HARLEQUIN
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INTRIGUE
SULLIVAN'S LAST STAND
HARPER ALLEN
THE AVENGERS

Harper Allen

Sullivan's Last Stand

«HarperCollins»

Allen H.

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THE FIRST TIME HAD BEEN HARD…Bailey Flowers should have known a man who'd been to hell and back would break her heart. But now ex-mercenary Terrence Sullivan was the only man who could help her locate her missing sibling– before the police framed her sister for murder!THE SECOND TIME WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLEThese former lovers thought they could set aside personal feelings to solve an increasingly bizarre–and deadly– investigation. But when their simmering passion exploded in an all-consuming desire,Bailey knew this tortured mercenary needed her help. Because the only key to Sullivan's salvation lay in her ever-loving arms–

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Содержание

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 6
Books by Harper Allen 7
CAST OF CHARACTERS 8
Contents 9
Chapter One 10
Chapter Two 16
Chapter Three 23
Chapter Four 29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 34

He'd done his best to protect her from himself

And all right—maybe his best was one hell of a poor effort, but he'd tried, dammit. He'd never said he was a saint. That was why he'd stayed away from her since the last time—because he knew his limitations when it came to Bailey Flowers.

But then she'd come back into his life. And now she was asking him to destroy the last scrap of feeling she might have for him.

"You shouldn't have come back, Bailey." He kept his voice even, but he could feel a muscle twitching at the side of his jaw. "I told you how it would turn out."

Her eyes widened. "In bed together, or at each other's throats," she said flatly. "And I told you that the second scenario was the more likely one. It seems I was right."

Dear Harlequin Intrigue Reader,

What's bigger than Texas…? Montana! This month, Harlequin Intrigue takes you deep undercover to the offices of MONTANA CONFIDENTIAL. You loved the series when it first premiered in the Lone Star State, so we've created a brand-new set of sexy cowboy agents for you farther north in Big Sky country. Patricia Rosemoor gets things started in Someone To Protect Her. Three more installments follow—and I can assure you, you won't want to miss one!

Amanda Stevens concludes her dramatic EDEN'S CHILDREN miniseries with The Forgiven. All comes full circle in this redemptive story that reunites mother and child.

What would you do if your "wife" came back from the dead? Look for In His Wife's Name for the answer. In a very compelling scenario, Joyce Sullivan explores the consequences of a hidden identity and a desperate search for the truth.

Rounding out the month is the companion story to Harper Allen's miniseries THE AVENGERS. Sullivan's Last Stand, like its counterpart Guarding Jane Doe, is a deeply emotional story about a soldier of fortune and his dedication to duty. Be sure to pick up both titles by this exceptional new author.

Cowboys, cops—action, drama…it's just another month of terrific romantic suspense from Harlequin Intrigue.

Happy reading!

Sincerely,

Denise O'Sullivan

Associate Senior Editor

Harlequin Intrigue

P.S. Be sure to watch for the next title in Rebecca York's 43 LIGHT STREET trilogy, MINE TO KEEP, available in October.

Sullivan's Last Stand

Harper Allen

www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harper Allen lives in the country in the middle of a hundred acres of maple trees with her husband, Wayne, six cats, four dogs—and a very nervous cockatiel at the bottom of the food chain. For excitement she and Wayne drive to the nearest village and buy jumbo bags of pet food. She believes in love at first sight because it happened to her.

Books by Harper Allen

HARLEQUIN INTRIGUE
468—THE MAN THAT GOT AWAY
547—TWICE TEMPTED
599—WOMAN MOST WANTED
628—GUARDING JANE DOE*
632—SULLIVAN'S LAST STAND*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Bailey Flowers—A year ago Sullivan broke her heart. Now she's back in his life again…with a score to settle and a sister to find.

Terrence Patrick Sullivan—The tough ex-mercenary can't undo the mistakes of his past. But he's determined not to repeat them—and Bailey was his biggest mistake.

Angelica Plowright—Bailey's beautiful blond sister was smart enough to hold out for marriage to a billionaire. She just wasn't smart enough to realize that money isn't everything.

Aaron Plowright—The well-known billionaire is always a popular subject for the photographer's lens—and now his illicit weekend with a mystery woman has been caught on film.

Tracy Weiss—The ambitious attorney has a professional connection to Plowright. It's rumored she has a personal relationship with him, as well.

Ainslie O'Connell—Sullivan's half sister loves him dearly, but she's afraid that history will repeat itself.

For Michael

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Epilogue

Chapter One

He hadn't changed at all in one year. He was still the most gorgeous male she'd ever seen.

She might have known, Bailey thought in resignation, crossing her arms and waiting for him to see her standing in the doorway. Telephone receiver cradled on his shoulder, his eyes closed and a wry smile lifting one corner of his mouth, Terrence Patrick Sullivan was in full spate, slouched so far back in his leather chair that by rights he should have tipped the thing over. Long legs were propped up on the paper-strewn surface of his desk.

She gave an audible snort and had the satisfaction of seeing his eyes fly open as his startled gaze met hers.

"Whoever she is, she'll have to call you back," she said dryly. "Hang up the phone, Sully. We've got to talk."

She'd been right. He was even more heart-stoppingly handsome than she remembered, she thought with a spurt of irritation as he gave her a quick glance. Really, that was a big part of his problem. Would women have been throwing themselves at the man the way they had for most of his thirty-odd years if he hadn't been blessed with those dark navy eyes and those thick sooty lashes? Would he have been able to have his pick of female companionship without that glossy black hair brushing the collars of his Armani suits, or the linebacker shoulders that filled out the jackets of those same suits?

Probably, she conceded in annoyance. Because even if he'd had nothing else going for him, Terrence Patrick Sullivan was a charmer. Women adored him. Men liked him. Children trusted him, dogs followed him home, and although he parked his Jaguar near a tree at the back of the building here, she'd seen with her own eyes that the pigeons that roosted in it would spatter everyone else's car except his.

He was pond scum.

"Listen, something's come up, sugar," he was saying into the phone now. "But I'll see you tonight like we planned. Uh-huh, seven o'clock. SWKA, baby-doll."

"I see you still use the old sign-off, as well. But I must have rattled you, Sullivan—it's SWAK, not SWKA." Unfolding her arms and shoving herself from the door frame as he abruptly hung up, Bailey crossed the carpeted floor to his desk. She pulled out a chair and plopped herself negligently down in it. Swinging her own jean-clad legs up, she put her feet on a pile of papers next to his. "Unless you meant Sealed With Kiss A," she added.

"Tara's a great kid, but she's not that big on spelling. I'm doubting she noticed." He met her eyes. "My sister Ainslie's twelve-year-old goddaughter, Bailey. I'm taking her and Lee out for pizza tonight."

"Oh." Now he'd rattled her, she thought. She'd known when she'd made up her mind to come here that she would have to hold on to every ounce of self-control she possessed, and already she could feel it slipping away. She took a deep breath. "Why don't we skip the small talk and get right to the—"

"The ever-charming Ms. Flowers." There was an unaccustomed edge to his voice. "It's been—how long—a year?" He leaned back farther in his chair, and she found herself hoping that this time it would fall. "So to what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of this visit? Don't tell me—you finally decided to pack in that little fleabag operation of yours and join a real firm of investigators, right?"

"Triple-A Acme's doing just fine, thanks," she said evenly. "In fact, I send you business every so often. I figure you need to keep the cash flow steady, what with those expensive tastes of yours. Nice suit, Sully."

He followed her gaze and flicked a nonexistent speck of lint from the sleeve of his jacket. "Thanks," he said complacently. "Those Milan tailors know how to do their job."

"Too bad you don't." Bailey took her feet off the desk and planted them back on the floor with a thump. She leaned forward, her gaze hardening. "Your firm screwed up, Sullivan."

"My firm screwed—" Abruptly he swung his own legs off the desk, all traces of good humor gone from his handsome face as his eyes met hers. "I don't think so, Bailey, honey," he said softly. "You can rag on me about anything else you please—my love life, my clothes, even my character. But Sullivan Investigations and Security is off-limits, unless you can prove what you just said."

"Angelica was one of the cases I sent your way." Her tone was as humorless as his. "And you're right—whatever else my opinion of you might be, I've always admitted that you run one of the best agencies in Boston."

"The best," he interjected. "Just because you come first in the phone book doesn't mean you beat me out in getting results and clients. Far from it, in fact."

"I assume that's a dig at the fact that Acme's just a one-woman detective agency." She shrugged. "I'll admit that. The reason I sent Angelica to you was partly because Sullivan's is such a large firm."

"Multinational, now." He shrugged, too. "I've expanded since you and I last chatted."

On the mahogany desk he had an exquisite Waterford crystal paperweight. For a moment the impulse to grab it and hurl it at him was almost overwhelming. Chatted? Bailey thought with dull fury. Was that how he categorized their last encounter?

"I can see you're doing well," she noted tightly. "But that's your problem, Sullivan—I think the company's gotten so big you've lost touch with what's going on. You didn't even know Angelica was a client until I just told you, did you?"

"Your sister? Okay, I didn't know, but what's your point, Bailey?" He leveled an unconcerned blue gaze on her. "I can't be expected to be on top of every file we're handling."

"My adopted sister," she said shortly.

"Adopted sister." His usual lazy tone was clipped. "She married Aaron Plowright four or five years ago, going from cocktail waitress to billionaire's wife in one fell swoop, right? So why did you send her to me? Did she mislay some trifling object like a yacht that she wanted us to locate for her without the hubby finding out?"

"No. She thought hubby had a trifling object that he didn't want her to find out about." Impatiently she tucked a stray strand of hair behind one ear. "But Angel never was the smartest girl on the block—just the most beautiful. She came to me first and asked me to tail him."

His grin surprised her. In the tan of his face it was a flash of white, and it was devastating. Even now she could feel her own lips starting to curve in an answering smile. She bit the inside of her cheek sharply enough to keep her expression under control.

"Yeah, he might just have clued in, seeing his sister-in-law popping out from behind bushes everywhere he went," he said. "You're right—not too bright of our little Angelica. Although I don't agree that she was the most beautiful girl on the block, honey. Not when the two of you lived in the same house, anyway."

It took a moment for her to realize what he was saying. It took a moment only because her brain was starting to turn to mush, she thought in chagrin, the way it had turned to mush a year ago when she'd been around him. It was the grin. She was letting him affect her.

"I never was in Angelica's league in the looks department, Sully, and you and I both know it. I didn't come here for a dose of your patented Irish blarney. I came here on business, so let's keep things on that footing and we'll get along just fine."

It came out more sharply than she'd intended. He held her gaze for a moment, his own as unreadable as she hoped hers was, and then he let out a long breath.

"So you sent the lovely Angelica to my firm to have her husband followed." He pushed aside a stack of papers on his desk and leaned forward, lifting his shoulders a little as if his muscles were tense. "How do you figure we screwed up? Did Aaron make the tail?"

"Of course not. Your people aren't amateurs."

Her voice was nearly back to normal again, she noted with surprise. She felt oddly light-headed, as if she'd just picked her way through a minefield and couldn't quite believe she was still in one piece. She'd done it, she thought. She'd finally gotten him out of her system.

"As a matter of fact, Aaron had to go away on an unexpected business trip last weekend, and apparently your—" She stopped abruptly, her breath suddenly short and her heartbeat speeding up.

"Go on."

He'd stood up and shucked off the suit jacket he'd been wearing. Now he was unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt and rolling his sleeves back, his attention focused on the task. His forearms were a dark gold against the white material, and the same tan tone was echoed in the worn leather shoulder holster that slashed across the whiteness of his shirt higher up. He glanced over at her.

"What is it?"

How many times had she seen him shrug off his jacket and unfasten his cuffs in the past? she thought helplessly. The answer came to her immediately—three. Three times in the past he'd stood in front of her and lazily started to undress, and those three times he'd kept going. She'd once told him that if the investigation business ever went bust, he could probably make a darn good living as a male stripper. He'd given her a wide-eyed look of protest that had had nothing innocent about it at all, and then he'd taken so excruciatingly long to discard the rest of his clothes that by the end of it she was practically out of her mind with desire for him.

And the next time she'd paid him back in exactly the same way, Bailey remembered.

They'd made love three times together. Well, that wasn't strictly true—they'd spent three nights together and made love all through each of those nights, time and again. They'd made love that last morning, just an hour or so before she'd walked in on the phone call that had negated everything she'd thought they had between them. She swallowed with difficulty.

"Nothing. I just want to make sure I don't leave anything out," she finally said, her tone as professional as she could make it. "Aaron went away on what he said was an emergency business trip, and your operative followed him. Apparently Angelica's suspicions were correct, because when Jackson reported back to her—"

"Jackson?" He looked up quickly. "Hank Jackson?"

"Yes, Hank," she said impatiently. "When he reported back to her—"

"You're telling me that Hank Jackson screwed up on a job, honey?" Despite his casual posture, there was a tenseness about him. "It didn't happen, sweetheart. Not Hank—he's my best investigator."

Gone was the man she'd walked in on ten minutes ago, the man whose easy charm had so irritated her. Gone also was the man she remembered from last year. Looking at his hard, set features, Bailey suddenly recalled that Terrence Patrick Sullivan hadn't always worn Armani and driven Jaguars. He hadn't always run a security and investigative firm that was doing so well he had to keep a string of girlfriends just to help him spend his money.

He didn't hide his past, but he didn't talk about it, either. She hadn't known he'd been a mercenary until afterward, when she'd needed to find out everything about the man that she could in order to make some sense of his actions toward her. It had been astonishingly difficult to find anyone who claimed to know the real Sullivan, and even harder to persuade those who did to talk, but digging up information was what she did for a living. Eventually she'd pieced together just enough rumors and half-truths to realize she'd never known the man at all.

He'd been one of the toughest soldiers-for-hire available, she'd been told by a big man in a smoky bar one rainy night. An older man, trim and ramrod straight despite his advancing years, had met her on a park bench in the Common. While throwing bread crusts to the ducks, in a clipped British accent he'd informed her that Sully had been a maniac, always volunteering for the most dangerous missions available and never seeming to take anything seriously. When she'd asked him if he'd ever served with him, the faded gray eyes had met hers as if she was the one who was mad.

Every damned chance he could, he'd told her. And if Sully came up to him today and asked him to join him on one last suicide jaunt, he'd sign on with him in a flash, he'd added wistfully.

There had been others she'd talked to—not many, just a handful—but slowly a picture had grown in her mind of a man who was nothing like the Terrence Sullivan he now presented to the world.

She was looking at that man right now, Bailey thought. But that didn't change what she'd come here to tell him. She watched him walk back to the desk and sit down across from her.

"He might be your best investigator," she said flatly, meeting his cool gaze with an even chillier one of her own. "But he made a judgment call that sucked big time, and that's what I've got a problem with."

Even in shirtsleeves and with that glossy black hair in need of a trim, he seemed suddenly remote. She found herself wishing that she'd picked out something more businesslike and intimidating to wear herself. Jeans and a Pearl Jam tee weren't exactly power-dressing, she told herself ruefully. And her own hair kept falling out of the banana clip she'd pinned it up with this morning, in deference to the unseasonable—for Boston, at least—May heat.

Still she had one edge over him. She knew what had happened, and he, by his own admission, didn't. His next action made it obvious he didn't intend to let that state of affairs last much longer.

Leaning forward, he jabbed the intercom button on his phone. "Moira, ask Hank to come in here, will you? If he's not in his office, have him paged." He sat back, his expression grim. "I won't conduct a court-martial of one of my own men without giving him the chance to tell his side of the story, Bailey. But go on. What exactly is it you're accusing him of?"

His attitude was meant to put her on the defensive, but with a tightening of her lips she continued. "Jackson gave Angelica the gist of his findings over the phone on Sunday night. The written report was to follow, along with copies of the photos he'd taken, and apparently they alone were pretty damning. Aaron's 'business meeting' was with a gorgeous brunette young enough to be his daughter. Of course, all of his wives after the first Mrs. Plowright have been young enough to be his daughters, so the age thing isn't surprising," she added. "But they weren't exactly discussing a merger. According to Jackson, they were in the middle of one—a very personal, very intimate merger."

"So what's the big problem you keep talking about?" A moment ago, Sullivan's wry smile would have seemed natural. Now she could discern the effort it cost him to hide his anger, and her own temper flared.

"The problem is that Angelica's not the most stable person you could drop a bombshell like this on, even if she did semi-suspect something. Besides which, Jackson apparently gave her the bad news only an hour or so before Aaron himself returned." Bailey's eyes flashed. "A twobit PI with a mail-order diploma would have known better. He had to have realized what a volatile situation he was creating."

"Then why didn't you try to soften the blow, since you were so concerned about how she would take it?"

"I wasn't there, dammit!" Her features sharpened with frustration. "I was on a stakeout all Sunday night and right up until noon on Monday. When I got home I took a shower and then crashed for a few hours. After I woke up I saw the message light blinking on my answering machine, and that's when I heard Angel's message from the night before. She'd wanted to talk to me before Aaron arrived home, but I—" Bailey hesitated "—I wasn't there for her," she finished, looking swiftly down at her hands.

He'd been watching her intently. Now he shook his head, his gaze still on her. "You can't be around all the time. Besides, after she gets over the blow to her pride, your little sister'll realize that she's looking at a rock-solid divorce settlement. From what you've told me about her in the past, that's probably more to her liking than a diamond eternity band and a bunch of red roses on their next anniversary, anyway."

“That’s the way I thought she’d take it.” She looked up at him. “But the message she left on my machine was so hysterical I could hardly make out what she was saying. She said she was going to confront Aaron with the whole thing as soon as he walked in the door.”

“Not wise,” he said shortly. “Plowright’s got the kind of money that can erase memories. She should have kept quiet about it and let her lawyer get statements from anyone Jackson mentions in his report.” He frowned. “Today’s Wednesday. Aaron’s had time to do a lot of damage control already. Where’s Angelica been staying since she turned on the fan and watched everything hit it?”

“That’s just it—she’s disappeared, and no one seems to have any idea where she’s gone.” Her eyes met his and her voice hardened. “Jackson’s your man, Sullivan. I’m holding you responsible for anything that’s happened to Angelica.”

“ If anything’s happened to her and if Hank behaved un-professionally, then I’ll accept that responsibility,” he said curtly. “But maybe you should keep personal out of this yourself, honey.”

Bailey stiffened. “What possible connection could there be between my problem with one of your investigators and the way I feel about you personally?”

“You know damn well what the connection is. It’s not Hank Jackson who blew it as far as you’re concerned, is it? It’s me. I’m the one who screwed up big time.”

Raking his hair back with one hand in a suddenly frustrated gesture, he held her gaze intently. “I always wanted to call you up and apologize for the way I behaved, but I figured you’d just slam the phone down as soon as you heard my voice,” he said softly. “But you’re here now. I’m sorry for what happened last year, Bailey. No excuses. I handled things badly.”

She stared at him, taken completely off guard. Once she would have given almost anything to hear him say what he’d just said, she thought. For months after, her heart had skipped a beat every time her phone had rung, thinking it might—just might—be him. But as he’d said, he’d never called.

She hadn’t been able to forget him completely, but she’d gotten on with her life. His twelve-months-late apology shouldn’t have the power to rip away the scar tissue of composure it had taken her so long to build up.

But it did. And all of a sudden she was back there in his house, standing in the doorway of his study and clad only in one of his shirts, listening to him methodically pull her world to bits.

Bailey blinked. Her throat felt as if it had a drawstring around it and someone had just tugged the drawstring shut.

“You’re wrong, Sullivan. There’s nothing personal left at all between us. I’m over you completely.” Her voice was barely audible. “Want proof?”

She got to her feet and leaned over the desk until she was close enough to him to lightly grasp the pearl-gray silk of his tie. Sullivan half rose from his chair, his eyes dark with suspicion.

“What the hell—” he began, but she didn’t give him a chance to finish. With a swift movement she brought her lips to his. Her tongue darted out and flicked the corner of his mouth teasingly, and immediately she felt a tremor run through him and heard his sudden indrawn breath. Those eyes, which only a moment ago had been narrowed and wary, closed, the thick lashes fanning against the hard ridge of his cheekbones.

Bailey kept her own open with an effort and fought down the dazed languor that she could feel spreading through her. She couldn’t keep this up for more than a second or so, she told herself disjointedly. Already the taste of him was spilling through her like some kind of dangerous intoxicant, addictive and seductive.

It had taken long months to break that addiction the last time. She wasn’t going to let herself get hooked on it again.

Her hand tightened on his tie. She ran her tongue lightly across his parted lips, forcing herself to ignore the impulse to explore deeper, and finished up at the opposite corner of his mouth with another little flick of her tongue.

“Completely. Over. You,” she whispered against his mouth. Then she drew back from him and let go of his tie.

His eyes opened and he stared at her in disbelief, his gaze still slightly unfocused and his breath audibly shallow. She kept her own expression impassive, willing herself not to betray the shakiness she was feeling. She gave him a brief smile.

“So now that you know it’s not personal, what are you planning to do about finding my sister?”

He didn’t answer her. Instead, he slowly lowered himself to his chair, his eyes never leaving hers. “That was dirty fighting, honey,” he said softly. “You’ve changed.”

She sat down herself, her legs feeling as if they couldn’t support her a minute longer. “Maybe I have, Sullivan. Maybe you changed me.” She shrugged tightly. “You played me for a fool once. I came so damned close to falling in love with you that one more kiss would have done it. I looked at you and saw the person I’d been waiting for all my life—a sexy, gorgeous man with a wicked sense of humor who, by some miracle, was falling in love with me.” She paused. “I thought we were two halves of a whole,” she added. “I was wrong.”

For a moment she thought he was about to speak, but when he said nothing she continued, her tone brisker.

“Anyway, we both know how that turned out. I was a wreck for about a week after, and then for two weeks more I think I hated you. But after a while I realized that was simply the way you were, and to expect anything more of you had been unreasonable of me. You’ve got a reputation, Sullivan. I was well aware of it before I went home with you the first time.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say I’ve got a reputation,” he said shortly.

“Please.” Her smile was humorless. “Of course you do, and of course you know it. You never stay with the same woman for more than a month or so, but that doesn’t matter, because the women you date prefer brief relationships. You don’t like intense, you like casual. You say that you intend to settle down one day, but no one’s putting their money on the likelihood of that happening.”

“I see.” He looked away, and then back at her, his expression shuttered. “That’s quite a list, honey. Anything on the plus side that you can think of?”

She blinked, wondering if she’d imagined the thread of unsteadiness she thought she’d heard in his voice. Of course she had, she told herself impatiently. She hadn’t exactly hit the man with any painful revelations about himself.

“On the plus side, you’re a damn good investigator,” she said smoothly. “Or at least you used to be. That’s why I came—”

“Sully?”

The interruption came from the doorway and, looking over her shoulder, Bailey saw Sullivan’s indispensable secretary, Moira, standing there surveying them quizzically. The slim, dark-haired woman sounded hesitant.

“Jackson hasn’t been in to work for the past three days, and Shirley in personnel says she hasn’t been able to contact him at home. It seems that his line’s out of order.” Moira’s expression clouded. “You’d better send someone over to his house to see what’s wrong, Sully. I—I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Chapter Two

One way or another, Bailey Flowers had been the biggest mistake of his life, Terrence Sullivan told himself, pressing the button for the elevator and slanting a sideways glance at the straight-backed figure beside him. He just wasn't sure what part had been a mistake—acting so out of character as to let himself get involved with her in the first place, or reverting at the last possible moment back to type and letting her walk away for good.

The former, of course, he thought with a familiar twinge of self-disgust. He'd known from the moment he'd laid eyes on her that she was capable of blowing the precariously fragile existence he'd carved out for himself all the way to hell and gone. He'd known she wasn't the type that he'd been so careful to restrict himself to up until then. A few laughs, a couple of heated encounters between the sheets, and the women he usually dated would be casting their big blue eyes around as restlessly as he was, looking for someone new.

Bailey's eyes were the color of water running over stones in a stream. They hadn't glanced around restlessly; they'd been direct and clear, looking at him and only him. Sometimes he'd even had the unsettling feeling that her hazel eyes could look right through him and see everything he'd always kept so well hidden.

The rest of her was a combination of ordinary attributes that somehow added up to beauty. Her hair was a rich, peaty brown, with glints of honey and amber in it. She'd pinned it up on top of her head once, and the exposed nape of her neck had excited him as no blatant display of any other woman's cleavage ever had. Her mouth was wide, and a dead giveaway to whatever she was feeling. She was slim, her muscles had definition, and all in all she was as unlike the kittenish blondes he was used to as possible.

He'd fallen for her like a ton of bricks.

Things had ended badly between them, and it had been his fault entirely. But as brief as their affair had been, there had been moments about it that he'd clung to since she'd walked out on him. One wet afternoon they'd gone to a horrendously bad kickboxing double feature, and Bailey had laughed so hard she'd spilled a jumbo carton of popcorn all over him. Once they'd gone on a picnic, and she'd fallen asleep in his lap under a big shade tree, with the sunlight dappling her features, the breeze stirring those honey-amber strands of hair, and him just watching her, drinking in all the delicate details of her face and stamping them on his memory. He could remember every single time they'd made love—her hands on him, his on her, the scent of her skin and the taste of her mouth and the small shallow sigh she gave just before the two of them reached the limits of their control and soared over the far edge of desire together.

But from her attitude toward him since she'd walked into his office, it was all too obvious she'd kept none of those memories. And if they didn't exist for her, then maybe one day he would lose them, too. Fear shafted through him, bright and painful.

"My sister and now your best operative. Are you starting to see a pattern here?"

Wrenching his thoughts back to the present, Sullivan frowned as the elevator doors opened and Bailey stepped in. He followed her and the doors slid closed behind him.

"Not yet. But there's something taking shape I don't like." He reached over and grasped her shoulder lightly. Immediately she stiffened.

"Hands off, Sully. Like I told you, this is strictly work."

"I know." He pivoted her around to face him. "And like you also said, my firm screwed up. Why don't you go back to Triple-A and I'll call you after I talk to Hank? There's no need for you to be involved in this."

She gave him a blankly incredulous look. "Come again?"

He sighed. “Let’s face it, the past half hour just proved we can’t even keep up a civilized facade when we’re together.” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his suit. “Hell, we’ve got a history, and my part in it isn’t anything I feel too proud about. Let me find Hank, locate Angelica, and send you a report when I’m through.”

“You’re giving me the brush-off.” Her voice was dis-believing. “Again.”

“For crying out loud, Bailey, it’s not like that at—” he began, but she cut him off.

“It’s exactly like that.” Her glance flicked to somewhere a little lower than his midsection, and then back again to his face. “Tell me, Sully, are they made of brass? Is that your secret? Because you’ve got a nerve like I just don’t freakin’ believe!”

Her eyes glinted ominously. “Your conscience is bugging you. Tough. Learn to live with it, because this time I’m not going to quietly disappear just to make things easier on you. I’m coming with you to talk to Jackson. You owe me that much, at least.”

The elevator doors opened to the lobby, and the guard behind the desk looked over at them. He gave the man a brief nod and switched his attention back to Bailey.

“It won’t work, you and me together, and you know it, lady.” He shrugged. “Within twenty-four hours you’ll be at my throat or I’ll have you in my bed—and neither of those scenarios can have a happy ending.”

“You never know.” Her tone was ice. “Why don’t we give that first one a shot and see how it plays out?”

He wasn’t going to win this one, Sullivan told himself in defeat. He wasn’t even sure he wanted to. He took a deep breath.

“Move that sweet butt and let’s get going, honey.”

For a moment—just for a moment—the woman he’d once known looked up at him through those clear, brilliant eyes. Then she was gone again.

“Don’t push me, Sullivan.” Her lips tightened. “I’m in no mood, believe me.”

No matter what she’d said to him, it looked like Bailey Flowers was back in his life again, he told himself as he exited the building behind the slim, straight figure striding ahead of him to the parking lot. And no matter what he’d said to her, he was glad she was.

Except that in a day or so he was going to have to arrange things so that she walked away from him again. But this time he’d have to make her hate him enough to stay away, Sullivan thought wearily.

And this time it would have to be for good.

IT SEEMED AS THOUGH they’d hit upon a way of being together that didn’t lead to a confrontation, Bailey thought—total silence. So far on the drive to Jackson’s house neither one of them had said a word. Sullivan had concentrated on avoiding the worst of the traffic snarl-ups, she had stared out of her window, and an edgy peace was prevailing.

She closed her eyes, acutely aware of his presence beside her, and tried to make some sense of the way she’d acted back in his office. She’d walked in there planning to keep her emotions under control whatever the provocation, but within minutes she’d—she’d—

For crying out loud, Flowers, she told herself uncomfortably, within minutes you practically had your tongue in his mouth. How restrained was that?

Even so, right up until the second her lips had touched his she’d thought she could handle it, because what she’d told him was true—she was over Terrence Patrick Sullivan. Completely and totally over him. So why at the exact moment of contact had she experienced that icily electric thrill, as if she had leaped recklessly out into empty space and was suddenly plunging toward destruction?

Her only consolation was that he’d obviously been hit by the same force that had smashed her detachment to bits. And although she was pretty sure she’d hidden her reaction from him, Bailey thought shakily, there had been no mistaking his response for anything other than pure, immediate desire.

But that meant nothing. She opened her eyes. If all she wanted from the man was another brief physical fling, she could be in his bed within twenty-four hours. She could have those strong, hard hands on whatever part of her body she chose. She could see those blue, blue eyes looking down on her and becoming blindly hazed with passion. She could feel his mouth the way she used to feel it, slowly and unerringly igniting every secret desire she'd ever imagined.

But that would be all she would ever have from him. And that was why she was over him.

"The way I hear it, your guy Jackson used to have an alcohol-abuse problem," she said abruptly. "How under control is it?"

A driver in front of them made a typical Boston lane change—no signal and at the last possible minute—and Sullivan jammed on his brakes. He looked over at her. "Hank takes it day by day, just like any other recovering alcoholic. He's got his five-year pin from AA, if that's what you're getting at, and I'd trust him with my life."

"But you're still checking up on him personally," she argued. "You've got some doubts about him, haven't you?"

"No." His tone was flat and uncompromising. "If he hasn't been at work for the past few days then something's the matter. I should have known about this sooner." He geared the Jaguar down as they entered a rotary, merging seamlessly with the flow of traffic. "You were right about one thing. I've let myself slack off these last few months."

There was a hard edge to his voice, but Bailey knew instinctively it wasn't directed at her. It was directed at himself, she thought curiously, darting a look at him through her lashes, but self-chastisement was something that the Terry Sullivan she knew didn't indulge in.

His jaw was set and his expression was unreadable. Maybe she'd imagined that tone of disgust in his voice, she thought hesitantly, but now that she was studying him, she realized there were other changes she hadn't noticed earlier. They were subtle, but they were there.

There was a steel-wire tenseness about him that betrayed itself in the grim lines that bracketed his mouth. His face was leaner somehow, his cheekbones harder looking. He drove with the same casual competence he'd always had, but on closer inspection she could see that the knuckles of the hand wrapped carelessly around the steering wheel were held tightly enough that they were whiter than the rest of his skin.

At first glance he still gave the impression of a big, lazily sexy man with not much more on his mind than the nearest attractive female. He gave that impression because he wanted to give that impression, she thought slowly. Had it always been a facade? Had it been a facade even when she'd known him a year ago?

"Sully? The man was a maniac—always volunteering for suicide missions, always with that incredibly charming but quite mad grin on his face. It got worse after the Salazar woman was killed."

The gray-haired British officer's words came back to her, and so did the feeling of frustration she'd felt when the man had refused to elaborate any further on what he'd told her. The name of Maria Salazar had had that effect on others who had known Sullivan, too. One of his closest friends, a pale-eyed, grimly silent mercenary named Quinn McGuire, had simply gotten up from the table and walked away when she'd asked him what he knew about the woman.

But right now wasn't the time to go into the subject of Maria Salazar. She cleared her throat awkwardly.

"You run a different kind of operation than Triple-A. With the dozens of case files that Sullivan Investigations must be working on at any given time, it's not possible for you to be familiar with each one personally. I was out of line saying that."

"Yeah, but that's what I liked about you, honey." Like magic, the grim look had disappeared from his face. One corner of his mouth lifted wryly as he briefly switched his attention from the traffic to her. "You were always out of line. I've missed that."

He didn't know it, but he couldn't have said anything more calculated to wipe out the fragile détente she'd been about to embark on. Bailey stiffened.

"If you missed anything at all about me, it was nobody's fault but your own. You had me. You got bored. End of story." Her tone was barbed. "But since you like it when I cross the line, I'll oblige. Tell me, Sullivan, why did you have to destroy me? When you were talking on the phone to your newest plaything that morning, you knew I was right behind you and hearing every word you were saying, didn't you?"

"I knew." His admission took her aback for a moment, but his next words floored her. "I planned it that way." He shrugged. "You had a concept of me that wasn't real. A clean break seemed best."

His words were completely uninflected. Unhurriedly he swung the Jaguar down a smaller side street lined with older, slightly dilapidated homes, as Bailey scrambled to cope with his unwelcome revelation.

She'd lied to herself, she thought. She'd never gotten over him—not totally. It had taken this latest admission of his to open her eyes, but this time she wanted to be absolutely sure she understood him.

"You say my concept of you wasn't real. What do you mean?" she asked carefully.

"You were beginning to think of me as someone you could build a future with." He could have been talking about the weather, there was so little emotion in his voice. "Your faith in me was all wrong, but you couldn't seem to see that. I did you a favor, Bailey. I let you see what kind of man I really was before it was too late."

"Your timing could have been a little better," she said, still not looking at him. There was a far-off roaring in her ears that made it hard for her to hear her own voice. It was as if she were holding a conch shell and listening to imaginary waves crashing against an imaginary shore, she thought foolishly—as if she was standing in the middle of a desert, longing for a sea that didn't exist.

"My timing could have been a lot better," Sullivan said harshly. Pulling in to the curb in front of a small bungalow, he switched off the ignition and turned to her. "I never should have gotten involved with you at all."

"So why did you?" she rasped, amazed to find that her voice still worked in any fashion at all. "If going out with me in the first place was such a big mistake on your part, why did you?"

His eyes darkened as he looked at her. "For God's sake, do you think I had any choice?" he said tightly. "You came into my life. I took one look at you and I was lost. I didn't care if it was the smart thing to do, the responsible thing to do, or the right thing to do—I wanted you. Even knowing that I was going to have to make you walk away in a day or two didn't matter, honey." He rubbed the heel of his hand against his mouth in frustration. "You don't get it, do you?"

"What's there to get, for God's sake?" Her eyes, wide and uncomprehending, were fixed on his. "You haven't told me anything yet! I'm a pretty simple girl, Sullivan, so why don't you give it to me in words of one syllable, so I can finally grasp it and get on with my life?"

Her voice had risen, and in the close confines of the Jaguar's interior they sounded shockingly loud. He looked away.

"Hell, I've said too much already. I'm a bastard, honey, and you're better off without me. There's your simple answer, so let's just leave it at that." He reached for the door. "Come on, let's see if Jackson's here and get some answers from him."

Without waiting to see if she was following him, in one swiftly fluid movement he got out of the car and started up the cracked walk to the bungalow.

Bailey didn't move. She'd told him she'd come to get some answers about her sister's whereabouts, and that was true. But if she was honest with herself, after they found out where Angelica was, there was still another mystery she needed to find some answers to, another woman she wanted to ask him about.

Maria Salazar was dead. If she existed at all, it was as a ghost. There was no reason why she should still have any power over Sullivan.

But she did, Bailey thought fearfully. She didn't know why she was so certain about that, but she was. Maria Salazar had taken Sullivan away from her, and she was going to find out why.

She looked up. His hands in his pockets, he was waiting at the bungalow's front door, and with sudden resolve she got out of the car. Her determination wavered for a moment, but then she set her shoulders and started up the concrete walk. Even as she did, she saw him slip something out of his pocket.

He was breaking in, she thought in faint shock. She quickened her pace and reached him just as the door swung open.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, nervousness overlaying the jumble of conflicting emotions she'd just been experiencing. "That's breaking and entering, Sullivan—we could both lose our licenses!"

"This was stuck in the mail slot."

His voice was curt. He handed her a business card and she took it from him reluctantly. It bore the name of an S. Wilkes, who was apparently a regional sales director for some unknown company, and a phone number. Flipping it over impatiently, she saw a scrawled message.

"Hank—missed you at the last two meetings. Call me."

"Wilkes is a friend from AA," Sullivan said. "Hank's mentioned him once or twice." He frowned. "Those meetings are his lifeline, Bailey. He doesn't miss them. There's something wrong here."

She met his eyes. "I agree, but it's pretty obvious what it is," she said, trying not to sound brusque. "He's fallen off the wagon, Sullivan. Your boy Jackson's probably out on a bender."

He turned from her abruptly, his expression unreadable. "I don't believe that. I'm going in."

Before she could say another word, he stepped across the threshold, and without even having seen him reach for it, she saw that his gun was in his hand. She looked apprehensively over her shoulder. It was midafternoon, and apart from an old man a few houses down dozing on his porch, the street was deserted. Stifling her annoyance, she slipped quickly in after him and closed the door quietly behind her.

The minuscule front hall opened immediately onto a cramped, untidy kitchen. On the counter an empty bottle lay on its side, and the broken shards of a smashed glass were strewn nearby on the linoleum floor.

"Hell." In front of her, Sullivan slowly holstered his gun. He turned to her, his mouth tight. "Looks like you were right, doesn't it? I'll check the bedroom in case he's sleeping it off in there."

Shrugging in resignation, he started to step across the broken glass, but then he stopped, his glance sharpening on the fallen bottle on the counter. He set it upright, turning it so that the label faced them. She looked at him, confused, and saw the broad shoulders stiffen under the impeccably cut jacket.

"Hank's not a rye drinker. Somebody didn't do their homework," he said grimly.

His hand went to his holster again, and all of a sudden the Armani suit might just as well have been fatigues, and the small, untidy kitchen an ominously silent jungle. He hadn't put his former profession behind him at all, Bailey thought with quick insight. He reacted like a soldier. Just below the casually lazy surface of the man was a tense alertness, and at the first sign of trouble his military instincts took over.

Except she couldn't see what had aroused his suspicions.

"He's an alcoholic," she said dismissively. "If he wanted a drink badly enough he'd break into the cooking sherry."

"Maybe he would, at that. But he still wouldn't choose a grain-based alcohol, and if he had, he'd be lying on the floor with that glass, his throat swollen closed," Sullivan snapped. "He's even allergic to bread, for God's sake. This is some kind of setup."

"A setup for what? To make it look like the man fell off the wagon?" She stared at him in frustration. "For crying out loud, Sully, it doesn't make sense. For one thing, who knew we were coming here today? Who would have expected you to barge in illegally the way you just did?" A strand of hair had escaped from her clip, and she blew it away from her eyes with an impatient breath. "Let's check out the rest of the house before we jump to any conclusions. Maybe he's in the bedroom with an empty bottle of vodka, sleeping it off. Maybe the rye was for a friend."

Without waiting for him to respond, she pushed past him with more annoyance than the situation warranted. With a muttered oath, he grabbed her arm and stopped her.

"I'm armed. You're not. I'll take point position and you bring up the rear," he said tightly. "In fact, I'd prefer it if you stayed right here."

"Forget it. I'm a real woman, not one of your bimbos," she retorted. "If you're going to lead, lead, but I'm coming with you."

He wasn't happy about it, she knew. Too bad, she thought as she shadowed him from room to room, hanging back a little as he cautiously entered each one. She wasn't happy with the situation, either, but her reasons were harder to figure out. Why did his loyalty to the man who worked for him, however misguided she might see it as, irritate her so? They entered the bathroom, and she was jolted out of her thoughts.

"Wait a minute," she said as Sullivan turned to leave. "There's something odd here."

"What?" He shrugged and looked around. "There's nothing out of place."

"That's just it," Bailey said slowly. "Hank's a single guy, and the rest of the house is as untidy as you'd expect it to be. But this bathroom's immaculate. The taps actually sparkle, for heaven's sake."

"And the floor's been washed." He looked down, and then over at the towel rack. She followed his glance.

"Not even a facecloth," she said, frowning. "What does he use to dry himself with?"

"A towel, like everyone else does." His eyes darkened. "But towels can be used to mop up blood, too."

She felt an icy chill settle over her as his words sank in, and it was all she could do to stop herself from backing instinctively out of the small room. Had a man been killed here? Had he been killed so violently that his murderer had had to get down on his hands and knees after the deed and scrub every square inch of the floor to remove all traces of his blood? The bath was a combination shower, she noted. There were plastic rings on the rod, but no curtain. Had it been pressed into grisly service as a makeshift shroud by someone desperate to dispose of a body?

She was letting her imagination run away with her, Bailey told herself sharply. What they had here was an empty house, an empty bottle and an empty bathroom. Combined with Jackson's absence from work and the little she knew about him, her first guess had to be the right one.

But Sullivan wouldn't accept that. He seemed willing to stand by the missing Jackson no matter what.

And that was what stung, she realized. His loyalty to a man who worked for him was unshakable. His loyalty to her had been limited to three days, at most.

"I'm checking out that last room," she said shortly, turning from him back into the small hallway. "What is it, some kind of den?"

He was right behind her, but the door was only a few feet away, and before he could stop her she'd opened it and stepped into the room impatiently. That was as far as she got.

Her eyes widened in shock as she surveyed her surroundings, and behind her she heard Sullivan swear under his breath as his arm went around her and he pulled her closer to him.

It had once been an office, but now it was a disaster area. A computer lay smashed on the floor, and a filing cabinet was tipped over on its side, its drawers removed and upside down nearby. Drifts of paper covered every available surface, obviously ripped from the empty file folders that were scattered about. Whoever had done this had been in a murderous rage, Bailey thought shakily. He'd been looking for something, and either he hadn't found it or the fact that he'd had to search for it in the first place had prompted him to trash everything in sight. She took a hesitant step forward, and then looked down.

She was standing on one of the few file folders that still seemed to contain something. Moving her foot, she bent down and picked it up.

"Plowright," Sullivan said tersely, reading the typed label out loud. "Angelica's case. Is his report all there?"

Bailey flipped open the folder and leafed through the neatly numbered pages. "It seems to be," she said slowly. "Whoever did this, he couldn't have been searching for Angel's file. We'd better call the police."

"Not yet." He hunkered down, sifting through papers, scanning them quickly and then letting them fall to the floor again. He straightened and looked at her. "They're what I thought," he said briefly. "Hank normally wouldn't keep confidential files here—this is his research for a book he's writing on famous crimes of the last century. The Plowright file is the only one here that anyone could have been looking for, so why the hell didn't they take it?"

"Because they didn't want the report itself," she said slowly, her mind racing. "They wanted the photos that went with it—the photos of the woman that Aaron was with last weekend. That's what this is all about, Sullivan. Someone's trying to conceal her identity, and it looks like they'll go to any lengths to do so."

She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. "Maybe even murder," she added shakily, her eyes meeting his.

Chapter Three

"Let's take it from the top again. Why the hell did you and your lady here break into the house anyway?"

They were back at Sullivan Investigations, where Sullivan had told the police they would be when he'd contacted them from the trashed bungalow on his cell phone. Bailey could guess why he hadn't wanted to hang around waiting for the authorities to show up, and as soon as the two of them returned to the office her guess had been proved right. Giving a quick rundown of the situation to three of his top operatives, he'd grimly instructed them to drop whatever other cases they were on and start looking for their missing comrade.

His haste in getting a search under way was justified. Within minutes of the briefing session, two police detectives had showed up asking for him and Bailey, and it was clear from the attitude of the younger man of the pair that he was prepared to grill them all night if he didn't get the answers he wanted. So far he'd concentrated his attention on Sullivan, but at this last query Bailey couldn't keep silent any longer.

"Hold it right there, Detective Straub." She pushed herself from the edge of the gleamingly polished conference table that she'd been leaning against and took a step nearer the man. He was fair skinned, with sandy hair that was already starting to recede, and at her interruption he turned a blank look upon her, as if he'd forgotten she was in the room. His partner, a man about Sullivan's age, burly and solid, swiftly hid the flash of amusement that momentarily lightened his somber expression.

"I'm not anyone's lady, Detective." She bit the words off curtly. "I run an investigative agency of my own—Triple-A Acme Investigations. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"It's the first one in the phone book," Sullivan added blandly.

She shot him an annoyed look. "I dropped by this afternoon to discuss an unrelated business matter with Mr. Sullivan. When he learned that one of his employees hadn't been in to work for a few days and couldn't be contacted, I suggested we continue our talk on the way to Jackson's place so he could check the situation out." She didn't meet Sullivan's alert gaze. "Frankly, I think he acted entirely appropriately. Our first thought was that the man had been taken ill and possibly needed assistance. It wasn't until we saw that his house had obviously been searched that we knew the matter was anything more than just an employee laid low by a flu bug."

She was lying through her teeth, Bailey thought in faint surprise, and until the words had actually come out of her mouth, she hadn't known that she had no intention of telling the truth—the whole truth, she fudged weakly to herself. After all, she had come here originally to discuss business with Sullivan, not realizing initially that it would have any connection to the absence from work of one of his operatives.

If it did, she added mentally. Finding her sister's case file at the man's house wasn't proof positive that the two disappearances were linked. It could mean quite the contrary, but that didn't alter the fact that there was one other detail that she—and Sullivan, too, she now realized—hadn't bothered to mention to the two detectives. She resisted the impulse to glance guiltily at her oversize shoulder bag, only a few feet away from her on a chair, but when Straub's partner finally spoke, she wondered at first whether he'd somehow been able to read her mind.

"Seems strange that someone would go to so much trouble to empty filing cabinets when all they contained were historical research for a book," he mused, propping one polyester-clad thigh on the conference table and fishing in the pocket of his disreputable sport coat for something. His hand withdrew, and in it was a paper-wrapped toothpick. With the same fascination that a mouse would give a snake, Bailey watched him as he slowly peeled the paper away, wadding it up into a tiny ball and looking around the room as if there was nothing more important on his mind right now than to find a wastebasket in which to throw his minuscule piece of trash. Not seeing one, he sighed and

dropped the wadded-up ball into his pocket. Then he inserted the toothpick between his lips and gave it a thoughtful chew.

Straub looked as if he was about to burst into impatient speech again, but the man that Sully had called Fitzgerald gave him a glance and, with obvious difficulty, Straub bit back whatever he'd been about to say.

Fitzgerald was the bulldog to Straub's high-strung fox terrier, she thought suddenly. With his big build running slightly to fat and his slow, deliberate movements, he gave the impression of being the stereotypical plodding cop.

But he was the one she had to worry about. His next comment, although it was phrased as an afterthought, made that abundantly clear.

"I know I don't have to ask if you left the scene exactly as you found it, Sullivan. You've been in this business long enough not to be removing evidence, haven't you?"

There was the faintest of brogues in his inquiry, and when Sullivan spoke his voice held an echo of it.

"Sure, Fitz, and you were right the first time. You don't have to ask." His attitude was as lazily unconcerned as the other man's, but Bailey had the unsettling feeling that the real conversation between the two was as antagonistic as it was unspoken.

"I've changed, Fitz," Sullivan went on, pulling out a chair from the table and straddling it backward. He folded his arms along its back and shook his head ruefully. "You still see me as that crazy lad I used to be, but those days are behind me. I've learned to play by the rules, now."

"Is that so?" There was a harder note in Fitzgerald's voice, but his expression was one of mild interest, no more. "The way I heard it, it took you entirely too long to learn that lesson, and it was an expensive one. But you seem to have come through unscathed."

"The same way you came through that unpleasantness at that godforsaken little desert town unscathed," Sullivan said softly. "Who the hell were we fighting that time, anyway, Fitz? I forget."

His arms were still folded casually along the back of his chair, and his posture was easy and relaxed, but glancing sharply at his face, Bailey saw a muscle at the side of his jaw tense. Puzzled, she flicked her gaze back to Fitzgerald. There was a rigid stillness on his expression, and she saw that Sullivan's words had meant something to him.

"The enemy," the detective said shortly. "That's all we ever had to know, Sully. But maybe we were always really fighting ourselves. You saved my life that night—except we never should have been so far away from backup in the first place, Terry, and you know it."

Their eyes locked, and for a moment Bailey had the uncomfortable feeling that if she dared to step between the burly police detective and the big man lounging in the chair, it would be like intercepting twin laser beams. She'd known from Sullivan's greeting of Fitzgerald that there was some level of familiarity between them, but now she realized that that familiarity ran much deeper than she had first suspected.

Fitzgerald had obviously served with Sullivan as a soldier of fortune. Unlike the graying Englishman she'd spoken with that day on the Common, it seemed he hadn't approved of his methods.

"What the hell has this trip down memory lane got to do with anything, Donny?" Straub burst out, his limited supply of patience obviously depleted. "Whatever wars you two fought together in are long over, so why don't we get back to the matter at hand here?" He turned to Sullivan. "I think we should go over your story one more time, mister. Maybe you'll remember a few more details down at the station."

He'd done what she had known instinctively would be foolish, Bailey thought. He'd interfered in whatever private battle was going on between Sullivan and Fitz, and suddenly the two ex-comrades were once again on the same side, united against him.

"Wars are never over, Petey boy," his partner said in a deceptively silky tone. "Not that you'd know about that, since you never fought in one. If you had, you might have learned something about

reading men. Sully here is lying about something, I'm sure of it—but I'd bet my next paycheck that he's telling the truth when he says he doesn't know what happened to his man Jackson."

"Yeah? Well, any lie is grounds to take him in as far as I'm concerned," Straub said tightly, his fair skin coloring. "Once we get him into an interrogation room, I'm willing to bet my paycheck that I can hold out longer than he can. I want some answers from your foxhole buddy, and I'm going to get them."

Sullivan finally spoke. The edge of amusement in his voice was deliberate, Bailey knew. "I don't think so, boyo. Wearing you down would be so easy it wouldn't even be fun. You might be hell on grilling petty thieves and hookers, but you're way out of your league with me. Your partner here will back me up on that one." He glanced over at Fitzgerald, and the burly detective allowed a ghost of a grin to cross his features. He shifted the toothpick in his mouth and nodded.

"Thirty-seven hours of questioning by the leader of that insane rebel faction in the mountains, wasn't it, Sully?"

"Thirty-eight," Sullivan said, frowning slightly. "Or maybe thirty-nine. That last hour was pretty much a blur. I was beginning to think you and the boys had taken a vote and decided to wash your hands of me."

"When we finally showed up, I seem to recollect you were going through Al-Hamid's family tree for him. It was hard to make out exactly what you were saying through a broken jaw and with the side of your face the approximate size of a football, but it appeared as though he was getting the gist. Something about a sheep, or was it a goat?"

Sullivan grinned wryly. "Hell, all I was trying to do by then was make him mad enough to get careless. It would have worked, too, if you and McGuire hadn't barged in just when I was getting to the good part." He glanced over at Fitzgerald. "Anyway, it all worked out in the end. I got the troop strength and materiel figures we needed, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did." The faint amusement left the other man's face, and his tone was quiet. "And you nearly got what you really wanted. Of course, that didn't stop you from trying again."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Fitz." Watching him, Bailey saw the blue eyes become instantly opaque, although there was no change in the easy good humor of his expression. "I got out alive—that time with Al-Hamid, and every other time."

The detective's gaze was steady and unwavering, and under it Sullivan looked suddenly away. "Don't lie to yourself, Sully." There was an odd intensity in his tone. "Lie to everyone else if you have to, but not to yourself. You did get what you wanted in the end, didn't you? You're a dead man walking," he said softly, his voice pitched so low that Bailey had to strain to hear him.

The conference room was well lit and spacious, but all of a sudden she felt as if the walls were closing in on her and the lights had flickered and powered down. Dead man walking. What did Fitzgerald mean by that? Even as the question came into her mind, she knew it was unnecessary to voice it. The heavyset ex-soldier, with his deceptively stolid demeanor and his prosaically unimaginative manner, had simply put into words the impression that she had always told herself was too fanciful and melodramatic to consider. Fitz saw the same thing in Terrence Patrick Sullivan that she'd subconsciously seen the first time she'd laid eyes on him.

He was good-looking, charming and seemingly invulnerable, Bailey thought. But something had a claim on his soul, and eventually that something would call in its claim.

"Your Irish imagination is running away with you, boyo."

Sullivan's wry grin looked so natural that Bailey felt a momentary doubt. Maybe both she and Fitzgerald were wrong. Maybe Sully was exactly what he appeared to be on the surface, and what he insisted he was—a risktaker, yes, but with no more ulterior motivation behind his actions than an innate tendency to push situations to their limits, simply for the thrill of it.

"Next you'll be taking a leaf from Quinn McGuire's book of fairy tales and telling me that the wild geese have laid their mark on me. Is that what you think, Fitz—that they're waiting to take me

with them from some battlefield that still lies ahead? Because if you do, then you're forgetting one thing." His brogue thickened. "I've got no intention entirely of joining them in eternity. That's why I walked away from the profession, isn't it now? They can't take me if I never go back, Fitz."

His words were gently mocking, but, glancing surreptitiously at the man he was directing them at, Bailey didn't see an answering smile on Fitzgerald's face. Instead his eyes closed for an instant, as if in pain. Then he opened them again and fixed Sullivan with an unwavering gaze.

"They don't have to. You're already up there with them, Sully."

"I thought we were here on an investigation, Donny." Straub's interjection was harsh. "What's all this crap about freakin' geese and battlefields and fairy tales got to do with anything?"

"Nothing at all, Detective." Sullivan's answer was just as harsh, but although he was apparently answering Straub, he didn't take his eyes off Fitzgerald. "It's a legend, that's all. Your partner here likes to trot out his Irish fatalism once in a while. It's all part of it, like the wearing of the green on St. Paddy's Day, getting into drunken arguments with strangers over the Troubles and insisting that one day you're going back to the old country for good. Like you so eloquently phrase it, it's crap."

His grin was tight. "And to be sure, I'd love to get together and lift a pint to Erin go Bragh sometime with you, Fitz, but right now I've got a business to run. If your baby pit bull intends to take me in for questioning, let's go. I'll call my lawyer and tell him to meet us down at the station. If not, then let me get back to work. Jackson was supposed to be looking into a case of industrial espionage this week, and I'm going to have to get another operative to take over the file."

"All right, that's it." Straub's fair skin was mottled with anger. He took a step toward the chair that Sullivan was lounging in. "Call your lawyer now, mister, because you're under arrest—"

"For God's sake, Pete, put the cuffs away," his partner cut in tiredly. "Until we know what he lied about, it's hands off." The big man looked at the toothpick he was holding with sudden distaste, and then he sighed. "You know, Straub, I'm just counting the days until Tarranova comes back from maternity leave and you get assigned as temporary partner to some other hapless soul."

"When she does, Fitz, come back and pay me another visit." Rising easily from the chair he'd been straddling, Sullivan shoved it in under the table, the innocuous gesture clearly signifying that the meeting was over. "She's a sweetheart, besides being a damn good cop, and I wouldn't mind seeing Jennifer again. But from now on keep this rookie away from me and my people, understand?"

"I understand, Sully." Fitzgerald's voice lost its weary tone and took on a harder edge. "Don't worry, I won't return unless I have to." He stood in front of Sullivan, as if sizing him up. "Just seeing me brings it all back, and you can't live with that, can you? You never could."

"See you around, Fitz," Sullivan said shortly, walking to the doorway of the conference room and ignoring the other detective. "You know the way out."

"Yeah, I do." As Straub shot a black glance at Sullivan and stalked out of the room, Fitz hesitated. For the first time his attention focused on Bailey, and she felt oddly off balance under his intent scrutiny.

"You lied, too, Ms. Flowers," he said softly. "You didn't just come here on business. Take my advice and let him go, lady. He's gone already." The blue eyes narrowed on her searchingly. "But maybe you already knew that," he said, so quietly that Bailey realized Sullivan, a few feet away, wouldn't have heard him. "You can't save him, you know. No one ever could."

"Maybe no one ever tried." The words came from her mouth unthinkingly, and in just as low a tone as his. "Or maybe they just didn't try hard enough."

The big detective shook his head slowly. "You're as doomed as he is if you let yourself believe that. He can't change the road he's on. Don't go down it with him."

As Sullivan glanced over impatiently from the doorway, Fitzgerald gave Bailey one last look, and then turned from her. Without another word, he strode past his ex-comrade and was gone, leaving behind him a sudden silence.

Very carefully, Bailey walked over to the conference table. Pulling out a chair, she lowered herself into it, her movements slow and deliberate. The atmosphere in the room seemed close and heavy, but despite that she felt oddly chilled. She hugged herself for warmth and realized with a small shock that the fine hairs on her skin were standing up.

She didn't blame Straub for being confused. She had no idea what that conversation had been about. She didn't even know what her part in it had meant.

Why hadn't she laughed off Fitzgerald's cryptic warning, or at least asked him to explain what he'd meant by it? Why had she answered him the way she had, and so promptly?

Maybe they didn't try hard enough…Her lips pressed together in a line and she sat up straighter in the chair, feeling a flicker of anger catch somewhere deep inside her. She wasn't here to save Terrence Sullivan, dammit. She'd come here to get some answers about what had happened to Angelica. Admittedly, she'd also hoped to gain some closure on her former relationship with him by finally learning the truth about why he'd needed to tear her life apart so completely a year ago, but that had been for her own sake, not his.

She looked up as he moved from the doorway and met her eyes, his own as unclouded as if he'd already forgotten the scene that had just taken place with the two detectives.

"He knew we took the file." He perched on the edge of the long mahogany table and looked down at her, one corner of his mouth lifting. "Well, maybe he didn't know what we took, but he knew we had something from Jackson's house. Fitz doesn't miss much."

"I'd already come to that conclusion." She didn't match his light tone. "What was the legend he was talking about? What are the wild geese?"

" Who are the wild geese, darlin'," he corrected her, shrugging. "They're the souls of mercenaries who die in battle, if you're inclined to believe in that sort of thing. I'm not. Fitz and Quinn McGuire, another of my old comrades, are."

Despite his wry smile, his tone was clipped, and Bailey knew he was about to change the subject. Before he could, she went on, frowning. "Where are they supposed to be flying to?"

He gave an impatient sigh. "Fitz and his old wives' tales, for God's sake. The story goes that they're fated to fly for eternity, searching the world over for the homes they never had." Without seeming to realize what he was doing, his hand went to his pants pocket and pulled out a small object. He continued, his manner verging on brusqueness. "But he can't have it both ways. If his damned legend were true, then it'd be easy enough to escape fate. All a poor Irish boy like myself would have to do is turn his back on that life and take up another profession, and he'd be out of their reach. All my wars are behind me, honey. I'm safe from Fitz's ghosts now."

The small object was a shell. Bailey watched it flash and reappear as he unthinkingly maneuvered it between his fingers, like a gambler with one last coin. He saw her watching him, and his fingers stilled.

"That's pretty. Can I see it?"

She held out her hand, and after an almost imperceptible hesitation he dropped it into her palm. She looked at it more closely. It was fan shaped, with a perfectly round hole in the exact middle of the fan. It was smooth, as if its ridges had been worn down over the years, and instead of being cool, as she had expected, it felt oddly warm in her hand.

She looked up at Sullivan. "How did you drill such a tiny hole—" She halted abruptly, shocked at the expression on his face.

His eyes were dark with pain, and the skin over his cheekbones seemed to have tightened, sharpening the hard angles of his face. His lips were a tautly compressed line, and when he spoke they barely moved.

"I didn't drill it. It was formed that way, or at least that's what my father told me. He carried it on him for years. After he died, it was sent to me along with the rest of his final effects, and now I keep it on me, just like he did. He said it was his talisman."

As if he couldn't help himself, he held out his hand for the shell and she handed it back. As soon as his fingers wrapped around it, he seemed to relax, and carefully he dropped it into his pocket again.

"Psalm 91," he said, his voice once more edged with rueful humor. "'The arrow that flieth by day, the pestilence that walketh in darkness.' Thomas Sullivan believed that as long as he carried it, he would be protected from them, and now his son's carrying on the tradition. I guess there's a little superstition in me after all."

Superstition hadn't been the cause of that terrible bleakness she'd seen on his face, Bailey thought, shaken. But she knew the man well enough to realize that if that was what he wanted her to believe, nothing she could say would get anything more out of him. Needing suddenly to bring some semblance of normalcy back to the conversation, she reached for her purse on the chair beside her and pulled out the file.

"I guess this is called withholding evidence," she said, hoping that her voice sounded steadier than she felt. As if he was just as eager to seize upon a new topic as she was, Sullivan took the slim sheaf of papers she handed him.

"Obstructing the police in the commission of their duties, at least." He flipped through the first few pages of Jackson's report, scanning them rapidly. "Nothing here that you didn't already know, is there?"

"Just details." She lifted her shoulders. "But they'll help. He mentions the name of the hotel, for example, and the number of the room Plowright and his playmate were staying in."

"And the photos he took." Sullivan was on the last page of the report. "This is a list of them, with a description of where and when each one was taken. Listen to this. 'Roll 2, frame 16: Subject Plowright beside bed. Unidentified female companion on bed, wearing negligee. Blinds on hotel suite's French doors fully open.' He must have been using a telephoto lens to get that shot."

He handed the report to her. After a moment she looked up from it in disappointment. "That was the spiciest one he got. Before Plowright got down to business he closed the blinds."

"Yeah, I noticed that. Frame 19 is him, shirtless, closing them, according to Hank's list." Sullivan shrugged. "Still, it's pretty conclusive, even if they weren't caught on film actually doing the wild thing with each—"

"Little pitchers have big ears, Terry," a brisk voice said from the doorway. "I know it's asking a lot of you, but try to keep it clean for the next few minutes."

Bailey looked up swiftly. The woman who had spoken was fixing Sullivan with a glare from blue eyes that looked a lot like his. Her hair was as almost the same midnight shade as his was, too, and not much longer, its urchinlike cut framing an angry, heart-shaped face. Beside her was a young girl with long coltlike legs and a mane of coppery hair tamed into a thick braid that was coming undone.

Sullivan looked at his watch and then swore under his breath. "I said seven o'clock, didn't I?" he said weakly. "I'm sorry, Lee. Something came up and I lost track of the time. But you're here now, so why don't we—"

"Some things just never change, Terry. Not where the Sullivan men are concerned, anyway." The dark-haired woman's expression was tight and closed. "It's way after regular office hours, so I'm guessing this isn't a business appointment."

She jerked her head stiffly at Bailey, her voice rising. "Like father, like son. It's obvious that you can't fit into a normal life any more than Thomas could. Why don't you just go back to being a damned mercenary, like he did in the end?"

Chapter Four

Swiftly Ainslie turned on her heel. Shooting an agonized look of apology at Sullivan, the young redhead—Tara, Bailey guessed—followed her down the hall. Bailey waited for Sullivan to go after them and work his charm on his sister, but to her surprise he simply stood there, his hands clenched into fists at his sides, his eyes shadowed.

"I screwed up," he said harshly. "And with Lee, of all people. Dammit, I knew how fragile this relationship was—how the hell could I have let her down in exactly the same way."

She didn't understand all the ramifications of the scene she'd just witnessed, Bailey thought swiftly, but she knew one thing. For some reason her presence had seemed to be the decisive element for Sullivan's sister, the factor that had turned her anger to pain.

Some things never change—not where the Sullivan men are concerned…There'd been a rawness in Ainslie's voice as she'd made the accusation, and it had been the rawness of a wound that had never fully healed. She'd been there herself, Bailey thought in resignation. She knew what it felt like.

"For heaven's sake," she muttered, getting quickly out of her chair and striding to the doorway. "Covering your butt was the last thing I expected to be doing when I came here today, Sullivan."

She saw them as soon as she stepped into the hallway. Standing by the vacant reception desk—Moira had left for the day just after Fitzgerald and Straub had arrived—they were waiting for the elevator to arrive, and their discussion looked heated. Tara, almost as tall as Ainslie but with the awkward slenderness of a preteen, had her arms crossed tensely in front of her. Despite her antagonistic attitude and the trendy clothes she was wearing—a skinny baby tee that stopped just south of her belly button and jeans that rode low on her nonexistent hips—she only succeeded in looking heartbreakingly young and miserable.

Ainslie, on the other hand, appeared to have regained a little of her composure. She was wearing an outfit that was simply a more mature version of her goddaughter's—jeans and a multicolored sweater—but instead of looking vulnerable, she looked ready to punch in the elevator door. She was probably more than capable of doing so, Bailey thought nervously. Sullivan had mentioned once that Ainslie had boxed professionally in a women's featherweight division for a time, and now she trained her own fighters at the gym that she ran downtown.

But I know karate, Bailey told herself hollowly, advancing on them with a confidence she didn't feel. Besides, I made it to the finish in the Boston Marathon last year. I can probably outrun her.

"If you're here to relay an apology from my big brother, tell him to forget it," Ainslie snapped. She jabbed at the elevator call button impatiently. "And tell him his damned elevator's just as unreliable as he is," she added with an edge of frustration.

"He's not unreliable, Auntie Lee." Tara's bottom lip stuck out pugnaciously. "What's your problem with Uncle Sully, anyway? You didn't even let him explain why he hadn't shown up!"

"I didn't need to hear his explanation. The O'Connell women have heard enough explanations from the Sullivan men over the years, and I'm about to end the tradition right here and now. It's her birthday, for crying out loud." Ainslie directed this last sentence to Bailey, and her eyes were glittering with unshed tears. "Maybe you two had a hot date or something, but I would have thought even Terry would consider a young girl's thirteenth birthday dinner a little more important than his latest conquest."

"I'm not his latest conquest," Bailey finally managed to interject. "I'm last year's," she added dryly. "Which means that whatever you've got against him, I'd normally be on your side, except that this time it really wasn't his fault. One of his men went missing, and the police were here questioning him up until half an hour ago. You're lucky he didn't have to phone you from jail to make bail for him."

Ainslie's stunned gaze went past her, and Bailey turned to find Sullivan behind her. "It's true, Lee, but that's no excuse. I should have phoned you. I'm sorry."

"Who's missing?" His sister ignored his apology.

"Hank Jackson." He grimaced. "You've heard me speak of him—he's been with the agency since before I took it over from Uncle Sean. We think it might be tied to a case that Bailey was involved with."

"Bailey?" The navy gaze, not quite as dark as her brother's, switched back to Bailey and widened. "As in Flowers?"

"Cut it out, sis." Sullivan's tone was sharp, but it softened as he turned to Tara. "What a babe," he said admiringly. "New jeans, new top…" He paused and peered closely at the pink-cheeked young face. "And if I'm not mistaken, my little sister's finally caved in on the no-makeup rule now that you're officially a teenager. Is that eye shadow you're wearing?"

"Eye glimmer." Tara's blush deepened. "And lip gloss, too."

"Only for special occasions, and I'd better not catch you wearing it to school yet, young lady," warned Ainslie with mock gruffness. "The nuns would have my hide."

The elevator chose that moment to open, and on impulse Bailey turned to Sullivan. "I should leave. We can go over the Plowright file tomorrow and decide where we're going to take it from here," she said swiftly. "Why don't you three keep that pizza date you had planned?"

"I've got a better idea." Ainslie looked up at her brother, and before her features assumed their normally wry expression, Bailey saw a flash of loving concern pass across her face. "Why don't we order in here? It'll still be a party, but you and Bailey will have a chance to look over the file and make plans. I know you're worried about Hank, Terry," she added quietly.

"Cool!" Tara's eyes lit up with excitement. "While we're waiting for the pizza, can I log on to the Internet on your computer and e-mail my friends, Uncle Sully?"

"I guess so." Sullivan raised a dubious eyebrow. "But from now on you're going to have to use your own at home, sweetheart. I can't have you on mine all the time."

"But I don't have one at—" The inexpertly glossed mouth dropped open and the green eyes, beautiful despite the smear of shine that decorated each lid, widened. "You got me a computer for my birthday?" she squealed incredulously. "Oh, Uncle Sully, you're the greatest!"

She wrapped her arms around him, almost knocking him backward, and over her head he grinned weakly at his sister. "Don't be mad, Lee. I know you said it was too extravagant, but I wanted to. I'll cover the Internet charges, and I arranged for an extra phone line so yours wouldn't be tied up all the time. I hope you like lime," he said to the top of Tara's head. She was still hugging him. "Because that's the color I got. I thought it would go with those cat's-eyes of yours, sugar."

"I love lime! Is it here? Can we see it?" Tara turned to Ainslie, her face alight. "Do you mind phoning for the pizza while Uncle Sully shows me my computer, Auntie Lee? Double cheese, no anchovies, and pineapple on half, okay?"

"Only because it's your birthday." Ainslie shuddered, and then flapped her hand at her brother and her goddaughter. "Go on, Bailey and I can manage to order a pizza, I guess. I'll tell Martin at the security desk downstairs we're expecting a delivery."

"Order one for him and Mike, too." Fishing his wallet out of his pocket with difficulty, since Tara was still clinging to him like a limpet, Sullivan grinned. "But ask them first if they want pineapple on theirs. Their palates might not be sophisticated enough to handle it."

"My palate's not sophisticated enough. Or maybe it's just that I'm not a teenager anymore," Ainslie said wryly to Bailey as she slipped behind Moira's desk and punched in a number on the phone.

From Sullivan's office a couple of doors down the hall came a series of high-pitched exclamations, interspersed with the deeper tones of Sullivan explaining the features of Tara's new computer to her. Ainslie caught Bailey's amused expression and grinned herself.

"He's a pushover, but then so am I when it comes to her," she said ruefully. "She's a good kid. I just hope I'm raising her the way her mother would have wanted me to."

Within a matter of minutes, she'd placed the orders. The more subdued murmurs now coming from Sullivan's office seemed to signify that he and Tara had passed the bells-and-whistles stage of the computer demonstration and were now getting down to exploring its more complicated capabilities. Ainslie tipped her head to one side, listening.

"Nah," she said decisively. "I'm not going in. I might have been able to help them get it out of the box, but that's about where my expertise ends. No need to give them a chance to feel too superior to me."

"It sounds like they're getting along fine without us," Bailey agreed with a smile. "Tara's your adopted daughter?"

They entered the conference room and Ainslie pulled out one of the comfortably upholstered chairs that ringed the massive table. With a sigh she sat down, leaning back and propping her crossed legs on the gleaming tabletop. Her pose was almost identical to the one that Sullivan had been assuming when she'd first walked in on him in his office this morning, Bailey noted with amusement. It seemed that the two of them were alike in some ways, at least. She sat down herself, pushing the Plowright file aside for the moment.

"Her mom was my cousin." Ainslie raked back her glossy black bangs and met Bailey's gaze. "She got pregnant when she was a teenager herself, but instead of giving the baby up for adoption she insisted on keeping it. Everybody told her she was crazy, even the teenaged father, who promptly moved with his family out of state. But when Tara was born the whole O'Connell clan fell in love with her." Her smile was touched with sadness. "Seven years later Babs was gone. Leukemia," she said briefly. "It was as if she'd known she only had one chance to be a mother, and she'd made the most of it. Tara was her pride and joy."

"She must have been very close to you to leave her daughter in your care," Bailey said gently.

"Her mother was my mom's sister, and we moved in with them when my father left, so yeah, we were close." Ainslie looked over at her. "Thomas Sullivan was my father, but he just wasn't the type to settle down with one woman and a family, even though he already had a son from his first marriage. He was almost as good-looking as Terry is now, and women just couldn't resist him. He couldn't resist them, either. When my mother realized he was never going to change, she gave him his walking papers and he was gone, taking Terry with him. I was five years old, and I lost my father and my adored big brother in one day," she said softly. "I never saw Thomas again, and I didn't see Terry for years. We don't even share the same last name anymore—Mom changed it back after the divorce."

And that explained much of her reaction half an hour ago, Bailey thought with a rush of compassion. Ainslie O'Connell might be tough enough to deal with the sweat and blood of a boxing ring, but some part of her was still that little five-year-old who only knew that the males in her life had walked out one night and never come back to her. No wonder she was so wary with her brother—half brother, Bailey corrected herself. But how had it been for Sullivan? He would have been around Tara's age when his feckless charmer of a father had uprooted him for the second time in his life, continuing with him on the restless journey that apparently had been Thomas Sullivan's life.

"It sounds like Sully inherited more from his father than just those black Irish good looks," she hazarded.

"From what you said, I guess you've got firsthand knowledge of that." Ainslie put up a hand, frowning. "I'm not prying. But you're the only one of his women he ever mentioned by name."

"I wouldn't make too much of that if I were you," Bailey said impassively. "Your brother's moved on since last year, and so have I. I really did come here to see him on business today."

"That's too bad." Under straight dark brows, Lee looked appraisingly at her. "I've got a feeling that only the love of a good woman is going to be enough to save the man."

Bailey felt an uncomfortable prickling sensation run down the length of her spine at Ainslie's words. It was the second time today someone had tried to cast her in the role of Terrence Sullivan's savior, she thought sharply. If that was the impression she was giving out, she wanted to dispel it —and fast.

"I'm sure he'll have no trouble finding plenty of takers for the position," she said. "But right now I've got a more immediate problem to worry about, and so does he. I seem to have mislaid a sister, and his best operative's gone missing."

She'd just finished sketching out the details of Angelica's disappearance and their discovery of Jackson's trashed home office when Sullivan joined them. He was bearing a large flat box, and under one arm he had three cans of cola that were in danger of falling. Ainslie jumped up and took them from him as he set the pizza box down on the table.

"Where's the birthday girl?" she asked, pulling a wad of paper serviettes from his back pocket and lifting up the pizza box just high enough to slip a nearby telephone book underneath. "Really, Terry, it's mahogany," she chided distractedly.

"The little ingrate asked if she could have hers at the computer. I said we'd be glad not to watch her eating her revolting fruit-topped concoction." He flipped open the lid of the box. "Pepperoni, tomatoes and onions. Now that's the way God intended pizza to be."

"Which is why He invented mouthwash," his sister said dryly. "But as long as we're all on the same garlicky playing field, I guess it doesn't matter."

She lifted a slice from the box and took a bite. Bailey and Sullivan did the same, and for a minute or so all that disturbed the silence of the elegantly appointed conference room were the sounds of chewing and the occasional murmur of appreciation from Ainslie.

"Good pizza," she said, daintily licking her fingers and taking another piece. "Bailey was telling me about her sister's marital woes, Terry. How can you be so sure Angelica's case has anything to do with Hank's disappearance? Come to that, how can you be sure that Angelica's disappearance has got anything to do with what's in that report? After all," she added apologetically to Bailey, "from the way you describe her it sounds as if she might just have taken off for a few days to nurse her wounded pride. Is she the type to do something drastic?"

"I wouldn't have said so if you'd asked me a week ago." Bailey shrugged and took another slice of pizza herself. "And I still don't think she threw herself off the nearest bridge or anything like that. But she was upset when she left that message on my machine—it's entirely possible that she's decided to pay Aaron back in his own coin."

"A little fling?" Ainslie raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that slightly rash, when he's the one with the money? And I presume the money's important to her, since there's a thirty-year gap in their ages."

"Oh, the money's important to my sister." Bailey gave a humorless smile. "She was determined to hold out for a millionaire."

"You don't sound like the two of you are that close," Ainslie said cautiously. Sullivan shot her a warning look, but after a moment's hesitation Bailey answered her.

"I'd like to have been closer, and maybe it was my fault we weren't," she said slowly. "I know that since our parents were killed in a car accident six years ago, Angelica made it clear that she was going to live her own life, with no interference from me. At seventeen she quit school, found a job and rented an apartment with a couple of other girls. It wasn't until a lot later that I learned she was working underage in a bar, thanks to some fake ID an obliging boyfriend had obtained for her. But even from the day she became part of the family, I felt as if she saw me as competition. It wasn't hard to figure out where that came from, though," Bailey added fairly. "Her mother had been an addict, and from the little I know about the first five years of Angel's life, love was a pretty scarce commodity. It's no wonder she went for something she could actually be sure of when she married."

"How sure?" Sullivan said suddenly. "Aaron Plowright, as determined as he must have been to get his new little eighteen-year-old plaything into his bed one way or another, certainly wasn't a lovesick boy when it came to his fourth marriage. Did he get her to sign a prenuptial agreement?"

Bailey looked at him, startled. Slowly she dabbed at her lips with the serviette, her gaze thoughtful. "I seem to remember she did, although she wasn't happy about it. Like I said, Angelica's blond and she puts on that dumb act when it suits her, but she's not stupid when it comes to money."

"Which means it's also unlikely she'd be impulsive enough to jeopardize her marital status by fooling around." Ainslie eyed the last slice of pizza in the box and then shook her head. "You take it, big guy."

"I hadn't thought of that, but you're right," Bailey said, her gaze darkening. "Dammit, if my little drama queen of a sister staged that phone message just for effect, I'm going to wring her neck when I see her!"

"I'd say go for it, except for one thing," Sullivan said with a frown. "Hank's missing, too."

Ainslie fiddled unnecessarily with the lid of the pizza box, and Bailey looked down at her hands. Neither of them spoke, and Sullivan's jaw tightened.

"I thought you agreed with me on this." His tense comment was directed at Bailey, and reluctantly she met his gaze.

"I'll admit, back at his house I was halfway convinced. The fact that you say he can't drink rye, the missing towels, the wrecked computer, the files all over the floor." She bit her bottom lip. "But to be honest, I think it was the atmosphere that really got to me. For some reason I had the creeps the whole time we were there."

She shrugged helplessly. "But don't you see, Sully, there was nothing there that couldn't be explained away, if only you'd accept that Jackson—" She broke off, not wanting to complete the sentence. Ainslie did it for her.

"He's a friend, and you're loyal to a fault to your friends, bro," she said brusquely. "But he likes the bottle, and when he's gone off the wagon in the past he's been a mean drunk. He even trashed the office of Sullivan Investigations when it was just a two-man operation in that seedy location in the South End years ago. Uncle Sean almost fired him over that, remember?"

"Sean liked the bottle a little too well himself, and his stories always got embellished in the telling," Sullivan said tightly. "Hank never tried to hide the fact that he had a problem, but in the past few years he's gotten it under control. What are you saying—that he trashed those files himself?"

He sounded incredulous, and Bailey saw Ainslie's eyes spark with anger. "At least admit it's a possibility," she snapped. "For God's sake, loyalty is one thing, but there comes a point where you have to turn your back and walk away."

"I did that once." Her brother's voice was ice. "I promised myself I'd never do it again. Jackson's one of my men, Lee, and I won't let him down. I'm going to find him, and if anything's happened to him I'm going to find the person who did it."

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