MILLS & BOON

Vintage INTRIGUE

One of These Nights

JUSTINE DAVIS

Justine Davis
One of These Nights

Аннотация

Corporate security guard Samantha Beckett knew that sexy electronics genius Ian Gamble would balk at having her as his bodyguard, so she decided that posing as his neighbor was the best way to keep her eye on him. Professionally speaking, of course…Ian thought that suddenly acquiring the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen as his next-door neighbor was too good to be true. And then Samantha turned out to be his hired…bodyguard! Well, perhaps it was time they both took her job description more literally….

Содержание

She really was very leggy, he thought. And very blond. 5
One of These Nights 6
JUSTINE DAVIS 7
Contents 9
Chapter 1 10
Chapter 2 28
Chapter 3 43
Chapter 4 58
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 76

She really was very leggy, he thought. And very blond.

And she appeared to be moving in next door.

The woman set a large box down on the front porch of the house. Then she froze. And slowly turned her head and looked right at him.

Ian jerked back from the window, startled.

You can't be sure she was looking at you, not with those dark glasses, he told himself, as he tried to puzzle out his scientific problem.

And then she smiled at him.

His heart did a crazy flip-flop. He told himself it wasn't the smile that rattled him, although even from here it was a killer smile. It was that she sensed him watching. Such instincts made his scientific mind wary, he thought as he turned his mind back to his old problem.

And hoped he hadn't just acquired a new one.

One of These Nights
Justine Davis

www.millsandboon.co.uk

JUSTINE DAVIS

A former policewoman, Justine says that years ago, a young man she worked with encouraged her to try for a promotion to a position that was, at that time, occupied only by men. “I succeeded, became wrapped up in my new job and that man moved away, never, I thought, to be heard from again. Ten years later he appeared out of the woods of Washington State, saying he’d never forgetten me and would I please marry him. With that history, how could I write anything but romance?”

Once upon a time, there was a genre of books that was sadly misunderstood by anyone who didn’t read them. Those who did read them loved them, cherished them, were changed by them. But still, these books got no respect on the outside. In fact, these books were belittled, denigrated, held up as bad examples, while their readers and authors were sneered at and insulted by people who, although they never read the books, had somehow arrived at the idea that it was all right to slap others down for their choices. But those readers and authors kept on in the face of this horrible prejudice. Why? Because they found something in these books that they found nowhere else. Something precious, which spoke to them in a very deep and basic way.

Then one day, this beleaguered genre was given a gift. A fairy godmother, if you will, a person with an incredible knowledge of

these books and why they worked, and an even more incredible generosity of spirit. A one-person support system who gave so much to the writers of these stories, and was ever unselfish with her time and that amazing knowledge. And her endorsement counted for something; readers took her word and knew they would rarely be disappointed. She was a rock, a pillar on which the genre depended. Her loss has left a gaping hole that can never be filled, and will always be felt by those who love these books—and loved her.

For those reasons and so many more, the Redstone, Incorporated series is dedicated to

MELINDA HELFER

Lost to us August 24, 2000,

but if heaven is what it should be, she's in an endless library, with an eternity to revel in the books she loved.

Happy reading, my friend….

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19

Chapter 1

"Hey, Professor, you've been ordered to the boss's office right away."

Ian Gamble swore that if one more person called him Professor, he was going to ruin his image and punch whoever said it.

At least they aren't saying the absentminded part, he told himself.

But it didn't help much when he knew they were thinking it. He was not absentminded, nor was he a professor. What he was was an inventor, and that, as he'd told them all more than once, should be enough of a job title. It had been enough for Joshua Redstone, after all. He'd hired Ian when nobody else would. Josh hadn't cared about a piece of paper with the name of some college on it.

"Did you hear me?"

Ian gave his high-energy, and occasionally wearing, assistant a sideways look. The young college student was bright and had a lot of potential, but she was also in a very big hurry to receive the kind of acknowledgment she thought she already deserved. Even Stan Chilton, the easygoing head of this safety-oriented section of Redstone's research and development division, admitted he sometimes found her tiring.

"Were you speaking to me?"

Rebecca Hollings let out an audible, put-upon sigh as she pushed a lock of rather dull brown hair out of her eyes. “Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Redstone ordered me to his office? That’s unusual.” He watched her steadily until she gave in sheepishly.

“Well, I guess what he really said was he needed to talk to you.”

That was more like it. Most of the time if Josh needed a face-to-face with someone in his own headquarters building, he went to them. Summoning the peons to the tower wasn’t his style. Besides, as he’d told Ian once, he wasn’t one to pass up any chance to get out of his office.

“But he did say soon,” she added. “And he was headed for his office.”

“Then he didn’t stay long,” Ian said as a movement at the doors to the research and development lab caught his eye. A split second later Joshua Redstone poked his head in the door.

Rebecca blushed and turned away. Ian supposed he should go easier on her. She worked hard, often late into the night. And she went out of her way to help him, even brought him sandwiches when he forgot to eat. It was just his own nature that made him feel she was hovering too much.

“Ian? Take a walk with me?” Josh said in that easy drawl that made it painless to follow what from another man in his position would have been an order.

Ian nodded at Josh, hit the keys to blank the screen he’d been working with, signed out and locked the system, then got up and

headed for the doors. Without a backward glance at his assistant.

They walked in silence until they reached the end of the hall and the huge bay window that looked out on the courtyard. The building that was the main headquarters of Redstone, Incorporated, was built around a cool green garden with a big pond and waterfall. In the heat of a California summer, it was a favorite spot for all the employees, and this window alcove lined with comfortable chairs was Ian's favorite retreat when he needed to get out of the bustle of the lab. He wasn't surprised that Josh remembered that. Redstone people got used to that kind of thing after a while.

"How's it going?" Josh asked as he folded his lanky frame into a chair. The laziness of his drawl, an odd combination of all the places he'd drifted through during formative years, didn't fool Ian one bit.

"Backing up a bit after the last results," Ian said as he took the next chair, "but we're still on the right track."

He knew Josh already knew this, because after the last round of experiments he'd filed a report that had shown they had further to go before the explosive-sensitive material he was working on would be effective in a configuration to be of use. Something else must be on his mind, Ian thought.

"If you can do this, it's going to be a wonder, Ian. Maybe we can't prevent everything, but I'd give a lot to never read about another Lockerbie or lose another of the family to a bomb on a plane."

Ian knew he was referring to the death of Phil Cooper a few years ago. As it turned out Cooper hadn't been the stellar citizen they'd thought, having died in the process of abandoning his wife and child, but that had all worked out for the best in a typical Redstone way, with new, happy beginnings for all.

"You're already giving a lot," Ian pointed out. "You're supporting this research." And if he could just figure out what was wrong and fix it, so the material could line the cabins and holds of any aircraft as he intended, it would be worth everything Redstone was putting into it.

"And I'm not the only one."

Ah-ha, Ian thought. Josh was on that horse again. "Josh, the only one even close on this is Trektech, and Baron's stumped."

"He is?"

"I was talking to a old prof of mine at Cal Tech. He said Baron's called him three times in the last month, with wilder questions each time. He's lost. I know there are others working on it, too, but I'll get there first," Ian promised.

"I believe you. As long as you're left alone to do it. And that isn't what worries me."

"Oh?" Ian said, fairly sure now of where his boss was going with this. And the fact that Joshua Redstone, founder of the entire Redstone empire and veteran of innumerable corporate and personal battles, looked uncomfortable told Ian he was exactly right.

"I got a call from a friend today," Josh said. "He heard

something interesting."

Ian knew Josh had an incredible network of people who, thanks to his penchant for lending a helping hand, were more than happy to repay him with bits of information.

"Interesting?"

"TriChem has had some inquiries about two of the chemical components you're using."

"Two?"

Josh smiled as Ian zeroed in on the crucial word. One might be coincidence, two was suspicious but not conclusive.

As if he'd read his mind, Josh added, "One of them is the compound, Ian."

Well, that changed things, Ian thought. It wasn't likely anyone else would need that particular combination at this exact moment in time.

Josh's voice was dangerously quiet. "I think we have to assume we have a leak."

Ian hated to agree with that summation, but he knew it was true. "You're right," he said reluctantly. "It's such an odd combination."

"And unlikely someone else would have come up with it within a month of your breakthrough."

Ian grimaced. Why couldn't he just get on with his work? He hated to think about things like this. About someone he knew, someone he worked with and trusted, betraying him.

He glanced at his boss and saw something in his eyes that

reminded him that this was a betrayal of Josh, as well. Josh, who'd earned the loyalty of everyone who worked for him. A generous, staunch ally who also made a dangerous, lethal enemy.

"There's more," Josh added. "Personnel caught another one."

"Trying to get hired?"

Josh nodded. "He had the perfect credentials. Would have been just what we were looking for."

"But?"

"A little digging turned up a JetCal connection. Not a close one—a roommate's brother or something—but it was there. Again."

This was the second time someone tied to JetCal had tried to get a job in Redstone Technologies' research and development division. Ian knew Josh hadn't thought much of Joe Santerelli's business methods already, and this only confirmed he was right in his judgment.

"I'm not sure we can make the lab any more secure than it already is, without limiting access entirely," Ian said thoughtfully. Josh had already spared no expense in setting up safeguards for the R&D section, Ian's work in particular, but if the leak was already on the inside, that might not be enough.

"We may have to do that. But I'll deal with the inside. Outside is where the real vulnerability is."

Ian frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You, Ian."

Ian blinked. "Me?"

“It’s not a secret that you do a lot of work at home. If they want this badly enough to try espionage from the inside at Redstone, they might try something there, too.”

“I’ve made some security arrangements there,” Ian said. “The work will be safe.”

Josh smiled, that gentle smile that warned Ian he’d somehow missed the point. “They might want it badly enough to come after you.”

“That would be crazy,” Ian protested.

Josh Redstone’s gaze never wavered. “Yes. But it’s a crazy world, my friend.”

Nobody knew that better than Josh, Ian realized. But the idea that someone might come after him seemed too absurd to Ian to contemplate.

“What good would I do them?” he protested. “It’s not as if I’d ever work for them.”

“Voluntarily.” Josh’s voice was grim. “I want you to have protection, Ian, until this project is concluded one way or another.”

Ian couldn’t help it, he burst out laughing. “Protection? You mean like a bodyguard? You’re not serious!”

“I am, Ian. I don’t compromise when it comes to the safety of my people.”

Ian had never seen quite that glint before in the steady gray eyes of the man who was Redstone. But he couldn’t give in to this. He liked his life as it was. He knew his own mental processes

well enough to know that the kind of disruption Josh was talking about would rattle his thinking, and he'd likely never achieve a breakthrough on this project. He didn't like change, anyway, he needed things in his personal life stable so he could free his mind to think about his work.

"I appreciate your concern, but it's out of the question."

"Ian—"

"No," he repeated.

It was not, he supposed, wise to interrupt and argue with your boss, but if Josh had been the kind of man who took offense at such things, Ian knew he would have been fired long ago.

"I mean it, Josh. Somebody around all the time, at my home and wherever I go? I can't work or think that way."

Josh studied him for a moment. "And if I made it an order?"

Ian let out a compressed breath. "Then, with great difficulty because of my tremendous respect and liking for you, I would disobey."

Josh's mouth quirked upward. "I was afraid of that."

"Josh, I'm sorry, but—"

Josh waved a hand at him. "Never mind. I had to ask."

"And I had to refuse."

"I understand."

Relieved, Ian stood up. Then he asked, "Was there anything else?"

Josh shook his head. "Just tell your assistant to lighten up."

Ian chuckled. "I have. She's a little hyper, so it hasn't gotten

through yet."

Josh looked concerned. "Is she turning out to be a problem?"

Josh himself had talked Ian into taking the girl on, saying she was bright enough to learn from the best. Ian had a sneaking suspicion Josh also thought having the young woman around might loosen him up a bit. In any case, he didn't want Josh to think he'd made a bad decision when in fact it was mostly Ian's own problem.

"No, not at all. I'm just not used to her yet, and she's anxious to do it all now."

"Keep trying with her," Josh said.

Keep Trying. One of the Redstone mantras, Ian thought as he headed back to the lab. Along with Hire the Best and Let Them Do Their Best, and Redstone Likes Happy People. To the outside world, he was sure they all sounded like idealistic dreamers, but everybody on the inside knew it was for real. Because of one man, Ian thought as he keyed in his pass code for entry to the lab. One man with a vision, and the determination to make it happen. Josh had—

Ian stopped dead in the doorway to his office. Rebecca was in his chair, at his computer.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

"Oh!" She jumped, spun in the chair, her hand pressed dramatically over her heart. "You scared me."

Normally it would have been time for an apology, a statement saying he hadn't meant to scare her. But Josh's warnings were still

echoing in his mind, and he stayed silent, simply watching her. He'd learned it was a rare person who could allow such silence, and Rebecca definitely wasn't one of them.

"I was just leaving you a note."

Her voice still sounded tight. Again he waited, and something odd flickered in her eyes.

"I need to leave early," she said hastily. "I have a doc—er, a dentist's appointment."

If she'd only been leaving him a note about that, why was she so flustered? Had she been doing something else? Trying to access his files on the computer? The screen was as he'd left it, blacked out, but if she'd been here long enough…

As Rebecca scuttled out of the room, Ian told himself he was being paranoid. Yet he had enough respect for Josh to take his worries seriously. The man was no fool, and those who had mistaken him for such, perhaps judging him by that lazy drawl or the way he had of strolling along with his hands in his pockets, were the sadder for it.

He turned to his computer and did a quick check. He could find no trace that anyone had accessed any of his files in the past half hour. That decided him. In this case Josh was being overly protective. Wasn't that part of the Redstone legend, taking care of his people? Wasn't that why they were consistently at the top of the national list of the best places to work?

I want you to have protection, Ian….

No. No way. He couldn't tolerate it. He hadn't even been able

to tolerate his wife around all the time. His need for space, while Colleen had needed people and socializing, had driven her away after a mere ten months of trying to put up with him.

No, he was a loner, a borderline recluse, as Josh's personal pilot, Tess Machado, had called him more than once. And he would stay that way, happily. He didn't need a wife, or any woman to complete him. He had his work. That was enough.

"Thanks for getting here so quickly, Sam."

"No problem," Samantha Beckett told her boss.

Actually it had been a problem—when he'd called she had just stepped out of the shower, her hair dripping wet. But she'd have dealt with a lot more than wet hair to come running at his call, and she hoped he knew it. Joshua Redstone had done more for her and Billy than anyone ever had, and she owed him more than she could ever repay.

"How's Billy?" Josh asked, as if he'd read her thought.

"He's doing great. That new residential skills center is working well for him. He likes the people and he's really happy."

"That's good to hear."

Sam knew he wouldn't take it in words, so she tried her best to put her thanks into her smile. If not for Josh, Billy would probably be locked in an institution somewhere, taken away by some bureaucrat who thought they knew better than she did how to take care of her little brother. Instead they'd stayed together, and she was able to afford to have him well looked after when she had to leave on assignment.

Speaking of assignments, she thought, why was the usually direct Josh taking so long to get around to the point?

She studied him, thinking as she often had that you'd never guess by looking at him that this former pilot had built a small airplane design company into an international corporation the scope of which she could hardly comprehend. But she also knew that was one of his strengths. Josh didn't come across as a shark, not with that tall, lanky frame, sometimes tousled hair and that lazy smile. He was very unassuming and laid-back, but people who assumed he was as slow as his drawl didn't discover the sharpness of his teeth until it was too late.

"This is an unusual one," Josh finally said, sounding a bit uncomfortable. That in itself was odd enough for Sam to sit up and pay close attention.

"In-house, I gather, since you wanted to meet here?" she asked, gesturing at the restaurant they were sitting in.

He nodded, confirming her guess that the "unusual" case involved something or someone inside Redstone, and that he didn't want to risk anyone seeing them meet. This despite the fact that the Redstone security team was low profile by intention. They reported directly to Josh, had their own office off-site, and other than those in the upper echelon, like Noah Rider last month, the majority of Redstone employees wouldn't know any of them by sight.

"Undercover, then?" Sam asked, already running through logistics in her mind.

“Sort of,” Josh said.

Sam looked at the man across the table from her. It wasn’t like him to equivocate. For the most part, Joshua Redstone preferred plain speaking. Which made this hesitancy even more interesting to her.

“Would you like to just cut to the chase, sir?”

“I need you to bodyguard somebody who doesn’t want one.”

Well, that was blunt enough, Sam thought. “All right,” she said. “How far under?”

“What?”

“You want me to sleep with him?”

Surprise flared in Josh’s eyes, as she had intended. “You know better than that!”

“Yes, I do.” She grinned at him. “You just seemed a little vague about the specifics here.”

Josh let out a wry chuckle. “Now I know how the guys who go up against you and lose feel.”

“Is there any other kind?” Samantha said, her grin widening.

“Not many, I’d guess,” Josh conceded, returning her grin finally. “I have to say I knew what I was doing when I hired you for this job.”

“And the people at the Sitka Resort are eternally grateful you pulled me out of there, I’m sure.”

And no more so than I, she added silently, knowing she would have gone slowly insane working in such a routine-laden world, even if it was for Redstone.

"You weren't happy," he said candidly, and for a moment Sam marveled at the simplicity of it; one of his lowliest, most distant employees wasn't happy, so he took steps to fix that. Amazing. "I'll have Rand relieve you periodically, because I don't know how long this assignment will be."

Samantha nodded. She and Rand Singleton had worked together frequently, often taking advantage of the striking resemblance between them. With matching nearly platinum-blond hair and blue eyes, they were easily able to pass as brother and sister. She thought of him that way, too, as a sometimes bossy big brother.

"So who's this guy who doesn't want to be guarded?"

"Ian Gamble. He's in R and D."

Sam frowned. The name sounded vaguely familiar. "What's he need guarding from?"

"He's working on a very important, very secret project for Redstone Technologies. He's close to success, and there are a lot of other people who would like to get there first. JetCal has already tried twice to get a mole in. Plus, there's a possibility we have a leak."

There was an undertone in his voice that was razor sharp, and if there was a leak, Sam didn't envy her or him when Josh found out who it was. Which he would, she knew. She thought about asking what the project was, then decided if it made any difference in her task, Josh would have told her. Besides, her mind had already leaped ahead.

"People who might want to interfere with him or his work in one way or another?"

Josh nodded. "Or stop him from working at all. On the financial front, the Safe Transit Project could be worth billions to whoever gets there first."

"That's a lot of motive," Sam said. "Why the resistance?"

"In part because he doesn't believe he's really in danger."

"Naive?"

"Not exactly. Ian is…different. Brilliant, but a bit eccentric."

Eccentric, in her experience, was a kinder euphemism for crazy. A vision formed in her head, a sort of Einstein-needing-Prozac image that had her smiling inwardly even as she calculated just how difficult this task might be.

"He has a very particular way of working," Josh explained, "and he refuses to let anything or anyone intrude on that."

"Even for his own safety?"

"Especially that. He agrees his work needs protecting but won't have anything to do with a bodyguard. And I can't say that I don't understand. He needs space and time to let that incredible mind of his run."

"He's that smart?"

"Not in the traditional sense. He thinks outside the box, as they say. That's why he's so good at what he does."

"Which is?"

"They call him 'the professor,' but he's an inventor."

Einstein suddenly shifted to Edison in her head. "We still have

those?"

"A few," Josh said with a grin. "Most inventing is done by committee nowadays, but Ian is a throwback. Lucky for us."

"And where did you find this one?"

It had become legend, Josh Redstone's knack for finding gold in the most unlikely places. It seemed every employee had a story of how Josh found them in a place they didn't want to be and gave them the chance to find the place they belonged.

"He was trying to market a new deicing chemical for planes that he'd come up with, and after he got turned down by all the big and small airlines, he came to Redstone Aviation. He'd already invented a new computer cable that reduced signal noise, and a fireproofing treatment for already existing roofs, but hadn't been able to sell those, either."

And on the strength of what would likely be seen in the business world as three failures, Josh had hired him anyway, Sam thought. Typical.

"They didn't work?" she asked.

"They worked," Josh said. "But Ian is in no way a salesman."

Sam smiled inwardly. Not necessarily a bad thing in my book. "So Redstone took that off his hands?"

"And let him do what he does best."

"Invent."

Josh nodded. "And nobody else can quite follow the way his mind works, so he works alone. And lives alone."

That could make things either easier or harder, Sam thought.

“Not married?”

“Not for several years.”

Burned, or impossible to live with? Sam wondered. “How alone is he? A recluse?”

“No. He doesn’t socialize much, outside of Redstone, but he does get along fine inside. He works out in the gym with a regular group, that kind of thing.”

Something in Josh’s expression told her she was wasting her time trying to think of an approach. “You’ve already got this set up, don’t you?”

One corner of her boss’s mouth quirked upward. “I always did say you were perceptive.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“I hate lying to him, but I’d hate even more having to negotiate for his safety. Or go to his funeral.” Josh reached into his pocket and pulled out two keys on a ring, with a paper tag attached. He slid them across the table to her. “You just bought a house.”

Sam blinked. She looked at the keys, then at her boss. “Lucky me,” she said.

She picked up the ring, glanced at the tag, at the address scrawled on it.

“Let me guess,” she said. “The professor’s nearby?”

“Right next door.”

Already planning her packing, she lifted an eyebrow at him. “Did they want to sell?”

Josh’s mouth quirked. “They did in the end.”

“At twice market value?” she guessed, knowing how Josh worked. “Enough to set them up in a brand-new house with cash to spare?”

Josh shrugged. “The important thing was to get you close. So Ian’s got a new neighbor.”

Sam pocketed the keys with a grin. “There goes the neighborhood.”

Chapter 2

Adhesion.

That, Ian thought as he paced his living room, was the problem. The formula itself was working perfectly, it was the practical logistics of use that were being evasive.

He paused at the side window, his mind intent on the puzzle. No matter what they applied the explosive-sensitive material to, it started to peel away. Steel, aluminum, even plastic—after a month to six weeks under normal usage in a cargo hold or passenger cabin it always happened.

He turned, crossing the room once more, his path clear because all of the furniture was pushed up against the walls, leaving him lots of free space to roam as he thought.

They'd tried embedding the material in a plastic that could then be shaped, but the process greatly affected the efficiency and sensitivity of the product. They'd tried every known kind of primer, with little success. The problem was finding something that didn't react with the active ingredient in the sensor medium. The only thing they'd found so far was lead, but lining an airplane with that was a problem for more reasons than just the weight factor.

He came back to the window.

He had to be overlooking something. There was some simple answer, he could just feel it. It was probably so simple he was

looking right past it. He was looking—

He was looking at a rather incredible woman.

He blinked as his conscious mind finally registered what his subconscious had already known. There was a tall, leggy blonde next door, carrying a large box. Carrying it more easily than he would have expected, given its bulk. She was wearing faded jeans, a yellow tank top and a pair of wraparound sunglasses. Her pale hair was pulled back into some kind of knot at the back of her head and secured with what looked for all the world to be chopsticks. How did women learn such things? he wondered.

She really was very leggy, he thought. And very blond.

And she appeared to be moving in next door.

He frowned. Not his usual reaction to the sight of a beautiful woman, but his quiet, older neighbors had sold out and moved so quickly, barely pausing to say goodbye. True, they'd been longing for a place with less upkeep, but had been certain it would be years before they could afford the luxury town house they wanted. Obviously, something had happened to change that.

And the day after their moving van had pulled away a furniture truck had appeared, unloading several items. And now this woman.

She didn't seem to have brought much. Maybe the rest of her personal items had been with the new furniture. Then again, probably not. It had been a delivery truck, not a moving truck. Yet what he'd seen her carry in amounted to less than his mother took on a weekend trip. Of course, his mother didn't know the

meaning of traveling light.

He supposed he could go over there and simply ask. Maybe introduce himself. Even offer to help, although it looked like she didn't need it. It was what his mother would do.

But she, Ian thought rather glumly, would do it with ease and charm. He would fumble and stumble and feel thoroughly awkward about it.

The woman set another large box down on the front porch of the house, straightened, started to turn to go back to the blue pickup truck that was parked at the curb. Then she froze. And slowly turned her head and looked right at him.

Ian jerked back from the window, startled.

You can't be sure she was looking at you, not with those dark glasses, he told himself.

And then she smiled and waved at him.

His heart did a crazy flip-flop. He told himself it wasn't the smile that rattled him, although even from here it was a killer one. It had to be that she seemed to have sensed him watching. Such instincts, while he knew they existed, made his scientific mind wary.

He pulled back even farther, and with a discipline born of years spent learning to focus, he turned his mind back to the old problem.

And hoped he hadn't just acquired a new one.

Sam took the last box straight inside, set it down and plopped herself down on the cushy couch that had been delivered just

yesterday.

"Well," she muttered to herself, "that'll teach you to make assumptions."

Obviously her Einstein image was now blown to bits. She hadn't been able to see all of him, but already it was clear that Ian Gamble was anything but the wild-haired old man she'd been picturing. In fact, his sandy brown hair had looked thick and shiny and had that endearingly floppy quality that always made her want to touch.

She jumped to her feet. She wasn't that rattled, she told herself. All she needed was a little readjustment of her perceptions. So he was younger than she'd thought. All that meant was he might be a bit more active than she'd figured. She could deal with that. In fact it would be easier. Stakeouts and long surveillances always made her crazy because she wasn't used to sitting still for so long.

That thought cheered her, and she got up and went about the business of unpacking. Since she'd have access to laundry facilities here in the house, she'd been able to pack even lighter than usual. She usually lived in jeans and cotton shirts when she had the option, but she'd have to wear office clothing to convince Gamble she had a job somewhere. At least the Armani gown and the dressy clothes she'd acquired—at Josh's recommendation and expense—in the course of other assignments could stay home this trip.

It didn't take her long to empty the two boxes of clothing, and

to set aside the dark jeans, sweater and knit cap she had selected in case she had to do any late-night recons. The bathroom was another, smaller box. The kitchen was the smallest box of all; her cooking skills were limited to coffee, scrambled eggs and packaged macaroni and cheese, so she didn't require much in the way of gear. Into the fridge went the items from the cooler she'd brought from home, to save her from throwing the stuff out when she went back to her apartment. Then she unpacked the bag of items she'd picked up at the grocery store around the corner on her way here; she couldn't order in every night. Well, she could, but not without drawing more attention from the neighbors than she wanted.

Lastly she took her two-inch Smith & Wesson revolver out of its case, along with a trim holster with a belt clip and an ankle holster. She'd spent yesterday sharpening her skills with the small weapon. Anything larger than the small gun would be harder to hide from Gamble, and she didn't want to have to worry about it.

When she was done unpacking, she went back into the living room. She'd already seen that the windows on the north side of the house were the best spot to watch Gamble's home. And smiled to see that Josh had already arranged to have the rather ornate floral draperies left by the previous owners replaced with pleated shades that allowed in sunlight from outside yet were semitransparent from inside, so she could see at least motion if not details without raising them.

Upstairs, the master bedroom had a window seat alcove that

looked out on that same side. She suspected most of her in-house time would be spent there, since she could see the windows on the side and back of Gamble's house, plus both the front and back yards. The yards themselves were an almost scary sight; gardening, it was clear, was not on the man's list of priorities.

Which could be a good thing for her, she thought. A way to get closer. She'd have to watch for a chance.

She was glad the lower bank of windows around the window seat bay opened. She needed to be able to hear the slightest noises from next door. She preferred to sleep with windows open, anyway, especially in spring and summer, but in this case she'd have to even if it was cold out. Not that she'd be sleeping all that much at night, and when she did, it would be with one ear open. She'd have to catch up during the day when Gamble was safely tucked away at Redstone.

Speaking of her target, she thought, it was time to get moving on that front. She went to the kitchen, grabbed her favorite coffee mug, and headed for the door. It was old and corny, yes, but it also happened to be true. She was out of sugar.

She had to go down to the sidewalk then up the walkway to the house; there was no way she could cut through the overgrown honeysuckle that grew along the property lines between the houses. It had to be at least six feet tall and incredibly thick. That, she thought, could be a problem if she needed to get over there in a hurry. All the more reason to pursue that, she thought.

She paused for a moment before knocking on the front door.

First impressions counted, and never more than in this kind of work. She debated between sheepish, shy or harried, decided on a combination of the first two, with a touch of flighty blonde just to see if it would work.

She knocked. Waited. Knocked again. Finally the door swung open.

Samantha Beckett took her first close-up look at Ian Gamble and immediately abandoned her plan. There was nothing naive or absentminded about those vivid green eyes, and the wire-rimmed glasses he wore did nothing to mask an intelligence that fairly crackled. His hair was lighter than she'd thought, almost a sandy blond on top, but it was as thick and shiny as it had seemed from a distance.

He was tall, she realized. At five foot nine herself, she noticed that. He didn't tower over her, but if she looked straight ahead she was looking at his nose, not his forehead as often was the case. And he was lean, not pudgy, as she'd half expected someone who spent their days in a lab to be.

I've got to work on my preconceptions, she told herself. And, she added silently as she realized he was looking at her rather quizzically, I'd better say something here.

"Hi," she said.

Well, now that was clever. Get it together here, Beckett. You've done this before, what's your problem?

She tried again. "I'm Samantha. Samantha Harrison." She and Josh had agreed that while it was very unlikely, there was

just enough chance Gamble might stumble across her name or someone else who'd seen it in connection with Redstone to make a cover name wise. So as she usually did, she used her mother's maiden name. "I just moved in next door."

After a moment of hesitation that made her wonder, he nodded. "I saw."

At least he didn't try to deny he'd been watching, she thought. After the way he'd jerked back when she'd sensed his gaze and looked over at his window, she'd half expected that.

"I know this sounds like an old joke, but I really am out of sugar, and if I don't have it for my morning coffee, it gets pretty ugly. I'd really like to avoid another run to the market if I can. I'm kind of beat."

His mouth quirked slightly. At first she thought it was in amusement, but then she got the oddest feeling it was in self-consciousness. Or embarrassment.

"You moved alone?"

In another man she might have thought this a not-too-subtle way to find out if she was married or otherwise attached. But there was nothing of subterfuge in his eyes, and she realized on a sudden flash of insight that he was uncomfortable because he hadn't offered to help her.

"Just me, but all I had to do was my clothes and personal stuff, so it wasn't bad." She gestured with the mug. "Except I was out of sugar and didn't realize it until I unpacked the coffeemaker."

"Oh," he said, as if suddenly remembering why she was here.

“Uh, sure, I’ve got some sugar.”

“Thanks,” she said, handing him her mug.

He took it, then hesitated, and she wondered if he would just leave her standing on the porch while he went to the kitchen. That wouldn’t do; she needed to see the inside of the house. She knew the layout, thanks to Redstone’s research department, who had miraculously dug up the original plans from when the tract had been built twenty-five years ago, but she needed to see how he had it set up, to know where he worked, slept, watched TV, whatever he did.

At the last second he pulled the door open. “Come on in.”

“Thanks.”

She stepped in after him, but instead of following him toward the back of the house, where the kitchen was, she stayed near the door. At least, until he was out of sight. Then she swiftly went to the windows that faced her new residence; first thing she needed to know was what he could see. Her living room was on almost a direct line with his, so that was out for stealth. She noted that he’d have to lean out to look past his chimney to see her bedroom window; another point for it being the prime observation post. She turned back to the interior.

She’d noticed the chaos, but only peripherally in her focus on the windows. What was supposed to be the living room clearly was serving as his office. Judging from everything he had here, none of the bedrooms would have been big enough. Two computers, a door-size table piled with papers, a lower

table covered with what looked like computer printouts, and two huge bookcases crammed with books, notebooks and pieces of equipment whose function she could only guess at.

On a normal surveillance, she'd be looking for places to plant bugs or cameras. But Josh had been quite clear on that; Ian was one of them, an innocent victim of his work at Redstone, and he was to be protected, not treated like some kind of suspect.

She walked to the other side of the room, where an arched opening led to what was supposed to be a den, according to the floor plan. This, at least, looked almost like what it was supposed to be, although there were piles of papers and books here, too. There was a television in one corner, and a leather couch that looked, from the pillow and blanket tossed to one side, as if it had been the scene of more than one night's sleep.

So, did he sleep on the couch for the traditional reasons, a tiff with a significant other that Redstone didn't know about? There was no sign of a feminine hand in this place, and rare would be the woman who could look at all this and not want to do… something.

More likely, she thought, as she heard footsteps and dodged out of the room and back into the entryway, he got so involved in his reading or work that he crashed here on the couch because it was closer. That fit with what Josh had said about him.

Of course, it could simply be that the bedroom was full, too, she thought, stifling a grin.

"It's a bit lumpy," he said apologetically as he handed her the

mug, now nearly full with indeed lumpy sugar.

"No problem," she assured him. "It'll still dissolve just fine."

He seemed a bit more at ease now, and she wondered if she could stretch this a bit.

"I and my bleary, morning eyes thank you."

He managed an actual smile. A nice smile. In fact, a very nice smile. It changed his entire face, from that rather somber, serious mien to something that could pass for the proverbial boy next door. Which he was, in a way, she thought, smiling back at him.

"Have you lived here long? I don't know the neighborhood at all," she said, hoping to draw him out.

"Almost all my life. My parents bought this place when I was seven." He frowned slightly. "I didn't even realize the Howards had put their place on the market."

"They didn't, actually. A friend who knew I was looking for a place out here put us together." She didn't want to over explain and draw his curiosity, so she asked, "Your parents don't live here now?"

This time the quirk of his mouth was almost a grimace. "They don't live anywhere. They're never in one place long enough. They visit here now and then, but live? No."

"They travel?" She knew that already, but schooled her features to friendly interest.

"In the extreme," he said. "The old phrase the jet set was invented for my parents. When I was a kid, every summer we were off to some exotic place. Now that they're retired, it's

constant."

"Sounds like fun," she said, as if she hadn't had her own experiences of round-the-world travel since she'd joined the Redstone security team. Of course, her travel was hardly for pleasure, and often she barely got to glimpse whatever exotic part of the world she was in.

He lifted one shoulder. "It's okay, if you don't mind not having a home base."

She thought about that for a minute, then shook her head. "No, I'd have to have someplace to claim as home." She grinned at him. "Or that would claim me, at least."

He grinned back then. A quick, flashing grin as lethal as any she'd ever seen. And she'd seen a few. Again she had to reassess Ian Gamble.

Who hadn't, she realized, told her his name.

"So tell me, where's the best pizza, Chinese takeout and ice cream?" she asked, knowing full well those were his weaknesses.

He blinked. And the grin widened. "Luigi's, Wong Fu's and The Ice Cream Factory. All within walking distance, if you like to walk."

"Hallelujah."

"Luigi's and Wong Fu's even deliver," he added helpfully.

"I may survive," she said. "Thanks—" She lifted a brow at the place where normally she would have said his name. He didn't miss the hint.

"Ian. Ian Gamble."

She held out a hand. “Nice to meet you, Ian.” No macho posturing here. His handshake was firm but not crushing. “I’ll replace the sugar.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

“Okay, then I’ll buy the ice cream one night.”

“I…uh…”

He looked so startled it disconcerted her. He was a reasonably attractive man—well, okay, more than reasonably—surely he’d had a woman ask him for a casual date before. Hadn’t he?

He was, she knew, only thirty-two, hardly old enough to be of the mind-set that women simply didn’t ask men out.

“How about tomorrow afternoon?” she asked, thinking perhaps a Sunday afternoon might seem less threatening. “Besides,” she added, “that way you can show me where it is.”

That practicality seemed to convince him, and he nodded. “Okay. If it can be late afternoon, I’ve got some work to finish up.”

“Work? On Sunday?” He shrugged. She looked at the two computers. “Are you some kind of dot com guy or something?”

He laughed. It was as nice as his smile. “Not hardly. I’m just a…researcher.”

Had he hesitated over using the word inventor? And if so, why? she wondered. Because it was too hard to explain to strangers?

“You work at home?” she asked.

“No. I work downtown.”

"So do I."

As if the need to be careful had just come back to him full force, he asked, "Where did you move from?"

"An apartment so small I could barely breathe," she said, with total honesty. She never spent much time in the place she'd moved into after Billy had settled into his own new home, because she was on the road so much for Josh. But when she was there for more than a few days, it seemed cramped. She had the feeling that by the time this was over, she'd miss the extra room. This house wasn't huge, but it was three times the size of her apartment.

"This will be worth the extra drive," she added, and he seemed to accept the implication that her apartment was closer to her work.

"It's a nice neighborhood. Quiet."

"Good. I've already picked out my favorite reading spot, up in the window seat," she said, figuring she'd supply the reason now, in case he noticed and started to wonder why she was up there so much.

"You read a lot?"

"Not as much as I'd like. That's why I'm planning on more."

He smiled at that, the understanding smile of a fellow reader. She gestured around at the living room office. "Do you read anything but work?"

"I try, but like you, not as much as I'd like. I read history, mostly. But now and then a good mystery will keep me up

nights."

"Me, too," she agreed, knowing she meant it in a totally different way than he did.

She'd about pushed the limits of the cup of sugar, she decided. "I'd better get back to my unpacking. And I've got to get my friend's truck back to him yet today. Thanks again for the sugar."

She felt his gaze on her all the way down the walkway, and then heard the door softly close.

Ian felt exhausted. He'd only spent five minutes with the woman and he was worn-out. He sank down on the couch, fighting the urge to pull the pillow into place and lie down. What the hell was wrong with him? Had he become so reclusive, so withdrawn that a short conversation with someone was such an effort for him?

After a moment he discarded that notion. It wasn't just someone, it was someone like Samantha Harrison. Life and energy simply radiated from her, and that kind of person always had this effect on him. Because he was so much the opposite, he supposed. He was always one step back from life, an observer rather than a participant. People like her lived life to the fullest, with passion and élan. People like him just stood back and watched, admiring but not partaking.

And sometimes wishing they could be different.

Chapter 3

It wasn't just a Monday morning, it was a rotten Monday morning. Rebecca was really starting to get on Ian's nerves. When they'd first assigned the intern to him, he'd thought she might be a help with all the paperwork and reports tracking the progress of the project. And he couldn't deny she was efficient at that. Too efficient, perhaps. She had too much time left to hang over his shoulder, too much time to poke her nose into new work that wasn't ready to be added to the logs yet.

He'd tried telling her he worked alone; he couldn't tolerate somebody hanging around so closely. But she'd told him she was just so excited she couldn't help herself. One time he'd snapped at her, and the sight of tears welling up in her eyes made him feel like such a jerk. She was barely more than a girl, after all. So now he found himself making up things for her to do, just to get her out of his way for a while. Like now, when he asked her to track down a new cartridge for the printer, when he knew a simple shaking of the current one would keep him going for a couple of weeks. He didn't care, he just needed her out of here so he could concentrate.

It didn't work.

He swore under his breath as his mind insisted on returning to yesterday, a Sunday afternoon unlike any he'd had in years. Samantha was filled with such energy, such a passion for life it

put him in mind of his mother, which did little to explain his wary fascination. He and his mother—and his father, for that matter—did not see eye to eye on much of anything, except that they loved each other and shared the wonder at how on earth they had wound up as parents and child.

A simple walk down the street for an ice cream, something he'd done countless times before, had somehow been turned into an adventure. Being new to the neighborhood, she'd seen and asked about things he took for granted. But he was glad. It let him relax and answer questions instead of trying to think of things to say. At one time he'd been perfectly able to carry on a conversation without strain. Once again he wondered how he'd come to this.

The Martins' multicolored Victorian-style house had earned a grin, the Bergs' cheerful border collie, a croon and a pat, and Mrs. Gerardi's lavish formal garden had rated a stop and look.

"Gorgeous, but a bit too tidy for my taste."

"You ought to love mine, then," Ian had said wryly.

She'd laughed, that lively and musical sound. "I noticed."

"I don't have the time," he'd said, then added frankly, "or the knowledge."

"I do. I love gardening, and there's not much to do around my place. Too much concrete," she'd said with a grimace. She'd turned a smile on him then that made his breath catch. "So why don't I tackle your yard? You'd be doing me a favor, letting me putter."

“You want to work on my yard?” He’d gaped at her but hadn’t been able to help it.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Samantha had said, sounding utterly enthused.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Rebecca’s voice said in his ear now, sounding utterly meek.

Ian snapped back to the present. For a moment he just stared at his assistant, who was looking at him as if she’d been talking for a while. He hadn’t heard a word.

“Mind?” he asked, hoping the ploy would work. It did, sort of. She repeated enough that he was able to get the gist of her request but with an expression on her face that clearly indicated she was wondering about his sanity.

“I know you said last week’s data wasn’t ready yet, but I thought since I have some time I’d enter it, anyway, and then I can make any changes you want later.”

Sometimes her eagerness wore on him, Ian thought. Maybe it was simply her youth. She made him feel much more than just thirteen years older than she was. He wondered how old Samantha was. Younger than he, he guessed. But not as young as Rebecca. And her enthusiasm didn’t wear on him in the same way. For all her lightheartedness, he sensed in Samantha depths that weren’t shown to the world. She’d had shadows in her life, he thought. She—

“Well, Professor?”

Yanked again back to the present, he resisted the urge to again

snap at her for calling him that. He shouldn't be angry at her. She was always so nice to him, bringing him lunch when he forgot to eat, tidying his office, making sure he remembered a jacket when it was cool.

"Go ahead," he said, rather sharply.

And just leave me alone.

Even as he thought the words, he realized they had become a mantra. He'd even stopped adding to do my work to the phrase. And for the most part, people were doing just that. Leaving him alone.

For the first time he wondered if maybe he'd gone too far into isolation.

"Hey, Professor, how goes it?" Stan Chilton's voice cut into his thoughts. "Data ready yet?"

He's your boss, Ian reminded himself, albeit with jaw clenched. You can't punch out the head of research and development, even if he is the one who started that damned "Professor" thing.

And the man was nearly as bad as Rebecca, hovering, flitting around the edges until Ian thought he was going to lose it. Odd, Stan hadn't always been that way. But it seemed everybody was strung tight over this particular project—even Stan, who, while bright enough, was more of an administrator than anything. His talent lay in the research, not in the development. Along with his computer skills, which were legend around the division, paperwork and organization, things that were an anathema to Ian,

were Stan's pride and joy.

And without him, you'd be stuck doing that, Ian told himself. So with a sigh he reined in his temper and set about updating Chilton, which in essence meant telling him that in hard data they were exactly where they'd been the last time he'd asked.

"So far, so good," Sam reported.

"He doesn't suspect?" Josh asked.

"No." She lifted a shoulder to hold the phone receiver against her ear as she finished pouring icy soda water into her glass. "I've got a good watching post for when he's in the house at night, and a way to stick close to him on weekends. The only problem is transit between here and Redstone. Right now I'm following him in and then back home, but I don't think that's going to work forever."

"You think he knows you're following him?" Josh asked.

"I told him I work in the same direction. But he works unpredictable hours, and that makes it tricky for me to match his schedule without him getting wise."

"Shall I have somebody else do the tail, so you can be less obvious?"

"That would be a good idea, for the interim."

"The interim?"

"I still don't like him driving alone. Too much could happen. If somebody was really prepared, they could grab him before we could get to him."

"Unacceptable," Josh said. And she knew he meant it.

"I've got a way around it, but I think I need to wait a bit. He needs to know me better, get used to me being around."

"It's your call."

She understood what trust and faith were implicit in those words. Josh didn't need details, he trusted his people to do their jobs. Never once had he even hinted that she was any less capable than any of the men on the team, or that she needed backup. Josh had hired her, Draven had trained her, and she carried her share.

"I'll arrange for someone to track him in the meantime," Josh said.

"Thanks. Have you heard from Draven?" she asked, now that the head of her section had come to mind.

"This morning. He's wrapping up in Managua and will be headed back the end of the week, with the package."

Way to go, she thought. They'd all wondered if they would be called in on that kidnap situation. Should have known better, with Draven on it.

"How's Billy?" Josh asked.

"Fine. I just got back from the school. I'm able to see him every day now, as long as our boy is in the lab. It's working out well."

She knew Josh had somebody on the inside watching—his longtime and rather spookily omniscient assistant, St. John, she suspected—ready to call or page her if Gamble left unexpectedly. That left her quite free during the frequently long work hours the professor put in, hours she put to good use visiting

her brother and catching up on her sleep.

"I'd like to stop by and see him," Josh said.

"He'd love that. You know you're always Uncle Josh to him."

She could almost see him smiling, and there was no denying the genuine pleasure in his tone when he answered. "He's a special kid."

"Yes," Sam said quietly. Her little brother was a very, very special kid. And it took a man the caliber of Josh Redstone to realize that.

After she'd hung up she sat still for a moment, thinking once more how lucky she was. If Josh hadn't pulled her out of her old job, who knows where the restless streak she'd been born with would have led her. Her parents, had they lived, would have been aghast at her work now, at the danger of it, the very thing that kept her exhilarated and buoyant.

But they would have been pleased that she'd taken care of Billy. Not that there had ever been any question. Her sweet-natured, always happy brother was considered handicapped by some, but to her he was the base of her world, the center that kept her sane.

And sometimes the single thing that kept her restless streak from becoming a reckless one.

Ian nearly drove through his garage door.

He wasn't really accident-prone, just sometimes he got to thinking and lost track of what he was doing. Fortunately his reflexes were fast enough to keep him out of trouble most of the

time, but there was a reason he always bought used cars.

Thinking had nothing to do with it this time, however. When he pulled into his driveway and saw Samantha in his garden, wearing only a bright-blue tank top and cutoff jeans that bared too much of those long legs for his equilibrium, he completely forgot what he was doing. That is, driving.

He stopped a fraction of an inch away from an expensive repair job on both garage door and already recently repaired car. Samantha looked up then and gave him a cheerful wave. She held a small pair of clippers, he saw then, and other gardening tools were in a small bucket on the ground beside her. She had on those dark, wraparound sunglasses, and a lime-green baseball-style cap, with her long, pale hair pulled through the back in a makeshift ponytail.

And the three-foot section of garden in front of her had been reclaimed. It wasn't anything drastic, just…tidier. The profusion of color his parents had loved was still there, it was just that you could see it all now.

Slowly he got out of his car and walked toward her. It was still warm out, even though it was after five, and he could see that she'd been at this a while, as she'd worked up a sweat. She seemed utterly unconcerned about it, which he thought was nice. He also saw a large bottle of water beside a tube of sunscreen in the tool bucket. She was careful, he thought. And wise. With her fair skin she could truly suffer from too much sun without protection.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said as he stopped before her. “I wasn’t going to start this until Saturday, but I got off a bit early today. I only did a little, until you could see and approve.”

“I do. Approve, I mean,” he amended hastily. “It looks just like it used to, when my mother was here.”

“She planted the garden?”

He nodded. “Most of it. They’re both big on bright colors and the exotic, so she added that to what was already here.”

“She got both,” Samantha said with a grin. “What a great place. I presume the bird of paradise was her pet?”

“And the lilies, I think.”

“Then the passionflower vine must be hers, too.”

“Is that that one, with the odd, round flowers?” he asked, pointing to the vine that was now so heavy it was nearly collapsing the trellis that was supporting it.

“That’s it,” Sam said.

“Yes, that was one of hers, too. I guess it was the only way she could let out what was inside. She was trying to be a homebody, for my sake.”

“Trying?”

“It just wasn’t in her. Oh, she did it, until I graduated high school. Then I went off to college, and they…just went.”

“You don’t sound particularly bitter about it,” Samantha said.

“Bitter?” he asked, startled. “No. Not at all. It’s so against her nature I’m amazed she lasted as long as she did. But she did it for me. I don’t begrudge her now.” He smiled. “Miss her, yes, and

my dad, too, but not begrudge her."

She smiled at him. She pulled off her sunglasses, and he saw the smile was echoed in her eyes. "They're lucky you understand."

He shrugged. "I do, more than they do, I think. They're exotic, sophisticated. They did the best they could, but they never quite understood how two peacocks ended up with a raven."

She blinked. "A raven?"

"Clever, sometimes even deep, but hardly flashy."

She looked as if his blunt assessment startled her. But then an odd expression came over her face. "I saw a raven once. In a tree. While he was there, he was just another shadow. But when he took wing, and flew into the sunlight, those black feathers flashed green and blue in a way that was more amazing than any peacock's display, because it was subtle, hidden, and you had to pay attention or you'd miss it."

At the near poetry of her statement, Ian found himself staring at her. He told himself not to take it personally, she'd only been comparing birds, not people. But still…

"And besides," she added, "a raven is much more useful than most peacocks."

"Useful?" His voice sounded almost like that raven's squawk to his own ears.

"They find things," she said. "And they are very, very smart."

He wondered if there was a compliment for him in there, but decided that was reading far too much into a vague conversation.

Besides, it didn't matter. Compliments weren't something he sought out or needed.

Although one from this woman might be rather pleasant, he admitted.

"You really don't have to do this whole garden, you know," he said before he could take that ridiculous train of thought any further. "I'm sure you have lots to do, unpacking and all."

"I enjoy it," she said. "And as I said, except for a few pots and planters, there's not much for me to do over there."

He suspected the view out her windows of his yard wasn't the nicest, and that might have something to do with her eagerness, but he chose not to say anything.

"I guess I should have hired a gardener, but I never seemed to have the time to do even that."

"You do put in some long hours, I noticed."

Something about what he himself had said suddenly registered. "I…can I pay you for your time, at least?"

The minute the words were out he was afraid they would offend her. Damn, he was no good at even this, a friendly chat between neighbors.

But if she took offense, she hid it behind another smile. "You could find me something cold to drink," she said.

"I…sure. I think I have some soda or even a beer if you want."

"Soda's fine. Whatever you have."

When he came back, she was working again, and for a moment he just stood there, watching the smooth, easy way she moved.

Then she straightened and turned to him, swiping her brow with a gloved hand, leaving a trace of soil on her forehead.

"Thanks," she said, taking the cold can he held out to her.

He liked that she didn't apologize for her appearance, as he thought most women would. She was working hard in a garden; she was going to sweat and get dirty. And her casual attitude silently said that if you couldn't handle that, it was your problem, not hers.

Of course, most women probably wouldn't look as good as she did doing it, he thought when she took a healthy swig of the drink. And then she rested the cold can against her neck, and he felt a ripple of an odd sort of heat that had nothing to do with the sun.

It was lucky for her Ian Gamble was no party animal, Sam thought as she watched him pacing his office from her lookout window seat. She'd been here for nearly a week now, and he didn't seem to have any social life at all. She didn't understand. He was an attractive man. She supposed the frequent usage of historical rather than contemporary analogies she'd noticed might bother some, and some women would find his frequent slides into deep thought, sometimes midconversation, disconcerting. But there had to be someone out there who would find the traits rather endearing. And impressive, given what those slides into thought often produced.

Not, she told herself, that it mattered to her job why he was the way he was. She was curious, that was all.

Just accept it and be grateful that you don't have to tail him all over town.

She ran the brush through her damp hair once more. If he ran true to form, he was in for the night. Only once had he gone out after he'd arrived home, and since he'd walked she'd been able to follow easily enough. The ice-cream place had been his destination again, and once more she'd had to laugh at his idea of walking distance; it was at least two miles each way. But it was also why he was able to indulge without it showing, she supposed.

But tonight he seemed settled in, so she chanced ten minutes with her blow dryer to finish her hair. Then she returned to her seat and took up the vigil.

When he finally turned out the lights at close to midnight, she stayed put, watching. At one in the morning she added a dark knit cap to her black jeans and sweater and went downstairs. It was time. And she knew he had a meeting in the morning, so it was the right time.

He'd left his car in the driveway, as usual. She wondered why he didn't use the garage, then guessed with a grin that it probably looked something like his office did, so there wasn't enough room. Whatever the reason, it was making things easier for her.

It took her under three minutes. She was back inside in five, again watching the house until she was sure he hadn't heard. Finally she went to bed, with the window still open, knowing she would awaken at the slightest out-of-place noise.

The quiet of a California summer night settled in.

“Damn it,” Ian muttered, slapping the steering wheel of his uncooperative car.

He turned the key again. Nothing. Not even a click to indicate it was thinking about turning over.

He guessed he shouldn’t be surprised. Cars tended to break down on him. Something about forgetting maintenance. He just had better things to do with his time and his mind, that’s all. How could he be expected to keep track of things like oil changes and tire rotations when he was trying to solve this damned adhesion problem?

Maybe he should have taken Josh up on the offer of a Redstone company car. He’d said no because he tended to ding them up, and no matter that Josh had said that didn’t matter, he would be too embarrassed to turn the thing in at the end of the lease period. It would only add to the perception of him as the absentminded professor.

He’d have to call a tow truck. Then he’d—

“Problem?”

His head snapped up. Samantha was standing beside the driver’s side window; he hadn’t even heard her approach. And she was dressed in a sleek navy pantsuit with a long jacket and crisp white blouse that made her look sharp and businesslike, totally unlike the casually dressed woman he was used to seeing. He wondered if she had to have things custom-made for those long legs.

“Won’t start,” he muttered, feeling as if he was stating the

obvious.

"Dead battery?"

"Could be," he said, not wanting to admit he had no clue at all. Guys were supposed to know all about these car things. How could he explain he'd never spent any time mulling over things that had already been invented? "And I've got a meeting this morning."

"Come on, then. I'll drop you off. You can worry about the car later."

He hesitated but only for a moment. This meeting was important. Stan would have a cow if he didn't show up; he was picky about things like that. The man was picky about anything he thought reflected badly on the efficiency with which he ran his department. And as much as Ian was focused on the Safe Transit project, there were others already in the pipeline, and he'd insisted on being kept in the loop by marketing and production. He could hardly be late for the meeting they'd set up to fulfill his own demand.

And she did go the same direction, he'd seen her, he told himself.

"Thanks," he said, reaching over to gather up his briefcase and the traveler's mug of coffee he usually downed by the time he got to Redstone.

As he climbed into the passenger side of her sleek—and dingless—blue coupe, he couldn't help thinking how nice it was that she'd been there at just the right moment.

Chapter 4

"Something wrong?"

At last, Sam thought. "Wrong?"

"You're…quiet."

"Maybe I'm just tired of carrying the entire conversation," she said. "I don't mind talking, but I don't usually chatter."

"Oh."

He sounded abashed, and she hoped he was, but she couldn't look at him at the moment and still deal with the cross traffic. This was the third day she'd taken him to work, and it was the third day he'd barely said a word unless in answer to a direct question.

"Sorry," he said after a moment of awkward silence. "I'm just not used to…"

"Small talk?" she asked, finally completing the left turn.

"Something like that."

She glanced at him. "Not even with yourself?"

His glasses had automatically darkened in the sunlight, so she couldn't see his eyes clearly, but she did see him blink. "Myself?"

"I'm not sure I trust people who don't talk to themselves," she said, quite seriously.

He chuckled then. "Then I guess you can trust me."

She gave an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Ditto," she assured him. "You can even talk to me."

“I don’t mean to be…uncommunicative. I just never got used to talking about…inconsequential things.”

“So everything has to be important?”

“No, I don’t mean that,” he said, sounding a bit defensive. “I mean I never acquired the knack.” His mouth quirked. “My mother and father were both born with it, but neither of them passed it on to their only offspring, I’m afraid.”

“Your parents sound fascinating.”

“They are,” he said. “And charming. They can hold court for hours, and people still hate for it to end.”

There was nothing but admiration in his tone, but Sam couldn’t help wondering if he’d always appreciated his parents like this. It would be hard to grow up with two larger-than-life parents if you didn’t feel you were able to live up to their example.

But it was harder to grow up without parents at all.

“That made you sad,” Ian remarked.

A little startled at his perception, she shrugged. “I was just thinking of my own parents. And how much I miss them.”

“They’re gone?”

She nodded. “Over seven years ago now. Car accident. It’s not raw, but it still hurts.”

He shook his head slowly. “I’m sorry. My folks may not be around much, but I can’t imagine a world without them in it.”

“Treasure them, Ian. While you have them.”

She shocked herself with her own words. She rarely spoke of her loss, and wasn’t sure why it had popped out now.

“You must have been young when they were killed. What happened to you?”

Somehow she hadn’t thought about what she would tell him about herself. She’d always prepared cover stories before, but this was different, guarding one of Redstone’s own, so she hadn’t done it this time. After a moment she decided the truth would be okay.

“Since I was only nineteen it took some doing, but I won the battle to keep my little brother with me.”

“Little brother? That must have been tough.”

“It would have been tougher if he’d lost me, too. He’s…pretty sensitive, and he was already devastated.”

“I’ll bet.” It wasn’t until after they’d made the turn into the Redstone driveway that he said, “Not every nineteen-year-old would take on a kid like that.”

She slowed the car. He pointed to the side door that was closest to the lab. She nodded and pulled over to the curb there.

“You do,” she answered finally, “when you love him and there’s no other acceptable option. I’ll pick you up six-fifteenish?”

“You don’t have to—”

“I know, but I can, so why not?”

He gave in. “Thanks.”

He pushed open the car door and gathered up his briefcase and cup, and put one foot out. Then he stopped and looked back at her.

"Next time I'll chatter," he said unexpectedly.

She grinned at him. "This I want to see."

He returned her grin rather sheepishly. She watched him walk toward the side door. He stepped into a patch of sunlight, and it gleamed on that thick mop of hair.

He really was, she thought as she watched him, quite charming in a studious sort of way.

"I brought you a sandwich, Professor."

Ian took a breath, held it for a single second, then answered congenially, "Thank you, Rebecca."

Her startled look told him he'd been as snarly to her as he'd feared. And her sudden smile made him feel even more guilty about it.

It also made him doubt the suspicions that had become chronic since Josh had planted the idea of a leak inside the lab. Rebecca was simply young and overeager, he thought, not devious. She just thought she wasn't getting the credit she deserved. But he also feared that she wanted glory without having earned it, and that was a mentality Ian simply couldn't understand. What was the point of being praised for something you hadn't really done? For him the joy was in the process and the final success, not in the accolades that came after.

He smothered a sigh as he took a bite of the turkey sandwich. It was from the Redstone Café, so it was much tastier than the vending-machine fare that was standard at most places.

"Did you look at the paper I gave you yet?" Rebecca asked.

For a moment Ian looked at her blankly, then remembered the project paper she'd so excitedly presented him the other day. She'd done that before, come up with some idea she thought they should pursue, and this time he'd made the mistake of telling her to write it up, simply to get her out of his hair for a while.

"I did glance at it, yes," he said.

"And?" Rebecca asked, hope brightening her angular face.

He tried for tact, feeling as if he needed to apologize in some way for being suspicious of her.

"It's clever," he began.

She beamed.

"And the process is very thorough. At first look, I'd have to say it appears solid."

"Great!"

She looked so thrilled he almost hated to go on. But teaching was part of having a student assistant. He sighed inwardly; he'd told Josh he was no teacher.

"What's your goal?" he asked.

A crease appeared between her brows. "Goal? Just as it says, to create a new polymer."

"To what end?"

The crease became a frown, and she gave him a look that hinted that she was thinking him deliberately obtuse. "To do it, of course."

Irritation spiked through him, but he fought it down. As gently as he could, he asked the crucial question.

"Why?"

Rebecca blinked. Twice. "Why?"

"For what purpose? How will this polymer be better for that purpose than anything that already exists? What about it will make it worth going through this lengthy and expensive process? Will it make something stronger, lighter, more durable?"

She took a step back, staring at him. "Is that all you care about, whether it will make money somehow?"

Idealism, Ian thought with a sigh. It was the most wearing thing about children.

"What I care about," he said, "are things that will make lives easier, better, safer, and even give hope where there is none. Spending months to design a polymer we have no use for is a waste of effort, intelligence and, yes, money. But most of all it's a waste of the most valuable, finite resource you have, and that's time."

Her expression turned troubled. "Haven't you ever wanted to invent something just to see if you could?"

He was glad now he'd been gentle about it. "Yes. And I have. But eventually you come to realize the truth of the old saying about the scientists who got so wrapped up in the fact that they could, they forgot to question whether they should."

"Yeah. Right."

She turned and walked away, and he wondered if he'd inadvertently accomplished his goal of keeping her out of his way. Even if she wasn't the leak, it was best to find out now. If

the simple rejection of an idea could stop her, she wasn't cut out for this.

Still, he hadn't liked smashing her hopes. And it was still bothering him when he got into Samantha's car that evening.

"Rough day?" she asked, discerning his mood so quickly it startled him.

"Sort of. I had to rein in my assistant today, and she wasn't happy."

"Rein her in? Was she messing something up?"

He settled into the seat and fastened the seat belt—something he didn't always do when he drove by himself but that Samantha demanded before she would even turn the key—before he answered her.

"No, she just wanted to take off on a project that was a bit… misguided."

"Misguided?"

"With no real purpose. And somewhat self-indulgent. But she's young, so I tried to cut her some slack."

Samantha smiled at that. "You say that like you're ancient."

"Sometimes I feel that way," he admitted. "Her methodology is good, she's got the 'how' down pat. I hated to see one simple question take all the wind out of her sails."

She studied him for a moment. "You asked her…why?"

He was startled anew, but realized a perceptive woman like Samantha could have figured it out from his own words.

"Yes." His mouth quirked. "I told her not to feel too badly.

A very wise real professor once said, 'Science is wonderfully equipped to answer the question How?, but it gets terribly confused when you ask the question Why?'"

"And how many eons ago was that?"

"Recently. Erwin Chargaff of Columbia, 1969."

Samantha chuckled, but it somehow didn't sting. He knew he tended to older trivia, and she was too perceptive not to have noticed. Her next words proved it.

"Only you, Ian, could consider that recent. Do you have any quotes from this quarter century?" she asked as she started the car.

"Sure." He thought a moment as she negotiated the parking lot. She glanced at him as they waited for cross traffic, and he grinned and said "'It's hard to be religious when certain people haven't been struck by lightning.' Calvin and Hobbes."

She burst out laughing this time, and it pleased him more than he wanted to admit.

"If you'd told her that instead, it probably would have gotten through," she said. "How angry was she?"

"Not angry, really," he said, thinking back to Rebecca's reaction. "More…unhappy, I think."

She seemed to consider her next words carefully before saying, "How unhappy?"

It hit him in that moment—what hadn't before but should have. He must have been too preoccupied with how to let her down easy. But he should have thought of it. Should have

wondered if Rebecca was—and perhaps had been for a while—unhappy enough to do something foolish.

If she felt unappreciated enough to sell out Redstone.

"How's it going?"

Sam finished her last bite of salad, then raised her gaze to the man who looked enough like her to be her brother. The first time she and her partner, Rand, had come face-to-face, it had been an eerie sort of shock for them both. Later they laughed when they discovered they had both started checking the family history to make sure there were no unclaimed siblings floating about. Since her parents were dead, she couldn't be absolutely positive, but Rand's parents were alive and well and had been somewhat insulted by his questions. That is, until he'd brought Sam home to meet them. Two jaws had dropped, and all was forgiven.

"Fine," she answered his question. "He's not a tough job."

"I've heard he doesn't do much, outside of work."

"Doesn't seem to."

Rand had called this meeting to give her the final sale papers on the house, in case she should need them. It never ceased to amaze her how fast the Redstone name and horsepower got things done, even government paperwork.

They were at the restaurant where she'd met Josh when she'd started this assignment. She had grabbed the chance at a decent meal; this job was making her rethink the wisdom of never having learned to cook. Rand, as usual, was drinking a soda, while she sipped at a surprisingly good lemonade.

“Is he as odd a duck as they say?” Rand asked.

Sam felt strangely defensive. “I haven’t seen him do anything particularly odd. Yes, he thinks differently, but that’s good, not odd.”

Rand raised a brow at her.

“Like this morning,” she said, “we heard a story on the car radio about some firefighters who were killed in a forest fire. The report said they made it into their fire shelters, that it was breathing the superheated air as the fire burned over them that killed them. So Ian immediately began thinking about developing some device small enough to carry that would give them just enough breathable air to survive a burn over.”

“I see what you mean,” Rand conceded. “And if Josh is right about him, he’ll probably do it, eventually. Although St. John says the Safe Transit Project is his only focus right now.”

She nodded.

He paused before saying, “It’s Ian, now, is it?”

She grimaced at him. “Well I can hardly call him Gamble to his face, now can I?”

“Sorry,” Rand said, with a grin that belied the words. “Didn’t mean to hit a nerve.”

“So what’s up back home?” she asked, not caring if her subject change was obvious. “I feel like I’m totally out of the loop.”

“You heard Draven got McClaren out?”

“Josh told me,” she confirmed.

“So his record is still perfect.”

“Was there any doubt?”

Rand shrugged. “You never know.”

That was a truth anyone on the Redstone security team soon learned, Sam thought later as she drove out of the restaurant parking lot. In an empire as varied as the one Josh had built, anything could happen. It was their job, impressed upon them from the moment they were accepted on the team, to see that no matter what happened, no Redstone people were hurt. Property, both physical and intellectual, came second.

She was waiting at what had to be the longest traffic light in the city when her cell phone rang.

“Beckett,” she answered.

“He’s leaving.” There was no word of identification, but she recognized St. John’s deep voice.

She glanced at her watch. “This early?”

“I believe there was some tension in the lab today.”

“Tension? Ian?”

“Ian is rarely tense.”

And that was all the answer she was going to get, it seemed. She had no doubt Josh’s omnipresent assistant knew exactly what had happened, but she didn’t press for details. No one pressed St. John except Josh, and she’d bet even he picked his battles carefully.

“All right.”

She disconnected and pondered a moment, still waiting for that blessed light to change. She and Ian had come to the

agreement that she would come by when she got off, wait no longer than fifteen minutes, and if he wasn't out by then she was to leave and he'd find his own way home. So far there had been only one day when she'd waited longer, nearly an hour, but he'd seemed to accept her story of heavy traffic. She knew from St. John that this regularity in itself was unusual; Ian had a tendency, St. John told her, to lose track of time.

She could go to Redstone now, but Ian might wonder why she conveniently happened to get off this early on this particular day. He had her cell number. She'd given it to him and told him to call if his schedule changed, but she doubted he would, not when as far as he knew she was working a regular job and got off at six.

Instead, she decided to swing by the Chinese takeout, grab some food, and then go get him. With luck the food would be distraction enough that her apparently flexible hours wouldn't become a topic.

It worked. The moment he got into the car and smelled the luscious aromas, talk of mere time was forgotten.

"I was starved," she explained. "I hope you don't mind, I got enough for two, as long as I was there, anyway."

"Mind? I could kiss you."

Well, now that was a visual, Sam thought, shocked at the tiny jolt the idea gave her. He was digging around in the bags, seemingly unaware of what he'd said.

Of course, there was no reason to think he meant it as anything more than a joking remark. Something people just said. In fact,

if the growl his stomach had just sent up was any indication, he was hungry enough to have meant it no matter who had provided the food.

It's you who's out of whack here, she told herself. Get your mind in the game, Beckett.

"How long have you worked for Redstone?" she asked.

"Four years." He opened a bag and peered in.

"You like it?"

His head came up. "Yes. Yes, I do. Josh Redstone is one of a kind. He gave me a chance when no one else would, and I owe him everything."

"It's nice to have a boss like that," she said, meaning it in the exact way he did, although he didn't know it.

"Yes. He's the best. It's why everybody who works there stays, and he's got hundreds of applicants to chose from for any job that opens up." He dived back into the bag before he said casually, "How did you know I'd be leaving this early on a Friday?"

She made a note to herself never again to assume she could distract this particular mind. At least not for long.

"Actually, I've been off since four-thirty. My boss went out of town," she improvised. "So I figured I had time to grab food."

He looked up from the bag of small white boxes. "You really don't have to be my taxi service every day."

"I know, it's a sacrifice," she said with mock melodrama. "I have to drive an entire one hundred yards out of my way to cruise the Redstone driveway."

“Yeah. Well.” He sounded rather embarrassed. “I got a call today that they have to order a part for my car. And they don’t know how long it will be.” He sounded disgusted, but not truly upset. St. John’s words came back to her. Ian is rarely tense….

“Sometimes parts are hard to find,” she said neutrally.

“I could make it myself faster.”

Sam had to stifle a smile. With any other man, she would have laughed at the comment. With Ian, she knew he was probably right. But he didn’t know she knew what he really did, so she kept quiet. And Ian wasn’t done yet, anyway.

“When I had to have a fender repaired a while back, just because it’s an older car they spent forever trying to match the paint. Like I cared. Henry Ford had it right.”

“Henry Ford?”

“With the Model T. He said you could have it any color you wanted as long as it was black.”

Ian was always tossing off bits of historical trivia like that, she thought yet again. He seemed steeped in history, and as he’d admitted, many of the nonwork-related books she’d seen him with had been historical in nature. She herself was very much of the present, and only cared about history in passing as it applied to her or her work, and given their similar ages the difference intrigued her.

“Everybody driving the same car, same color. Or rather, no color,” she said. “Sounds kind of boring to me.”

He looked at her for a long, silent moment during which she

wondered what he was thinking.

"Yes," he said finally, slowly. "I imagine it would."

And suddenly the easy camaraderie in the car vanished. It was as if Ian, who'd seemed to finally relax around her, had thrown a wall up between them.

She managed to maneuver it so that they ate dinner at his place—hers was, as befitted a temporary home, minimally furnished, enough to appear curious—but the withdrawal she had sensed continued. The only good thing was that his silence gave her the opportunity to surreptitiously inspect his home further. The more she knew about him, the easier her job would be, she told herself.

"Nice set of pots," she commented, looking at the copper utensils hanging from a pot rack over the stove.

"My mother's," he said briefly. "Cooking is a production with her."

"But not you?"

"I never learned that kind of cooking. Can't afford the time."

Which both answered and didn't answer her question—time to cook or to learn? Weary of pushing when she wasn't sure what she was pushing against, Sam finished her meal in a silence that matched his. She helped him clean up, then picked up her purse and keys.

She hadn't intended to, but at the doorway she stopped and looked back at him. "If I said something to offend you, Ian, I'm sorry."

To his credit he didn't deny it. But he didn't look at her when

he answered. “You didn’t. It’s not you.”

Her gut told her to push; her common sense told her to back off. She was here to protect him, after all, not probe his psyche.

As she made her way next door, she wondered why she was having trouble remembering that simple fact.

Ian sat alone in the dark for a very long time. His parents hadn’t lived in this house for ten years, yet he could hear their voices as if they were here in the living room that now gave them heart palpitations to look at. As if he were still the child they didn’t understand.

“Why didn’t you invite your friend in?”

“Why didn’t you go to the party?”

“Why don’t you put that book down and go outside?”

He’d wanted to scream at them. Because I’m not like you, I can’t be like you, I’ll never be like you!

But it would only have hurt them, and he couldn’t do that. He knew they loved him; they simply didn’t understand that he was different. In so many ways. What was so simple for them, that easy, warm charm, just wasn’t in him. He was a throwback or something, a changeling. It wasn’t bad enough that he thought differently than they did, he had to be different in every other way, too.

A misfit, that’s you, he told himself.

It was the only explanation he could think of for what had happened tonight. All Samantha had done was give a simple opinion, and he’d shut down.

No color. Sounds kind of boring to me….

He'd shut down because in that simple statement all the differences between them had leaped out at him, and he wondered what the hell he was doing. More than once over this past week he'd caught himself eagerly looking forward to seeing her. He'd had the thought that the timing on the breakdown of his car couldn't have been better. He'd even started to leave work at a regular time, and that was a real first.

And today, as much as he wanted to leave early, after a tension-filled day when he hadn't been able to shake himself free of either Rebecca or Stan, he'd hesitated. He hadn't wanted to miss riding home with Samantha.

He supposed it was only to be expected. He'd been alone for a long time, since Colleen had given up on him and walked out. Dump him into close proximity with a beauty like Samantha and it was inevitable he'd be drawn like an already singed moth to a new, even brighter flame.

But if he got singed again, he'd have no one but himself to blame.

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. For a while longer he sat there in the darkness. Finally, for the first time in longer than he could remember, he went to bed early, and without even cracking a book.

When the light in the converted living room never came on, Sam sat up straighter and watched the house intently. A short while later the upstairs light in the master bedroom came on, but

only for a few minutes. When it went out, she expected the light downstairs to come on at last; he must have forgotten something upstairs.

The house stayed dark.

She looked at the clock on the bedside table. It was barely nine, and this time of year, barely dark. And Ian rarely went to bed before midnight.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.