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Vintage INTRIGUE

High-Heeled Alibi

SYDNEY RYAN

Sydney Ryan

High-Heeled Alibi

«HarperCollins»

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A MAN WITH NO IDENTITY...A WOMAN WITH GREAT SHOES...AND
A KILLER ON THE LOOSEHis allies murdered and his identity erased, secret
agent Mick James was as good as dead. His only chance—blow the conspiracy that
set him up and turned his covert agency against him. His only hope—a resistant alibi
in stilettos named Bitsy Leigh. With bullets whizzing by her, Bitsy had no time to
question Mick's innocence. Nor to protect herself from her captor's threatening
masculinity. Her life was surely in danger. But on the run with Mick, trained
assassins at their heels, Bitsy wondered just who was more dangerous....

Содержание

Her captor sat in profile....	6
High-Heeled Alibi	7
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	8
CAST OF CHARACTERS	9
Contents	10
Chapter One	11
Chapter Two	18
Chapter Three	24
Chapter Four	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

Her captor sat in profile....

His face was gray in the dusky light of the car, his eyes shadowed but hard and focused. “How long can you go without sleep?” Bitsy asked him.

“As long as it’s necessary.”

“How do you do it?” she asked. “Do they train you guys? Put you through some secret agent boot camp complete with decoder rings and days of physical and mental deprivation until you’re an elite spy machine?”

He pulled into a gas station and turned off the car. When he reached for the keys, her hand reached for him, her fingertips moving lightly across his skin. Her lips parted, inviting him in.

“Is that what you are, Mick? A machine?” Her fingers were at the back of his neck now.

Foolish, he thought, even as his head lowered to her in response. Wrong. Then his mouth found hers and there was no thought. Only heat. Desire. Hunger.

In his kiss, Bitsy was falling, swept away by sensation and an overwhelming dominant male sexuality she had never experienced before. When he pulled away, she was bereft.

He held her gaze, desire in the hot blue of his eyes. “Does that answer your question?”

High-Heeled Alibi

Sydney Ryan



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of New York, Sydney Ryan graduated magna cum laude from Syracuse University with a degree in public communications. She worked in a variety of fields, including telecommunications and public relations, before devoting herself full-time to fiction writing.

She lives happily ever after in upstate New York with her husband, Jim, and their two teenage children, J.J. and Ariana.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Bitsy Leigh—After her marriage self-destructed, she'd fled the fast lane and found sanctuary in her small California hometown and a job in her uncle's mortuary. Until one night the stormy baby blues of a six-foot-two-inch stiff winked at her, telling her he wasn't dead yet...and neither was she.

Mick James—The undercover agent was a dead man. Or so everyone thought when he was set up to take the fall for an assassination attempt. Only a scalpel-wielding beauty named Bitsy could prove his innocence. But would he find anyone to believe her before his enemies find them?

Radley Kittredge—Insiders said the popular San Francisco congressman was the real deal—a politician who cared deeply about his constituents. But if it weren't for a brave valet stepping between him and a killer's bullet, Kittredge's career...and life...would have been over.

Arthur Prescott—A believer that everyone deserves a chance, the top operative had turned Mick's life around twelve years ago when he'd recruited him for The Agency. Now he'd arrived from Central Headquarters to give Mick another chance...one final time.

Grey Torre—One of California's most successful divorce lawyers, his skill at securing his female clients generous settlements had earned him the nickname the Spago Ladies' lawyer, but he'd handled his childhood friend Bitsy's divorce from Johnny Dumont and his millions for free. Could he save his favorite damsel in distress this time when she was taken hostage by an apparent madman?

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 One

God, even the man's feet were beautiful.

And Bitsy had seen enough bare feet to know they should've been, at least, unsightly. At a minimum, amusing. These feet, though, stuck out beneath the sheet like a final curtain call, naked, proud, without wrinkles, thickened, yellowed skin pads or oddly crooked toes. Smooth, sculpted, these feet did not reveal the many miles walked, only the fine-grained desire of many miles more wished for.

At the ankles, a white cloth began and spread wide and long across a large, unmoving body.

Above was the face, tanned and crowned by a bleached cap of hair. A small circular scar puckered the skin above the right collarbone, saving the man from total perfection. Otherwise, the jawline was not too square, not too soft. The lips tipped at the corners, teasing. The dark brows arched, then dipped deep toward the nose, finishing the face with an air of "to hell with you." The eyes were closed, but they had to be blue, the blue of night secrets.

Bitsy stared at the man, following his features one by one and thinking of dreams she'd had not so long ago.

The man was beautiful.

Beautiful and dead.

She turned away, clicking her tongue against her teeth in a dismissive note. The sound echoed across the silent room, the gurgling and whirring of the taps turned off for the night. Emotion had no place here. An occasional retching was allowed. Obligatory solemnness was expected. But emotional control was the cornerstone of the profession. And what had called her to her current circumstance.

She snapped on one pair of latex gloves from a waiting wheeled table, and then another. She stepped back, surveying the still figure on the metal stretcher. He must've just arrived. The skin was supple. The deceptive flush of life had only begun to pale. The eyes would require blue stipple work around the lids. The right lid had opened a crack in the inside corner, but a pinch of cream worked underneath, then firmed with Number 6, would take care of the problem. Of course, the head would incline slightly to put the carotid suture in shadow.

She stepped closer, drawing back the sheet at the neck, looking for the suture. When Uncle Nelson had suggested her cosmetology training would be useful in the family business, she knew it was exactly the type of work she'd been looking for. Few people understood her choice. Their reactions ran from macabre fascination to hardly concealed repulsion. It didn't bother her. She'd come home, seeking peace and quiet. At the moment, she only asked from life no more surprises. People could say whatever they wanted about her job, but one thing was certain. There were no surprises.

Bitsy looked up. Two blue eyes looked back at her.

Shock threw her body back. The cart she slammed into skittered across the room. Instruments clattered to the floor. The eyes, the exact shade she'd imagined, blinked.

She backed away, her hands reaching behind her, patting the air, searching for something solid to grasp and support her. Even above the room's always bitter odor, she could smell her shameful scent of fear.

Control. Her mind repeated the command, seeking to quiet her racing heart.

The eyes staring up at her blinked again, slowly, like a newborn babe.

Spasmodic muscle contracture. It was not uncommon in corpses. Some had been known to rise right up in their caskets. As if to prove her point, the body before her sat up.

She found the counter, fought to stay standing. The sheet fell away from the man's upper torso, revealing a bronzed span of muscled chest. Frantic fear beat against Bitsy's breastbone. Her mouth opened in a silent protest as her mind moved into overdrive, attempting to calm her. Okay, okay. Major cadaveric spasm. She gripped the counter's sharp edge.

The corpse's gaze narrowed, focusing. He rubbed his forehead. Closing his eyes against the harsh overhead light, he moaned. Bitsy ran out of rational explanations.

"You're dead." Her held breath whooshed out with the words.

The man squinted one eye open, letting out another soft groan. His body shuddered at the room's cool temperature. His nose sniffed the chemical smell. Shielding his eyes with one hand, he gave Bitsy a thorough once-over. She pulled tight the lab jacket she'd slipped on against the room's coolness, but her leather miniskirt and fishnet stockings were still visible. She watched the man's gaze lift to take in her skull earrings, the white foundation, black lipstick, her hair dyed jet-black and streaked with silver.

He wet his lips and swallowed as if his mouth were dry. His voice came out a croak. "Something tells me this isn't the Pearly Gates."

"This is Memorial Manor," she said with as much dignity as possible for someone with a bride of Frankenstein beehive. She'd been dressing when the phone had rung. Gwen's son had tripped over the shreds of his mummy costume and needed stitches. Could Bitsy fill in at the funeral home for a few hours? Uncle Nelson never left it unattended on Halloween. Bitsy had zipped a skirt over her bodysuit and fishnet stockings and rushed right over.

The man massaged his forehead. His hands were broad, big-knuckled. "What's Memorial Manor? A halfway house to heaven?" His speech was thick. He paused to wet his lips again. "Your people must not have talked to my many fans. They'd definitely have me first in line to fire and damnation."

"You're not dead."

The man's mouth lazily lifted at one corner. "That's a relief. Now, maybe you could tell me where the hell...sorry, poor choice of words. Where am I exactly?"

"Memorial Manor is a funeral home."

The man pointed a finger at her. "But you said I'm not dead."

"You were," she tried to explain. "Now, you're not."

"Either I'm dead..." The man swung his long legs across the narrow gutter on the side of the gurney. "...or I'm not." He stood up quickly as if needing the floor's firmness beneath his feet. The sheet almost slipped away from his body. Before he caught it, Bitsy endured a vision of golden maleness.

She averted her head. "Believe me, you're alive."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. Now, explain to me what I'm doing here and how I got here?"

The slur was gone. He spoke with the strength that defined him physically. Bitsy looked back, relieved to see the sheet securely gathered and tucked in tight at his waist. "There must've been a mistake."

He arched one brow.

"A big mistake," she offered.

He studied her with keen, assessing eyes. "You work here?"

She nodded. Her skull earrings swayed.

"And your job title would be?"

She went for a delicate laugh. "Haven't you ever seen Vera the Vampire Vixen before?"

"No. And yet until now, I believed I'd lived a full life, which, according to you, I'm about to continue."

"Heck, I saw three of them tonight already on my way here from the house. Vampire vixens were more popular than I expected this year."

The man kneaded his forehead as if warding off a migraine. "Who would've guessed?"

"I'll admit we do get carried away, but around here, Halloween is like a national holiday."

The man stopped rubbing his brow. "And where exactly is 'around here'?"

“Canaan, California.”

The man still looked blank.

“About twenty miles south of San Francisco,” Bitsy explained. “The City of Death.”

“The City of Death?” the man repeated.

Bitsy nodded. Her skull earrings swung. “We’ve got seventeen cemeteries, one million corpses and a funeral home on almost every corner. We’ve got more famous residents here than Los Angeles—except ours are all dead.”

The man looked at her as if waiting for the punch line.

“Tina Turner’s dog was buried in a fur coat at the Pets Rest Cemetery.”

The other corner of the man’s mouth quirked, his smile complete. And devastating. “It’s Halloween. I’m in Canaan, California, City of Death,” he repeated. He studied her, his large palm still shading his face, making the angled lines longer, bolder. “You’re a mortician?”

“Restorative artist,” she corrected.

The man stared at her a second more before breaking into a spontaneous laugh, his teeth flashing white. Something seized inside Bitsy and tightened. Yearnings remembered, desires denied. She smiled back tentatively. Alive, the man was deadly.

“Okay, what am I doing here?” His laughter stopped.

Bitsy’s hesitant smile remained. “The report of your demise is greatly exaggerated?”

Clutching the sheet at his waist, the man began to pace, sidestepping the large drain in the middle. Despite his size, he moved with an unanticipated grace. He stopped and aimed a finger at her. Bitsy pressed tighter to the counter.

“Let’s go over this once more. You’re Vera the Vampire Vixen.” His finger jabbed his bare chest. “I’m Lazarus.” His one hand clutched the sheet while the other panned the room. “And this is Memorial Manor, where they obviously strive to put the ‘fun’ in funeral.”

Unable to give the man the logical explanation he demanded, Bitsy said nothing. The slim glint of a scalpel on the floor near him caught her attention. She took a sideways step toward the instrument fallen from the cart. She was sure there was a reason for what had happened, and the man seemed harmless...but bottom line, he was a man. A half-naked, very alive man. It was more than enough of a combination to make Bitsy wary.

She inched her body along the counter, closer to the scalpel.

“And tonight’s Halloween,” the man continued.

“Trick or...” She slid her foot toward the knife.

“Treat,” the man finished as he swooped down and snatched the scalpel. Bitsy jerked her head up and met the man’s dark-blue eyes.

He tested the blade with the pad of his thumb. Her breath stilled, a dreaded helplessness coming over her. The silence was long, magnifying their aloneness. As Gwen had called over her shoulder as she’d hurried out the door earlier, “It should be nice and quiet until I get back. There’s only you and one in the icebox.”

The “one in the icebox” looked at her now as his thumb rhythmically smoothed across the edge of the scalpel.

She thought of Gwen, the sudden emergency, the too obviously gorgeous corpse. Halloween. Comprehension came, along with relief and annoyance as Bitsy realized exactly what was going on.

Trick or treat.

“Give me that.” She seized the instrument so quickly the man didn’t have time to react. “It’ll have to be sterilized.” She aimed the knife at his chest. “Lanie put you up to this, didn’t she?”

“Excuse me?” To his credit, the man was convincingly confused.

“And Gwen is in on it, too, isn’t she?” Bitsy jabbed the knife in the air, underscoring her words.

“Who’s Lanie? Who’s Gwen?”

“You know damn—” Bitsy stopped. Giving up swearing was part of her control program. Besides, she wasn’t mad at the man. He was probably one of the many out-of-work actors who came to California like lambs to the slaughter. She couldn’t blame him for taking advantage of an opportunity to make a few easy bucks. She hoped he’d charged Lanie a small fortune.

“You know.” She gave the space between them a stab with the scalpel. “All I’m trying to do is lead a nice, normal life, but that cousin of mine can’t let things be.”

The man’s gaze scanned the room and returned to Bitsy. “This is normal?”

She ignored his comment. “Tell me this. What’s the crime in waking each morning, working each day, going to bed each night...alone?” The scalpel punctured the air again.

The man took a step back. “Thousands of people do it every day.”

“Exactly,” she agreed with an approving flourish of the scalpel. “Thousands, millions, gazillions. Is there anything wrong if I’m one of them?”

“Is there?” The man repeated.

Her voice dropped. “I’ve known passion. I have.” She leaned in toward the man. “Believe me, I’ve ridden that roller coaster.”

The man stared back at her. “Three minutes of thrills? Thirty minutes of wanting to throw up?”

Bitsy smiled, her frustration deflated. She slipped the scalpel into the lab jacket’s pocket and held out her hand. “Bitsy Leigh, currently crazed, but, on a good day, calm, controlled cosmetician and upstanding citizen of Canaan.”

The half-naked man took her hand. The charming smile returned. “Bitsy? Is that short for something?”

“Momma said it was supposed to be Betsy but Daddy didn’t put on his glasses when he filled out the hospital paperwork. Daddy always joked it could’ve been worse. Batsy or Bootsy or, God forgive, Buttsy.”

The man studied her a second as if trying to decide if she was putting him on. He made his decision and broke into a low laugh, his hand still holding hers, his skin warm. Bitsy liked the silvery sound of his laughter tempering the room’s many edges. Her hand stayed in his.

“What is—” As she started to ask his name, the sound of a car pulling into the upper parking lot stopped her. She dropped the man’s hand. “I’ll bet that’s Lanie and her partner in crime, Gwen. Okay, ladies, now it’s your turn for a little trick or treat.” She marched toward the door.

“Bitsy?” The man called after her.

She turned, a finger to her lips. “Stay right here. Don’t make a sound. I’ll pay you half the amount you charged Lanie.”

She was gone before he could stop her. He crossed the room and stepped out into the hall to follow her when, from behind, he heard the whispered summons:

“Michael.”

BITSY STRODE PAST THE ROOMS of tile and porcelain, linoleum and chromium steel to the stairs. The main floor was pickled oak, chintz, spongy carpet and muted lighting. The knocker sounded twice at the front door. She crossed the reception area that always smelled of cedar and opened one of the wide, carved double doors. Two policemen stood in the perpetual soft glow of the entryway. One officer was tall, dark, Latino. His partner was older, bald, short and fleshy. They eagle-eyed her attire. The older policeman commented with an abrupt grunt.

Bitsy folded her arms so that the lab jacket covered the top of her leopard-print bodysuit and tipped back her head in appraisal. She definitely had to give Lanie and Gwen an A for effort. She nodded approval. “I’ll bet you guys didn’t have an easy time renting authentic-looking costumes on Halloween?”

The taller cop’s brow furrowed.

“Nice touch.” Bitsy tapped the badge pinned on his chest. Both policemen pulled back. The young cop rested his hand on his holster.

“Ma’am, we’re canvassing the area in response to a bulletin the station received earlier.”

“Excuse me just a minute.” Bitsy wiggled between the two men to the generous, curved porch and leaned over its railing. She peered left and right, looking for her cousin and Gwen snickering somewhere in the shrubs lining the circular drive. The bushes were still, their evergreen gone black in the night.

“Ma’am?” The tall officer attempted again, his voice thinner.

She turned to the men. Their faces solemn, they were obviously intent on carrying out this charade to its conclusion. She stepped between them and paused at the door. Might as well give Lanie her money’s worth. She gestured for the men to enter.

The partners glanced at each other. “After you,” the tall one insisted to Bitsy. The two men followed her into the foyer, where she shut the door and faced them. Clasp her hands in front of her chest, she spoke in the hushed tones generated by the surroundings. “How can I help you?”

“Ma’am, as I was saying,” the tall cop tried again, “we received an APB earlier this evening about a man named Michael James—”

She nodded comprehension. “I have him ready for you.”

“He’s here?” The short cop finally spoke.

Bitsy’s expression stayed somber. “I don’t mean to be indelicate, gentlemen, but he’s not exactly going anywhere now, is he?”

The puzzled look between the policemen continued much longer this time.

“I’ll get him for you,” she offered and turned toward the hall.

“Ma’am, we’ll go with you. We don’t want anyone hurt.”

She stopped beside a crushed-velvet sofa and faced them. “How thoughtful, Officer.” Her voice was as smooth as the short officer’s hairless dome. “But cremains are as light as a feather.”

“Cremains?” the bald cop blurted.

Bitsy fought a smile. She cast her gaze downward as if in contemplation. “There is one problem. Usually by the time the cremains are released, the family has chosen an appropriate urn.”

“What does she mean cremains?” the same cop demanded.

“But not to worry. We do have the ever-efficient double-layered brown bag. Let me check if the cremains have cooled and gone through the blender.” She stepped briskly toward the hall.

“Cremains, Hector?” the cop questioned his partner. Bitsy allowed herself a smile.

But when she turned back, her features were respectfully pious. “Gentlemen, I understand. We’re all professionals. Yet, no matter how many times our chosen paths bring us face-to-face with death, it’s difficult to think of anyone, even a stranger, as anything but brimming with life.”

“Hector,” the cop said out of the side of his mouth, “what the hell is this broad talking about?”

Hector made a shushing motion with his hand. The other hand still rested on his holster. “Ma’am, are you telling us the man we’re looking for is dead?”

Bitsy smiled patiently as her upturned palm made a semicircle. “Look around you, gentlemen. You wouldn’t exactly come here looking for a live body.”

“What we came looking for,” Hector said, “was a man, early thirties, blond, about six foot two, two hundred-ten pounds, athletic build.”

Bitsy crossed herself. “May he rest in peace.”

Hector attempted to understand. “You’re saying this man—

“The dearly departed.” She couldn’t resist.

“The dearly departed,” the cop repeated through thin lips, “was cremated?”

Bitsy raised her hands, steepled her fingers and closed her eyes. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” She opened her eyes to the men’s wonderfully confounded expressions. “Is there a problem, officers? That is the man you came here looking for, isn’t it?”

She had planned to let the “policemen” squirm until they could report to Lanie this little glitch in her plan, but the two men looked so bewildered, she didn’t have the heart to prolong their suffering.

She might as well tell them now that she had caught on to her cousin and Gwen's questionably funny Halloween prank before the men had even knocked on the front door.

"Did the APB say the suspect was dead?" The short cop demanded of his partner.

"Okay, guys, you can give it up," Bitsy interjected. She would tell them the truth, go get Michael James or whatever his name was with his heart still steadily beating, and they could all be on their way to her cousin's boyfriend's costume party.

"It said possibly armed and dangerous. It didn't say possibly armed and dead," Hector said disgustedly. "It wouldn't surprise me if those SFPD desk jockeys got their wires crossed and sent us out on a manhunt for a corpse."

Bitsy felt a first frisson of doubt. "Fellas, it's okay," she assured them. "I know what's going on."

"I'm glad someone does," Hector said. "All I know is earlier this evening, we received an all-points bulletin from the San Francisco Police Department telling us to comb the area for a fugitive possibly headed for this locale."

The short cop snorted. "I'll tell you exactly what's going on. They didn't want to send a car to claim the body. I say we FedEx this poor bum's ashes right to the commissioner."

"A fugitive?" Bitsy's skepticism echoed off the dark-paneled walls. "Possibly armed and dangerous?"

The older cop huffed another disgusted breath. "Not any longer."

Bitsy studied the two men. She slowly smiled. "You guys are good. For a moment, you almost had me believing you're real cops."

Hector looked down at her. "Ma'am," he said, pointing to the patch on his shirtsleeve. "We're members of the Canaan City Police Department."

Bitsy stared at the colored patch, her smile dissolving. At one of the courses she'd taken on self-defense, she'd learned crimes were often committed by assailants posing as policemen. Uniforms, security badges and guns were easy to obtain. There was one way, however, to determine if someone was really a legitimate member of the police force: their uniforms would have departmental-issued patches on the upper sleeve. These patches could not be duplicated. Her gaze met Hector's.

"You guys are real cops?"

"Ma'am, that's what we've been trying to tell you."

She didn't wait to hear more. She turned and ran down the stairs, past the chrome and linoleum rooms, ignoring the policemen's shouts to stop until she came to the room where the "corpse" had been. She stopped in the entryway, panting.

The room was empty.

She spun around and faced the police right behind her. "He's gone!"

"Yes." The short one nodded. "Dearly departed."

She shook her head. "He's not dead."

Again a long, puzzled look passed between the partners. "Ma'am," Hector began.

"Shh! Did you hear that?" Bitsy looked to the stairs. Above them was the sound of footsteps crossing the oak floor.

"Inside." Hector pushed Bitsy into the room as both policemen drew their guns.

The footsteps continued to the stairs, down the steps, into the hall at the bottom, periodically pausing as if stopping at each room's entrance, checking inside. The older policeman flattened himself unseen at the right side of the door, his handgun aimed at the entrance. The tall one positioned himself at the other side, pushing Bitsy behind him. Shielded by his back, she sensed his trained tautness. Her own muscles clutched with terror. The footsteps had stopped at the room next door. They started again, slow, hesitant. The policeman's shoulders and spine were rigid, his body ready. Bitsy held her breath.

Gwen appeared in the doorway, tiny in the tall jamb. She gasped, her hand flying to the hollow of her throat. "Bitsy?"

Relief seemed to melt Bitsy's very marrow. She started to step out from behind Hector. "Gwen, thank goodness, it's—"

Hector pulled her roughly back behind him.

"Hey, let go!" She tried to shake his hand off her arm.

Hector's partner stepped out from the wall. Gwen, her features frozen with fear, looked from one pointed gun to the other.

"Bitsy?" Her voice was thin, wavering. "What's going on?"

Bitsy tried to sidestep Hector once more, but his grip only tightened on her forearm.

"At ease, big boy," she snapped at him. "Put your gun back where it belongs," she ordered the other cop. "Can't you see the poor child is terrified?"

"What's your name?" Hector barked.

Gwen stared at the gun pointed at her heart. Her throat worked but no sound came out.

"Gwen Rinkert," Bitsy supplied. "She works here."

The policemen didn't lower their weapons.

"Go ahead," Bitsy encouraged. "Tell them all about the 'corpse' that came in earlier today."

Gwen looked from the gun to Bitsy to the police. Trying to avoid looking at the aimed guns, she said, "I came on about nine tonight. The corpse was already here."

"Was it dead?" Hector demanded.

Gwen's incredulosity momentarily eclipsed her fear. "Officers, with all due respect, that is the definition of a corpse."

"He wasn't dead," Bitsy contradicted. "Less than twenty minutes ago, he sat up right here." She pointed at the gurney. "And said, 'Something tells me this isn't the Pearly Gates.' He was blond, blue-eyed, tall. I'd say six-two, like the report. He was well built. He obviously worked out." She stared at the empty metal bed. "He had a good smile."

"He couldn't have gotten too far," Hector said to his partner. "Get on the radio and see if there's immediate backup in the area. Call the station and tell them we're going to need more men. He could be to the border by the time we get done checking every masked person out there."

By the time Hector had ushered the women upstairs, Bitsy heard the wail of an approaching siren. When the other cop came back from the squad car, Hector pointed at Gwen and said, "I'll stay here with her until back-up arrives." His finger swung to Bitsy. "You take her downtown for further questioning."

"What for?" Bitsy demanded as the older cop grasped her upper arm. "Am I being charged with something?"

"We just want to ask you a few more questions," the older cop reassured her, steering her toward the front door.

Bitsy glanced over her shoulder as she was ushered out the door. She called to Gwen, "Get ahold of Grey."

The cop opened the car's door and she slid into the back of the cruiser with its unique odor of heavy, desperate sweats.

Costumed children came around the far corner, headed to the first house at the end of the street. In the split second before the car door slammed closed, Bitsy heard the night's calling card.

"Trick or treat."

Chapter Two

“An APB, Arthur?” Mick asked. His last identity had been Michael James, but he had quickly become known as Mick and preferred it. Only Arthur insisted on the more formal name he’d last christened the man.

Arthur opened the white van’s side panel. The metallic sign on the driver’s door said Frieda’s House of Flora and Fauna. Arthur was a spare man, elegant in body and movement. Forbearance in his stance and natural expression, he stood by the openmouthed van and waited.

Mick’s gaze shifted from the black insides of the van to the tempered features of his mentor. “I need an explanation.”

“An explanation?” The older man employed the same economy of speech as he did in physical appearance.

“I wake up, not at the arranged location with instructions for my next assignment, but—” he gestured at the building behind them “—at a funeral home greeted by the beautiful Bitsy of the mortuary business and her glad bag of embalming tools.”

“Bitsy.” Arthur tested the name.

“You descend from Mount Olympus or whatever lofty peak Central occupies these days, complete with a chariot. Not to mention, thanks to San Francisco’s boys in blue, my identity has been compromised up and down the California coast.”

A siren wailed through the night.

Arthur looked at Mick. He smiled pleasantly. “Shall we go?”

“What’s going on, Arthur?”

The other man had rounded the front of the van and was climbing into the driver’s seat. He buckled and adjusted his seat belt, smoothed his pants’ creases and started the engine. He turned in the seat, and with genteel features and a civil smile, he looked at Mick. “Get in, Michael.”

Something was very wrong.

Mick climbed inside the back of the van, slamming the side door shut behind him. The van was dark, no overhead light, no seats in the back. Arthur waited until Mick arranged himself on the cool metal floor, then eased the van out from behind the funeral home’s storage shed.

Mick’s questions started immediately. “Did last night’s operation go down as planned?”

“Shh.” Arthur raised a tapered finger. “Let me have my Mel Gibson getaway moment here.”

Mick shook his head, a smile starting as the van smoothly accelerated to thirty miles per hour and held steady. “Yeah, you’re one big bad ass, Arthur.”

“Yes,” was all the other man would concede.

They drove in silence, away from the sirens. It was futile to ask any more questions. Arthur would give him the answers when he was ready. Mick saw Arthur touch the pearl-gray streak at his temple. Beneath that rakish silver wave, there was a scar. Beneath that a metal plate.

“Congressman Kittredge was shot this evening,” Arthur said.

Mick listened and waited. The old man had never uttered an unnecessary word in his life.

“He was leaving a late dinner at a Bay Area restaurant when a man wearing a Halloween mask approached. The valet saw the gun and pushed Kittredge out of the way. The bullet hit the congressman’s shoulder instead of his heart. The valet’s a hero. The assassin got away.”

The sheet was loosening about Mick’s body. He pulled it tighter. He could feel the texture of the road through the van’s bare floor.

“They’re going to say you did it,” Arthur told him.

Mick closed his eyes. There was a rolling, soothing movement to the blackness.

“I issued the APB, tipped off the locals about the location of the funeral home.”

Mick’s eyes opened.

“If the local police had found you sooner, it could’ve provided an alibi. At the very least, protection. Until I could get to you, you were safer in the company of the police than our own men.” The old man’s hands were steady on the wheel, his gaze aimed straight into the night.

“I didn’t mean to involve the woman. Bitsy.”

The name sounded across the empty van. Mick saw the woman in stilettos stomping around the room, brandishing a scalpel, spouting indignation.

“She’s an alibi for you. A liability for the Agency.”

Mick’s hand fisted, ached to slam against the floor. He resisted. The gesture was ineffectual. Unvented rage was not.

“I erased your identity,” Arthur continued.

“If the Agency is trying to get me killed, they won’t be too happy about that.”

“It’s to protect the Agency as much as you. When the feds or the locals look, they’ll find nothing, a man who never existed. Still they’ll have your name. Others will know it. Grainy photos, a crude sketch or two will follow. It’s out of my control now, Michael.”

Mick waited for Arthur to tell him more, to give him a rationale. The darkness and the silence became too much, so finally he asked, “Why?”

The other man’s eyes looked into the night. “There’s not always an explanation, Michael. Life is random. Hit or miss. You stepped into its path.”

“What about the raid on the arms smugglers last night?”

“They got seven arrests, little fish, some AK-47s.” Arthur’s voice was flat. “The operation was compromised. There was a leak. The key figures had got out of the U.S. and escaped back to the Far East by last night.”

Mick’s fingers remained furled into a tight ball. Since the first death, he’d held fast to his rage. “The operation was deliberately sabotaged.” His voice was as level as his mentor’s.

“An investigation on the incident will be conducted through the traditional channels,” Arthur said.

“It should’ve gone down as planned.”

“Life,” Arthur said. “Hit or miss.” He touched his temple.

Mick knew he wouldn’t get much more information. The Agency’s M.O. was maximum secrecy equated maximum security and efficiency. Agents reported to an assigned contact. They were given only the necessary information to carry out their assignments. Each agent knew if their cover was blown, they’d be abandoned. It was the sacrifice of one for the survival of many. If nothing went wrong, the system worked.

Something had gone wrong.

Mick looked at the man driving, the man who’d engineered his first death, and in doing so, had saved his life. Since that time, he’d died a hundred deaths, a hundred different ways, none of them real, all of them resulting in greater good...until now.

Mick looked at the man he loved. “Who ordered my setup?”

Quiet was the only answer. Mick’s words hovered in the silence.

“Kittredge, our own agents, an international arms ring... It’s someone big, isn’t it?” Mick said.

Arthur’s gaze stayed on the road. “Rot starts at the top.”

“Corbain.” Mick muttered the name of the outsider put in charge of the Agency after last year’s presidential election.

Arthur steered the van into the parking lot of a convenience store. The lot was empty except for a car parked to the far side and a pickup truck near the entrance. He pulled up to the pumps and turned off the engine.

“I’ve brought you as far as I can. I’ll fill the tank. There’s a change of clothes in the bag back there. Money, identification, a name and number on a card in the glove compartment. Friends of mine. They own a twenty-two-foot whaler that can get you across the Gulf.”

Mick looked at his oldest friend. “You didn’t have to do this. If they find out...”

Arthur looked at him for a moment, then said the words he’d said to Mick twelve years ago. “Everybody deserves a chance.” He opened the door.

“Arthur?” Mick placed his hand on the other man’s forearm. “Thank you.”

When the older man’s gaze met his own, Mick could almost read his thoughts. Arthur had had to make a choice once before. He feared he had chosen wrong.

“You’ll be on your own now,” Arthur said. “Stay alive.”

The driver’s door closed. Mick waited but didn’t hear the gas cap being unscrewed or the gurgle of gas into the tank. Rising to his knees behind the front seat, he saw large signs on the pumps instructing customers to pay inside before pumping. Arthur was walking toward the store. Only the streaks of gray at either temple revealed the years that had passed since he’d recruited Mick. Even then, the poreless skin had been fine-lined, the slants deep from nose to mouth.

Mick reached into the bag of clothes when he felt an unwelcome pressure against his bladder. He looked around the lot. There was a bathroom at the end of the building.

Mick scanned the lot once more. Inside the store, he could see Arthur standing before one of the candy bar displays. A man, mid-twenties, came out of the store, got in the pickup and drove off. Mick grabbed a pair of sweatpants, slipped on the running shoes, slid open the van door and, gathering the sheet tighter, stepped out.

The bathroom door was locked.

Behind the store, darkness almost hid a stand of trees. He headed toward them.

He moved behind a thick trunk, back far enough so he could see the lot, but no one could see him. A dark Chevy turned into the lot. It pulled up to the pumps, opposite the van, and parked.

Arthur had come out of the store and was walking toward the vehicle, a chocolate bar in his hand. He unwrapped the candy, broke off a square, put it into his mouth.

Mick finished and was pulling up the too-short sweatpants that ended several inches above his ankles. He scanned the lot. It was quiet. No one had gotten out of the dark sedan. Mick’s instinct of twelve years undercover awoke. His mouth was forming the word No as the sedan’s window lowered and a fat steel cylinder appeared. A muted pop-pop-pop... Arthur dropping. Several more pops and the sedan sped away, gone as if it’d never been.

Mick was running now. He reached Arthur and dragged his body away from the pumps. The clerk looked out the wide front windows.

“Call an ambulance,” Mick yelled. He looked down at the man in his arms. He’d been hit once in the heart, twice in the forehead. Execution-style.

Mick looked to the pumps, the van, saw the dark stream where shots had punctured the side of the vehicle, the half-empty gas tank with its lethal fumes. He felt the intuitive quiver, the anticipation of disaster, his muscles tightening. “Get out,” he yelled to the clerk coming out the door. “Get out of here!”

He covered Arthur’s body with his own. At first, the explosion was contained, almost anticlimactic. Then, the fuel tank ignited. Light flashed and noon changed places with the night. Mick felt the wave of heat roll over his body. He looked up. The clerk was running to his car parked at the far end of the lot. Mick rolled off Arthur and dragged him toward the woods.

Beneath the long shadows of the trees, Mick placed his mouth on Arthur’s and he breathed into the man, even knowing it was as useless as a fist slamming against metal. The sweet smell of chocolate met him. He checked Arthur’s neck, then the wrist above the hand that still clutched the half-wrapped Cadbury bar.

Mick looked back toward the van. A spark shot up, and in a blast of color and light, the gas pumps blew. The heat reached for the men. The California sky was fragmented, fluorescent.

The sedan had headed south, back toward Canaan. Mick stared into the heat and light. Cars from the highway were slowing down, stopping. Emergency vehicles would be here soon.

He worked quickly, drawing back Arthur's linen sport coat, unfastening the holster that held the 9 mm, retrieved a leather wallet from the coat's inside pocket. The wallet held only a few singles, a fake driver's license and an American Express gold card in the same false name. Either item would only alert Mick's enemies should he try to use them. He took out the singles, slipped them into the sweatpants' pocket and shoved the wallet back into the jacket's inside pocket.

A new siren pierced the night. Close by. Mick pulled up Arthur's carefully creased right trouser leg, released the gun strapped to the ankle and wrapped it high on his own calf so the short sweatpants would conceal it. He straightened the trouser, smoothed the coat, aligning the gold buttons. The sirens sounded closer, were almost here.

He straightened the angle of Arthur's head, folded his beautifully shaped hands into a position of peace across his chest. He leaned over, kissed the man, rose and walked into the night.

DAWN HAD BROKEN, spreading a surreal cast across the night sky as Grey Torre drove Bitsy back to Memorial Manor. His black Lexus pulled up smoothly beside Bitsy's car, contrasting with the bright apple-green hatchback, a color everyone, including Bitsy, found nauseous, but had gotten Bitsy a great deal on the car.

"Thank you again for coming down to the station," she told Grey.

"Damsels in distress are my specialty." Grey gave her the infamous grin that had charmed females from the corner kiosk to the higher courts. Bitsy had known that irresistible smile since she used to challenge Grey two Scooter Pies she could climb to the top of ol' lady Simone's sycamore before he could. She'd won every time.

"I was only drinking a Corona, watching CNN," Grey assured her. "Some nut tried to kill Congressman Kittredge last night. Damn crazies. One of my old buddies from Berkeley, Tim Stafford, works for Kittredge. Says he's the real ticket—a politician who actually cares about his constituents."

Grey looked pointedly at her. "The moral is 'you can never be too careful.' I'm thinking of having that tattooed on your beautiful backside."

"Leave my beautiful backside out of this," she warned him. "I don't go around advertising for big bad bogeymen to come and take advantage of me."

"And still, they seem to find you no matter how hard you hide."

"I'm not hiding," she insisted as she opened the car door. "I'm just..." Her words faltered as she turned to her friend. "I'm just..."

Grey's voice softened. "I know, honey, I know. C'mon, I'll walk you to your car."

"Really I'm doing fine, Grey," Bitsy assured him. He had draped his arm across her shoulders as they headed to her car, and she patted his hand and felt the pull of weariness.

"It's your heart," Grey decided. "It's too big. It keeps getting stepped on."

She yearned to lean on the welcome weight of her friend. While the puff of her pompadour had long surrendered, and she had a run in the left leg of her hose, Grey looked, as always, as if he'd just stepped from the pages of *InStyle*.

She straightened. A few hours sleep and her physical exhaustion would be remedied. Her shattered illusion of safety, however, wouldn't be so easily restored. The man in the embalming room had dredged up old feelings, fears, everything she'd worked so hard to keep under control the last few months.

"The bum was probably past the county line before they even called for backup," Grey said.

"Thanks to me."

"It was an honest mistake, Bits. The fact is, more creeps than we want to consider get away without paying for their crimes. Look at your ex-husband."

Grey had handled her divorce. He was one of California's most successful divorce lawyers, his skill at securing his female clients generous settlements earning him the nickname the Spago Ladies' Lawyer. Bitsy's divorce hadn't earned him his usual fabulous fees since she had wanted none of the Dumont fortune. Grey had also done his best to keep the entire affair out of the press, although most

big-time divorce lawyers would have taken the case for the publicity alone. Even still, Jumpin' Johnny Dumont, known for his lavish lifestyle and bad-boy antics, was a media favorite, and his divorce from his small-town Cinderella had made as good cover as when he'd married her eighteen months earlier in a whirlwind romance.

"They don't put you behind bars for breaking hearts, Grey."

He said nothing. He had mentioned the bruises only once. She had asked him never to mention them again.

"Come on." Grey made his voice light. "I'll buy you a tofu omelet."

She made a face. "Bean curd isn't my idea of comfort food." She stopped a few steps from her car, turned and faced him. "Besides, I'm beat."

"All right, I'll accept that, but only because I've got some tax records to go over before I drive down to meet a client this morning."

"Beverly Hills?" she guessed.

"Malibu," Grey answered with a toothy smile. "I'm driving up to the lodge next weekend. You come, too. Try a little rock climbing."

"Rock climbing?" She shook her head. "I like to keep my feet on the ground nowadays."

Grey looked down at her. "That's not my 'two Scooter Pies' Bitsy talking."

She looked up at her friend. "No, it's not." Tiredness was tangible in her words.

"I'm calling you next week, and you better be ready to scale some peaks."

She was too exhausted even to try to think of an excuse. She touched Grey's arm. "Thank you again for coming."

"No problem. It'll give me an amusing story to tell in chambers." He leaned down and gave her a light kiss on her forehead. "Go home. Get some sleep. Wash off that makeup. I keep waiting for you to say, 'I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille.'"

She smiled. "I love you, Grey."

Grey straightened and regarded her with a similar smile. "Don't think that's going to scare me away. You know I don't give up easily."

"I've got the cavities to prove it."

She went to her car, unlocked the door and slid into the driver's seat. Through the side window, she watched Grey walk back to his car, turning his collar up against the early morning chill coming in from the coast. She started the engine and waved goodbye as he reached his own car. He was a good man. A lousy tree climber, but a good man.

She pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward home, trying not to think about last night, trying not to think at all. The day's light had erased the night, but, in her mind's eye, she still saw the man with the slow smile and the eyes of a storm.

She'd been so careful this time. She'd arranged her life neatly, forced herself to stop and look before leaping. Truth be told, her current vampire vixen getup was the wildest thing she had allowed herself since her divorce. And considering it had been Halloween in Canaan, she had still been among the conservative faction of the town's population.

For months, she had bitten her tongue, ignored desires, walked calmly away instead of rushing head-first into the flames. It hadn't mattered. Michael James had made her realize what she'd feared deep down all along was true. She was not safe.

She shook her head to clear the man's image from her mind, releasing a sigh of relief at her close call. The man was a criminal, for goodness sake, reaffirming her belief she couldn't trust her own faculties of attraction. Desire clouded the mind, sent logic and common sense scurrying.

She took a deep breath, hands steady on the wheel, and moved the car forward at a reasonable speed. Her composed world had been threatened, but it wouldn't be toppled by one smiling stiff. Last night was already on its way to becoming an anecdote for Grey's colleagues. According to the police, Michael James was probably heading to the border. And she was on her way home to take a long,

hot shower, crawl into bed with the latest Mary Higgins Clark novel and dismiss the brief, disturbing appearance of Michael James in her life.

She reached for the radio's buttons, the quiet she usually sought seeming unnaturally still. As she clicked the radio's on button, she heard a voice, but it did not come from the speakers. It came from directly behind her. A voice she'd heard before. A voice she'd never expected to hear again.

“Beautiful day to be alive, isn't it, darling?” Michael James observed from the car's backseat.

Chapter Three

The hell with control. Bitsy screamed so loud the windows vibrated.

In the rearview mirror, the man winced. "Is that necessary?"

She screamed again, louder and longer.

The man rubbed the back of his neck. "That's not really helping matters."

She slammed on the brakes and grabbed the door handle. At the same time, the man's broad hand snaked from behind the seat and snapped down the lock button.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

She twisted her head, meeting the man's eyes.

"I'm one of the good guys," he said. His lips parted in a thin smile, the mouth sensual with a touch of cruelty.

Her fear intensified. "Not according to your APB."

His smile faded, leaving his features gray and drawn. "Just drive," he ordered.

She faced front. Her hands gripped the steering wheel as if it were a life preserver. He was scared, too, she realized. A tiny bit of her fear slipped away, making room for rational thought. After her marriage, she had bought a weight bench and a set of weights, and lifted every other day. She'd taken self-defense seminars and had gotten up to a green belt in tae kwon do until a torn hamstring had set her back. She had promised herself she would never be a victim again.

She would keep that promise.

She looked through the windshield, hopeful for any sign of life in this small square of the City of Death. All was quiet.

"Where do you want to go?" She asked. Better, she thought. Controlled. Calm. She had to stay cool. If she gave in to the panic coursing through her, the man would win. And she could lose her life.

She glanced in the rearview mirror, saw his gaze nonchalantly lift to hers. She could taste her fear. Like bile, it rose in her throat. She looked away. Damn him.

He leaned in close behind her until she could see the sharply drawn lines of his features in her peripheral vision. His fingers rested on the side of the seat right near her shoulder. One inch closer and those at-ease fingers could wrap about her throat; those nails with their pale half moons could line up like little soldiers along her jugular.

"To your house," he whispered. A bolt of ice darted up her spine.

The man sat back, the pressure along her seat relenting. Still, his hand remained, deceptively lifeless, on the side of the seat. She slid her foot off the brake to the gas pedal. She released the clutch, not realizing the car was still in third gear. The engine seized. The car bucked. The man swore as he was thrown into the back of her seat. Bitsy was slammed into the steering wheel. She straightened, her hands clutching the wheel as if in spasm.

"Okay, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt on that one. Never did meet a woman who could handle a stick."

She wrapped her hand around the black knob of the shifter, its hardness beneath her palm. No give, no take. She shifted into first, eased up on the clutch and gently pressed down on the gas. The car moved forward as smoothly as hot fudge melting on French vanilla ice cream. Control.

The street was empty. People were sleeping. Dream now, she told them, as the car passed house after silent house. Dream sweet, illicit dreams.

The police station was in the opposite direction the car had been heading. If she could keep the man preoccupied while taking a series of lefts and rights, he might not notice they were turning around.

"How'd you avoid the police?" she asked. She sounded good. Efficient, in charge.

When he didn't answer her, she glanced up to the mirror and saw his fingers rake through his hair, a gesture that was becoming too familiar.

"There was an APB issued—" she began again.

The man leaned forward. Bitsy stiffened.

"That was a mistake."

The breath of his words moved past her. She knew he'd seen her body tense.

"That's what every criminal says."

"Criminal?"

She couldn't believe the man actually sounded disgusted. "You're a wanted man."

"I'm the good guy." She heard the bitterness in his tone.

As she slowed the car to turn left, she glanced in the rearview mirror. The man had taken the sheet from the funeral home, wrapped it around his waist and slung one end over his shoulder toga-style. Only now he had pants on, at least.

"You slipped out, put the sheet over your head and joined last night's Halloween festivities?" she guessed, trying to keep his attention.

The man was looking out the window. "Nah, I crawled into a casket. Took a little nap."

She glanced up and saw the man's easy grin. Not exactly her idea of a cold-blooded criminal. Then again, her character antennae had been whacked out since her first adolescent hormonal rush.

She took another left. "So, if you're the good guy, Mr. James, why are you being chased by the SFPD?"

"Call me Mick."

"Okay, what'd you do to upset San Francisco's finest, not to mention our local boys in blue, Mick?" She bit down on the hard K. "Nothing?"

His eyes, as unclouded as a child's, met hers in the mirror. "I'm in danger."

Bitsy steered right, looking away from those eyes. Eyes lied as easily as lips.

"And so are you."

Bitsy looked in the mirror before making another turn. "That's pretty obvious to me, Mick." Again, the cutting K.

His eyes were steady and dark blue in the reflection. "I was set up. Soon I'll be charged with a crime I didn't commit. Except I've got an alibi—you. So now, when they learn I'm not dead, they don't only have to find me and kill me. They have to kill you, too. And this time the deaths will be real."

"For an innocent man, you certainly seem to attract your share of enemies, Mick. First, the police. Now, murderers."

"One man is dead already. Another was almost killed last night."

"And you're innocent."

"I don't know any man who's innocent," her captor said. "But I didn't do the crimes they'll say I did."

Bitsy knew those blue eyes were looking at her in the mirror, asking her to believe him. She kept her gaze on the road.

Behind her, Mick swore. He'd seen the parked black-and-white sedan with the row of red lights across the roof the same time she had.

She checked the mirror. She didn't see Mick. Instead she heard, "Don't do anything stupid. I'll use this if I have to."

A hard point jabbed her through the back of her seat. He had a gun. She couldn't speak, she couldn't breathe. All her control dissolved. Her life was reduced to a half-inch circle at the base of her spine.

He jabbed her again, low at her back, and she felt fear flow from that point right up her backbone. Adrenaline overwhelmed her brain, her body. Everything seemed to speed up, yet slow down at the same time.

“You better pray they didn’t see me,” she heard him threaten.

She’d dealt with death every day, foolishly thinking she’d forged a pact with its unreasonableness. But here it was, the ultimate master of ceremonies. Let me live, she prayed.

She glanced in the mirror, not expecting to see the man. But could he see her if she tried to signal the police? Taking a chance right now could be deadly. So was not taking one.

“Keep your gaze straight ahead,” Mick ordered. “Don’t even think of looking to the right.”

The gun bore into her back. She pulled even with the police cruiser, then past it. The chance was gone.

“Are we close to your house?” he asked.

“Yes.” The word came out anguished.

“For your sake, I hope so.”

She arched her lower back, moving her slim vertebrae away from the focused pressure on her back. In her mind, she could see the hole formed by a bullet, a perfect polka dot piercing her skin, her spine, her organs. Her terror fed on itself now, widening, overtaking her.

She forced herself to concentrate.

She couldn’t risk going to the police station. Maybe if she got him inside her house, she could find a weapon or call the police. “Won’t be but a minute,” she assured the man, her voice June Cleaver surreal.

The man said nothing.

Did he have a full clip in his gun, she wondered. She slowed down and took a right, then another and another until the car was turned around again, heading back to her house. In mute panic, she watched the police car grow smaller until it disappeared from the mirror.

“Are we almost there?” the man asked after a few silent minutes.

“Yes,” Bitsy replied. There was a warm, metallic sensation in her mouth. She’d bitten into her own lip and drawn blood.

The man stayed down, said nothing. She heard his even breathing, his steady, too quiet threat. She smelled the lingering chemical odor from the embalming room. The fluid of death. Her stomach roiled. She feared she’d get sick. She felt the touch of death at her backbone and prayed desperately for another day.

They pulled into the driveway of the stucco bungalow she rented in a quiet neighborhood of similar stucco and clapboard bungalows. She saw the delicate scalloped line of the eaves. She saw the tangle of rosebushes along the trellised front porch. They’d been pruned, in preparation for winter. Still, several thorny trailers continued to grow. She stared at those stubborn tentacles of new green. Tears filled her eyes. Control. The word came like a mantra. Control, Bitsy.

She pushed the garage-door opener on the visor, waited while the door rose, steered inside. She turned off the car’s engine, but clung to the steering wheel to keep her hands from shaking. Still the tremors seized her, and her body trembled.

“We’re here,” she said, sounding like the gracious hostage.

“Shut the garage door.”

She did as he said. The door dropped, sealing her farther off from salvation. After its final rattle, she saw the shock of blond hair first, rising cautiously. His eyes, alert, canvassed the inside of the garage, the side door. The pressure against her back stayed. “This is where you live?”

Bitsy nodded.

“Alone?”

She nodded again.

“Any animals? A dog? A cat?”

She shook her head.

“If we step inside and I find out otherwise, I’ll kill them.”

“There’s only me.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

She got out of the car and he was immediately right behind her, gripping her upper arm. She tried to step and her knees buckled. He caught her. The dull point of the gun, covered by the sheet folded across his arm, pressed into her ribs. The heat of his body mixed with the heat of her fear.

“You should get a pet,” he suggested as they headed with awkward steps to the side door. “A little dog or a cat, maybe.”

At the door, he bent over and picked up the keys that had fallen from her shaking hands. “It’s not good to live all alone.” He inserted the key into the door, but before he turned it, the door swung open.

He looked down at Bitsy.

“I must’ve left it unlocked last night,” she said. “I was in a hurry.”

He twisted the key out, watching her. “You should be more careful,” he advised, then pushed her inside.

As soon as he released her, Bitsy took several steps into the house, but her progress was stopped abruptly.

“Bravo, Bitsy,” a woman’s voice said. “You finally brought home a live one.”

Lanie stepped into the kitchen. She wore a pair of Bitsy’s shorts, a T-shirt and a pair of turquoise flip-flops with plastic butterflies along their straps. A tall black witch’s hat sat on the kitchen table atop the heaped remains of the rest of the costume. The woman’s well-placed features resembled Bitsy’s, except, as she crossed her arms and leaned against the refrigerator, Lanie’s held the wry amusement of an older cousin who’d always enjoyed the advantage of power by birth date alone.

“Lanie,” Bitsy warned.

As the name left her mouth, Mick grasped her wrist and pulled her tightly against him in a false embrace. At her hip bone, his other hand pressed the gun into her belly. She instinctively recoiled. He released her wrist to wrap his arm around her neck, pressing her mouth closer to his.

“Don’t,” he whispered like a deadly kiss.

She felt the length of cool steel, its hard edge against the yield of flesh. The heat of her blood rose. The pulse in her throat beneath his palm quickened. All reasoning left her. Only instinct allowed her to speak in a breathless tone to her cousin.

“What are you doing here, Lanie?”

“I had a fight with Roy last night. Just because he was dressed as Casper the Friendly Ghost didn’t mean he could spend half the night in a corner with a Wonder Woman wannabe. So, I crashed here. How come you didn’t show up? Oops, dumb question. I can see—”

“Lanie?” Bitsy’s voice sounded more strangled than passionate.

“Yes, right.” Lanie misinterpreted the urgency in her cousin’s voice. “I can see you’re occupied, so I’ll just discreetly let myself out.”

Lanie gathered her costume, plopping the witch’s hat on her head. As she passed them, she tugged on the sheet wrapped around Mick’s middle. “It seems my cousin and I share the same fondness for friendly ghosts.”

She gave Mick a wink, flashed a smile at Bitsy and was gone. The side door banged, then all was quiet. Bitsy was once again alone with a madman.

Chapter Four

“She doesn’t live here,” Bitsy blurted. “I had no idea she’d be here.”

They stood, breast to chest, thigh to thigh, belly to belly, only a metal snout and a chamber of bullets between them. Bitsy found Mick’s eyes, hot and bright.

“She’s gone. Let me go.”

“I didn’t hear a car leave.”

“She lives four blocks over, three houses down.”

Mick muttered an obscenity, his breath warm and unwashed on her. She held his gaze, her thoughts the same as his. Lanie strolls home, slips the waiting Canaan Courier out of the mailbox or snaps on the 6:00 a.m. news, and sees a picture of her little cousin’s one-night stand splashed across the front page or flashed on the screen. He shouldn’t have let her go. He made a mistake. A sly satisfaction spread through Bitsy’s veins.

Mick’s jaw set. “Where’s a phone?”

She tipped her head to the left, where a cordless phone on its charger sat on the small table against the wall.

“Get it.” He released her. The relief drove her backward and made her light-headed. The gun stayed trained on her abdomen. The light-headed moment passed. She took two more steps backward and picked up the phone.

He reached for it, clasped it in one hand and punched in the number, his gaze aimed at her.

“It’s me,” he said to whoever picked up at the other end. A pause followed as he listened. His lips close to the mouthpiece, he then said, “He’s dead. Only one death reported.” Another pause, the silence laden.

“No, don’t come in. Too much risk. Too many involved.” His gaze was as steady on her as the gun. “I’ll meet you. I have resources. Find out what you can. I’ll call.” He paused. “Only as a last resort.” Another beat, then he said, “I have a guest.” A metallic tone had infused his voice. No expression lit his hard face. Bitsy stared at the dull silver gun, stifling an impulse to let her knees buckle.

“I’ll be in touch.” He disconnected and handed Bitsy the phone.

“Who’s dead?” she asked, surprised at her voice’s remote quality.

“We need clothes, any cash, food.” He ignored her question. “An ATM card, a cell phone and charger.” He ticked the items off as if they were on their way to a weekend in the wine country.

When she didn’t move, he reached for her arm. She recoiled and stood strong. Mick’s gaze snapped to hers. It was a matter of wills now, even as the piercing fear deep and unspeakable, welled up, pushing at her limits and she grieved for her lost courage.

“If I was going to kill you, I would have by now.” He sounded weary. Neither of them had slept.

She regarded him in the yellow, florid light. He was a mystery, a danger, yet he made her want to believe in him. Her anger at this parlor trick was like a keen rising in her head and much more valuable than her fear.

“We have to go now, or we won’t have a chance.” He continued the ruse. Her anger was to the point of blaring.

“I’m not the one wanted by the police, Mick.” His name sounded hard on her tongue.

His smile wasn’t warm. “No, the people who want you are much more dangerous.”

“Only one man is holding a gun on me now.”

His lips pulled back farther from his teeth in a devil’s grin. “Right now you’re lucky.” He glanced at the wall clock. Bitsy estimated her cousin should be cutting through McGilicuddy’s backyard with its plastercraft planters and ceramic gnomes. Mick gestured with the gun toward the entryway into the rest of the house. “Clothes, cash, food,” he said as if ordering from a Chinese menu.

Her gut turning, Bitsy backed out of the room, feeling it fatal not to face him. Under the weight of his eyes, she moved, startled when she hit the doorjamb, then she was in the hall, the tidy living room with its coordinated furniture and the Roman shades she'd bought on end-of-the-season clearance from Sears.

"Clothes, Mick?" Her lips thinned and her voice mocked. "Unless you're a misses size six, you're SOL."

He didn't look worried and that made her wonder. "The clothes are for you." His heavy gaze dropped, then sidled back up her until her skin prickled.

"You're afraid I'll look conspicuous?" She returned the same once-over. "And you won't?"

He moved toward her as she spoke, forcing her farther down the hall, a frantic pitch of resistance and disbelief vibrating inside her.

"Do I look like a worried man, Bitsy?" His voice softened, designed to throw her off balance more than a sharp pitch.

They were almost to her bedroom with its slightly sleazy black-lacquered furniture and oversize Georgia O'Keeffe framed floral prints. The bathroom was to their left. Bitsy stopped.

"What?" Impatience cracked Mick's voice.

She screwed up her forehead, her eyes becoming larger, the pupils contracted. "I have to go."

His features showed no sign of his impatience easing. Her fear and anger remained near at hand. Her resolve strengthened. She shrugged, took a step toward the bathroom door as if she didn't need his permission.

His hand snapped around her wrist.

"What?" She twisted her arm but he held firm. "I can't go to the bathroom?"

With the gun, he pushed back the half-opened door and pulled her into the bathroom with him. He scanned the room, the small narrow window with its lowered vinyl mini-blinds, the teal-and-peach ceramic tile halfway up the walls, the shower curtain with pink flamingos stretched across the tub.

"Okay." He thrust her toward the toilet as he let go of her wrist.

"Okay?" she blurted. "What do you expect me to do? Go at gunpoint?"

He stepped past her, pushed up the blinds and checked the window's lock. Bitsy glanced in the mirror over the sink, gave a sharp intake of breath.

"What?" Mick wheeled from the secured window.

Bitsy peered at her reflection, the sunken eyes, the skin gray with fatigue and stress beneath the garish remains of her makeup. "I knew you looked like crap, but I didn't think I looked this bad." She pushed a lank lock of hair off her brow.

Mick stepped back. "You've got one minute. I'll be right outside."

He rounded the door, pulling it half-closed behind him. She waited for it to close totally.

It didn't.

"You're not going to close the door?"

"Fifty seconds." His shoulder and arm, the gun dangling in his hand, were visible at the door's edge.

"What do you think I'm going to do?" She pulled down her stockings, panties. "Hang myself from the shower?"

"Forty-five seconds."

"Pull out the .44 I keep in the back of the toilet tank?"

"Thirty-five seconds."

"You're not making this any easier." She rattled the toilet paper holder, ripped off a length.

"Thirty seconds."

She flushed, pulled up her panties, adjusted her stockings, twisted the hot and cold water faucets all the way open.

"Ten seconds."

"I'm washing my hands," she yelled back.

"Five, four..."

The water stopped. "I'm drying my hands."

"Three, two..." The door started to swing open.

"One," Bitsy yelled, aimed the value-size can of extra-hold hair spray at Mick's face and sprayed full force into his surprised blue eyes. She heard a guttural gurgle as she pushed past him. His hands reached for her but, blinded, he only found a fistful of the hairpiece she'd added to last night's costume. She jerked her head hard as he yanked the opposite way, and the hairpiece ripped loose. She ran. She was down the hall, into the kitchen when he came behind her, spewing passionate oaths aimed at her and her children and her children's children. She heard him hit something hard and curse loudly. She looked frantically for her car keys but didn't see them on the table or counters. She was running out of time. Undoing the lock on the side door, she dashed out, slamming the door behind her. Freedom was her wildly delicious, delirious last thought...till she ran head-on into a mountainous, unmoving mass. She bounced back onto the concrete floor and was knocked out cold.

SHE WAS BEING HOISTED UP under the armpits when she came to. In front of her in her garage stood an angular man with a thin face and hatchet features, pointing a gun casually at the left side of her chest where her heart pounded crazily. Twice in one day. Go figure.

Bitsy jumped as someone behind her wrenched her arms together and bound her wrists with a hard tie that sliced into her skin. She whipped her head around and found the no-necked brick wall that had stopped her escape. She twisted her head farther and saw the razor-thin wire circling her wrists. Any attempts to escape its hold would only result in slicing through flesh, arteries, veins.

She turned back to the front. Her gaze careened around the garage. She saw nothing of the blue-eyed, charming-smile son of a bitch who'd gotten her into this mess in the first place.

Was Mick dead? The thought hit her harder than the mass of muscle behind her. Had the man with the cold fish eyes in front of her killed him with the gun now holding her hostage?

"Let's go." The man gestured with the gun.

Holding her bound wrists, the gorilla nudged her forward. Control, Bitsy repeated to herself as she was led to a gray BMW. Stay in control. She frantically searched for self-defense techniques. Look for an advantage. The creep behind her was so close, she could feel his erection pressing into her. Her wrists were bound behind her back, but her feet were free.

The thug gripping her arms released one to open the car door. As he pushed her in, she aimed her spiked heels at his groin and got off a couple good shots to his shins. He let out a yelp as he shoved her down into the backseat.

"You wanna play rough?" He came at her, his shaved head ducking her flailing feet. His hand came up, struck her hard once, twice. Her head whipped right and left. Her brain rattled.

"Cut out the social niceties," the other man growled as he slid into the driver's seat. "There'll be plenty of time for that later." He looked over his shoulder and gave Bitsy a sickly grin that soured her stomach.

The strong arms shoved Bitsy back into the seat, grabbed her ankles with one hand and circled them with the thin wire. She gingerly prodded with her tongue several teeth loosened by the blows.

"There, honey." The ape leaned over her, his thick lips rolled back from his pale-pink gums. The moist smell of male sweat and cigarettes overwhelmed her. "This is only the beginning. Whatever god you believe in, I'll have you screaming for him before I'm done with you."

She screwed up her lips and spat at him. Blood colored the saliva that dripped down his cheek.

The fist that hit her square in the face and knocked her out cold again was almost a relief.

When she came to, she was uncertain how much time had passed, but didn't think much. The blood was still damp on her skin, the pain fresh where the fist had met her face. The ache in her shoulders had not yet escalated from a throb, but her wrists and ankles burned where the wire cut into the thin skin.

She kept her eyes closed, hoping the cover of unconsciousness would give her captors a false sense of security, perhaps cause them to talk more freely, reveal something useful. Something that could save her.

The car was moving fast. There was no slowing down for intersections or ninety-degree turns. They must be on the highway.

“Is she all right?” she heard the driver ask.

The seat shifted as the heavy man guarding her in the back leaned toward her. She forced her body to involuntarily tip toward the man’s weight. Fresh anger rose inside her as his hateful odor filled her nostrils. She fought to keep her breathing steady.

“She’s breathing,” the man reported in a bored voice.

A fingertip scraped down Bitsy’s left breast. Her entire body stiffened.

“She’s awake.”

She opened her eyes. An inch away was the man’s oily smile.

“Rise and shine, sweetheart.”

She instructed him to perform a technically physically impossible act on himself.

The driver gave a pitchy laugh. A savage deadness moved into the other man’s eyes, made even eerier by the low, amused rumble that rose from him. The tip of his tongue wet his lips as he moved in even closer. “Soon, sugar pie. And thanks to you, it’ll be even sweeter.” He gave her breast a squeeze, blatant satisfaction filling his fleshy features as he leaned back and lit a cigarette.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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