with me, that’s great, but I’m doing it no matter what.”

The desperate kid look was back again and it tugged at him. Mentally, he cursed. He didn’t get the sense she was doing it for show. She was telling him the truth as she saw it. Stubborn, contrary, unpredictable and somehow very good at getting over on his blind side.

He’d be better off stopping right now, but there was something about her that he couldn’t walk away from. If it meant going to Stockholm with her to keep her safe, he’d do it, he realized.

And if it meant giving in to both of their desires against his better judgment, he’d do that, too.

5

AT FIRST GLANCE, Stockholm seemed to be as much water as land, vivid bands of blue weaving their way among the confusion of islands that formed the city. Whereas most metropolitan

areas boasted a single river winding through, in Stockholm water charmed the visitor at every turn, from broad passes to narrow inlets between the steep rock, or tree-lined edges of the islands. Bridges vaulted from shore to shore and boats and ferries sailed in between, seeming more a part of the city than the streets and cars.

As the taxi brought Bax and Joss into the heart of Stockholm, the modern utilitarian structures that had dominated the landscape at the fringes gave way to the aged, graceful buildings of the old city. They sat shoulder to shoulder on the waterfronts, their ornate and gabled facades tinted ocher and blush, tan and pale yellow. The old city was a pastel fantasy, reflected in the rippling waters of lake and sea.

"It's lovely," Joss murmured. "So much blue and so many trees. I had no idea."

"You should see it farther east, in the archipelago," Bax said. "It's something else, just islands and water. That's where our friend lives, on his own private island."

"His own private fortress, more like." Joss stared out the windows of the cab, eagerly taking in the sights of the city. "So you've been to Stockholm before, I take it?"

"Passed through a few times."

"Often enough to know anyone useful?"

He gave her a pitying look. "Isn't that why you hired me? As a matter of fact, I've already arranged a meeting."

"I apologize for underestimating you," Joss said, looking over to see him relaxed on the seat in his travel clothes. She should have known he'd be organized. There was nothing for getting to know another person like taking a long and complicated international flight together. Bax always had ticket and passport in hand, chose the right line, knew where their seats were. That wasn't too much of a surprise to her. What had been a surprise was how quickly the hours together had gone, lightened up by his flashing humor and odd bits of knowledge.

She'd expected the trip to be illuminating on the subject of John Baxter. She hadn't expected it to be fun.

The taxi swung around a U-turn and pulled to a stop in front of a rococo fantasy of a hotel. "The Royal Viking," the cab driver announced. Windows topped with stylized lintels marched across the high, sheer front of the hotel. On the first floor, elaborate carvings decorated the rosy stone facade. Flags flew from the green copper roof, snapping in the breeze. Behind them, script letters spelled out Royal Viking against the sky.

At the foot of the hotel lay the waterfront, lined with the white tour boats and ferries.

The building had the same sort of presence as an aging prima ballerina, stylish and graceful, but mellowed. There were small signs, perhaps, of the passage of time, but the bones and muscles remained disciplined.

"The Royal Viking, huh? You've got expensive taste," Bax commented as they got out.

"I figure if we want to get our friend's attention, we've got to walk the walk, as well as talk the talk," Joss said with a little smile, watching the blue-uniformed bellhop bring a wheeled luggage rack out to collect their bags. "If I've inherited some of Jerry's stolen swag, I should already be living well off the more easily fenced items, right? Besides, if they think I'm not too smart, they're likely to drop their guard."

"To their peril."

She smiled at him. "Exactly. By the way, the room's under your name," she said over her shoulder and walked through the doors into the hotel.

"*What?*" Bax stopped her, brows lowering.

"Well, we don't want our friend to somehow find out that a Chastain is staying here, do we?" She didn't see the point in mentioning the fact that she didn't have a credit card to her name. That was the old, feckless Joss. The new Joss was getting her act in gear. Bax didn't look convinced, though.

She tried again. “Look, if we’re lovers, we’d be registered under your name, wouldn’t we? It makes sense. Breathe,” she patted his cheek. “We’ll pay you back at the end.”

“I’ll make sure of it. Any more surprises?”

“Only of the most enjoyable kind,” she murmured and continued through the doors.

Like the city outside, the lobby was a fantasy of gold and blue. Marble pillars with gold-leafed crowns soared to fifteen-foot ceilings ringed with crenellated moldings. Crystal chandeliers glimmered overhead. Underfoot, herringbone-patterned hardwood floors gleamed at the edges of royal blue carpet woven with twisting gold vines.

“Good evening,” said the smiling woman behind the polished mahogany counter.

“*Hej*,” Bax said, using the Swedish word for hello. He then astounded Joss by producing a stream of what sounded like Swedish. Once or twice, he searched for a word or the desk clerk frowned, but mostly they chattered along like magpies. Finally, he signed the registration card and received the key.

“Was that what I thought it was?” Joss asked as the bellhop collected their luggage and they headed toward the elevator. “Are you fluent in Swedish?”

“Not exactly. I’m fluent in Danish. I can get by in Swedish. Not all the words are the same, but the two are close enough that we can generally understand one another. I’m sure nearly everyone here speaks English—but I wanted to get the rust off.”

“Didn’t sound like there was any rust on it to begin with,” Joss said, thinking of the lilting conversation she’d listened to.

Bax shrugged and punched the call button for the elevator. “My mother was Danish. I lived in Copenhagen until I was about six.”

“No kidding. Was your father Danish, too?”

Bax shook his head. “American. He was a marine, an embassy guard. We lived all over Europe until I was about sixteen.”

“Wow. You must be one cultured guy.”

“I have my moments.” The elevator appeared.

“So do you wish you lived over here?”

He shrugged and opened the door to let her walk into the car ahead of him. “I’m not sure I know. I don’t exactly feel like an American, but I don’t really feel like a European anymore. I’m somewhere in the middle.”

“I know what you mean,” Joss said as they got into the tiny car. “I grew up in Africa.” An experience she wouldn’t have traded for anything, but one that had left her homeless in a way, and always searching for more.

“Really?” He looked at her with interest. “How did that happen?”

“My parents are doctors,” she explained. “We lived all over. Zimbabwe, Botswana, Tanzania, mostly out in the bush.”

“What was it like?”

“It was amazing, the animals and the landscape and the people. I loved it. There was always something new. I was free there, you know? No rules.” And it had been so hard to get used to life in the real world.

“Ah. Now it all makes sense.” The car stopped on their floor and they got out.

Joss gave Bax a quick smile as they stopped at the door to the room. “Are you saying that I’m not good with rules?”

“I’m saying that you like to make your own.”

He stood there in his jeans and denim shirt, his jaw darkened with stubble from the long flight, looking just about good enough to eat. Joss took a step toward him and flowed into his arms. “Let me tell you about my rules,” she began.

"Good afternoon," someone said cheerfully from behind them. They turned to see the bellhop walking toward them with their suitcases on the shiny brass birdcage luggage cart. "Welcome to the Royal Viking Hotel."

Joss gave Bax a rueful grin as the bellhop opened up their door.

It was like walking into a room in some eighteenth-century palace. Glossy white paneling with gilt moldings spread across the walls. White and gold swags of fabric framed the wide windows that overlooked the waterfront. Rich aquamarine damask covered the reproduction antique chairs—surely they were reproductions, she thought feverishly—as well as the coverlet of the half-tester bed. And what a bed, high and wide and piled with pillows, just made for all manner of aristocratic decadence.

She looked over at Bax and their eyes met. And desire throbbed through her.

The bellhop came through the door with their last bag and set it down. "Let me just get your suitcases," he began reaching for the luggage rack.

Bax took it from him and set it aside. "I don't think that will be necessary," he said smoothly.

"Well, then, I can show you—"

"Nope, won't be necessary," Bax told him, turning him around and ushering him toward the door. "In fact, I think we're all set." Bax slipped a twenty-five kroner tip in his hand and closed the door in front of his startled face.

"Now." Bax walked back toward Joss and tumbled her onto the bed with him. "What was that you were saying about rules?"

WHEN JOSS opened her eyes the following morning, it took her a moment to remember where she was. The big bed was empty but for her, the room silent. Yawning, she found her way to the bathroom, with its aqua and white tile walls and gleaming chrome. By the time she'd brushed her teeth and washed her face, she was feeling almost human.

Wrapping herself in one of the hotel's thick terry robes, she wandered over to the window to look out over the water. Beyond, in a pastel fantasy, lay the island of Gamla Stan, the oldest part of Stockholm. It beckoned to her from across the water. Forget about the room, however gorgeous it was. She wanted to be out there, exploring.

In time with her thoughts, there was a rattling at the door and Bax came in.

"Good morning."

"Good morning." She jammed her hands deep in the pockets of her robe. "I thought maybe you'd headed out for the day."

For a moment, he looked taken aback. "I was downstairs having coffee. I didn't want to wake you. Sorry, I should have left a note."

It was awkward, she thought. They'd become lovers without warning. Now, they were essentially living together as intimate strangers. She knew how to make Bax shudder with arousal but couldn't name his favorite color. They still hadn't found their rhythm with one another, they didn't know what to expect.

At least not out of bed.

"Well, I'm up and around now," she told him, sitting down on the bed. "Hey, is anything important going on today? The guide book mentioned a postal museum on Gamla Stan. I thought it might have some useful information for us. You know, stamps and stuff."

"Sure." He walked restlessly over to the windows to peer out. "By the way, I saw something in the paper about a stamp auction later on this week. The preauction viewing and reception are tomorrow night."

"So?"

"So Silverhielm will very likely be there. It might be a good opportunity to make his acquaintance."

"Wouldn't that be convenient?" Joss said, watching Bax. He was tense enough that he was making her tense. Too many more days like this and they'd be crawling the walls. It was definitely time to do something about it.

She reached for the sash of her robe. "Well, if we're going to be meeting Silverhielm, we should probably get prepared."

"I think I told you, we're going to get a briefing."

"I mean you and I should get prepared," she said, sliding her robe off her shoulders.

"Get prepared how?" Bax turned away from the window to look at her.

Joss gave him a wicked smile. "If you'll just come into the shower with me, I'd be happy to explain."

THE NARROW cobblestone streets of Gamla Stan wound between the high gabled buildings, the air still echoing with the past. Tourists and Stockholmers sat at the sidewalk cafés drinking coffee in the warm afternoon. The whole scene held the feeling of a gentler age.

Inside the postal museum, history permeated the air. All around them were displays with stamps from other eras, other places. They walked past the prize holdings of the stamp world. At least, that was Joss's assumption. Given that all the signs and labels were in Swedish, and her current vocabulary consisted of "hello," "goodbye," "please" and "thank you," it was hard to be sure.

Context was everything, Joss thought with a sigh. Otherwise, the stamps were just colored squares of paper. "I don't suppose you could translate for me, could you?" she asked Bax.

He gave her a calculating look. "I suppose, but it'll cost you."

Joss frowned. "Wait a minute, I thought you were supposed to be my devoted lover. Wasn't that what we were just talking about?"

"Well, I'm not sure that includes translation services beyond *la langue d'amour*." He stuck his tongue in his cheek.

Joss raised her eyebrows. "*La langue d'amour?*"

"I was raised in Europe," he said blandly.

"I see." This was a new Bax. She'd never seen him be playful before. It was something she could get used to. "Well, if I could talk you into translating, I'd be happy to discuss some sort of compensation for your efforts."

"What do you have in mind?" He looked at her speculatively.

"Perhaps we could take it out in trade."

"I can work with that. Let's see," he squinted at the label. "Well, what you're looking at here is a stamp on a letter."

Joss crossed her arms and leaned against the doorway to the display case. "You don't say."

"It's true. If you want to hear more, I'll need a deposit."

It took her away, the taste of his mouth, the feel of his arms around her. It didn't matter that they'd just spent a couple of hours making love. She wanted more, and more wouldn't be enough.

Sounds echoed into the exhibits area from the next room, the voices of children in a school tour. Hurriedly, they broke apart.

"I trust you found that sufficient?" Joss pressed her lips together.

Bax grinned. "Well, we do have a minimum deposit, but I suppose under the circumstances I can waive it."

"You're so kind."

They worked their way slowly through the museum, past rare stamps and printing presses, past relics of ages gone by. In the next room, Bax drifted past her to look at a perforating machine with its pointy-toothed wheels. Just inside the doorway sat a small safe on a pedestal, its thick, black door swung wide. Inside, on even tinier pedestals stood a pair of stamps.

Joss took a look and blinked.

One blue, one reddish orange. A white profile of a queen wearing a circlet around upswept hair showed on each; the words Post Office ran along the left-hand margin in white block letters and Mauritius on the right. The indigo stamp was twin to the one they'd installed in a bank vault earlier that day.

"Bax," Joss said softly.

He was on the other side of the room.

"Bax," she said again.

"What?" He walked over to stand at her side.

She pointed to the safe. "It's them. The Post Office Mauritius pair."

He studied them. "The queen doesn't look the same on the orange one. Her hair's different. They look more like sisters than the same person. Look, the one on the Blue Mauritius almost looks like she's smiling."

"So, what are the chances that we'd stumble across them here?" Joss commented.

"Not necessarily that surprising, when you think about it. Maybe seeing them here is what whetted Silverhielm's appetite to have his own."

"Maybe." She continued to stare at the little squares of color, still vivid after all these years. So small, so fragile to have caused such grief. "I thought it would be a different color. More yellow, from what Gwen described."

"Didn't you ever see your grandfather's copy?"

She shook her head. "It was always in the vault. The only reason I've seen the Blue Mauritius is because we brought it here."

The two stamps sat on their little pedestals under the lights, the plump-jowled images of the monarch looking serenely off to the left.

"Hard to believe that people are willing to pay so much money for something like this, isn't it?" Bax said.

"Oh, I don't know. It's a bit like owning a piece of history, isn't it? A little bit of immortality. I think that's what my grandfather finds so magical about them." She stroked her finger down the glass protecting the contents of the safe.

"We'll get it back," Bax whispered. "One way or another, we'll get it back." He kissed her forehead.

First playful, now nice. Joss blinked back the sudden stinging in her eyes and blew out a breath. "Well, I think we've seen everything we need to here. You want to stop and get something to drink somewhere? Maybe that café we passed?"

He tangled his fingers in hers. "I've got a better idea."

SLUSSEN, just across from Gamla Stan on the island of Södermalm, was a whirlwind of motion. Cars and buses converged on the transportation hub from a dozen directions. Ferries lined the waterfront, poised for journeys to the archipelago and beyond. After the charm of old town, Slussen seemed garishly modern, but even here there was the beauty of the water, the green of trees, the aged loveliness of historic buildings.

Joss and Bax sat in the broad public square in front of the Swedish state museum, watching pigeons search for crumbs among the cracks of the cobblestone-striped concrete. To their right, the bluffs of Södermalm rose sheer and high. On their left, bridges vaulted to Gamla Stan. Directly ahead of them, propped up at the far end by a fragile-looking tracery of iron, a slender finger of blue projected out from the building that climbed up the face of the bluff.

"What is that?" Joss asked.

"Gondolen. It's a restaurant bar, very fashionable. The strutwork at the far end is the Katarinahissen, an elevator that takes you up to the public walkway on top. It's a pretty amazing view." Propped up on one side by the office building and across the street by the Katarinahissen, the restaurant hovered high in the air over one of the streets that fed into Slussen.

"It's almost cocktail hour," Joss said. "Why don't we go on up and have a drink and you can show me?"

"In a bit. We're here for a reason. Our friend Silverhielm has his city offices in the building attached to the restaurant." Bax glanced at his watch. "I'm told he comes out between four and five every afternoon." He rose and held out a hand to her. "Would you like a closer look at the Katarinahissen?"

Joss grinned. "Lead the way."

Crossing the various streams of traffic between the square and the Katarinahissen took longer than she expected, but eventually they stood by the doors to the elevator, across from the office building. Bax led her a few steps along the sidewalk, staring out at the water. Without warning, he swept her into his arms, his mouth hard on hers.

It should have been different. They knew one another's bodies now, they'd kissed plenty of times. It should have been pedestrian. It shouldn't have sent her blood fizzing through her veins.

It shouldn't have left her stunned with wanting.

"There, coming out of the doors," Bax murmured against her lips and lifted her off her feet to spin her a little, as though he were a lover overcome with the moment. "Take a good look so you'll know him later."

Face pressed into his neck, Joss opened her eyes and looked across the street.

There was no doubt which one was Silverhielm. Bodyguards flanked him but he walked as though he were alone, head raised arrogantly as he approached the gleaming black sedan that sat idling at the curb. He wore an impeccably tailored suit, slate-blue with a chalk stripe. His hair was thick, wavy and entirely gray; his eyes were pale. About him, there hovered an indefinable air of implacability and menace.

It was a well-choreographed scene, like the footage she'd seen of presidents and prime ministers walking to vehicles. In seconds, he was safely ensconced in the car and his entourage was inside.

The sound of the car door slamming behind him echoed across the street. Joss shivered as the car drove away. "So that's him."

Bax nodded and released her.

It shouldn't have shaken her. There was no good reason why it did. Joss walked away from the lift building to lean on the railing and look across the water to Gamla Stan. "He looked…ruthless."

"He hasn't gotten to where he is by being kind. So are you ready to step back from this and let me take care of things?"

"No." She turned to him, shoulders squared. "I know who we're up against now, which is going to make me that much better against him."

"Stubborn," Bax commented, bouncing his loosely curled fist lightly off her chin.

"Determined," she countered.

"Not to mention sexy as hell. I seem to remember something about a payment due, by the way."

"Payment?" she echoed innocently.

"If I don't get it, I'm going to have to send you to collections," he warned.

Joss smiled. "Well, then, I guess I'd better pay up."

6

THE CHERUBS SMILED at her, golden-haired and rosy-cheeked, their bellies coquettishly round. Hanging on the wall over her head, their lively faces stared out, not at Joss, but at the sailing ship behind her, the enormous relic of a bygone age, the ornately carved king's folly that hadn't even made it out of the harbor before capsizing centuries before.

It was hard to say what was more extraordinary, Joss thought, the fact that for over two centuries people had forgotten where the *Vasa* warship lay, just a few hundred yards from the bustling waterfront, or the fact that the ship had been rediscovered and brought up to the surface nearly intact.

When she'd capsized, the sailors on the *Vasa* must have prayed to God for salvation. Now, the vessel was ensconced in a temple of its own, a soaring building of soft light designed to protect and display the ripe and luscious lines of a sailing ship that barely sailed.

"It's incredible," Joss murmured turning to stare at the stern rising high above them as she and Bax stood on one of the observation floors of the multilevel museum. "How can anything be this big?" As they walked toward the front of the ship, the height of the ship's side dropped in a slow, graceful curve until they were looking down at the deck by the time they'd reached the midway point. "How could anything be so beautiful and yet so useless?"

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