H
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CHRISTINA
SKYE
TO CATCH
A THIEF
A new adventure
begins at Draycott Abbey...

Christina Skye
To Catch a Thief

Аннотация

Nell MacInnes can spot a forgery from a mile away.After all, she learned from the best – her father is one of the art world's most notorious thieves. His brutal beating by the very authorities who claim to keep the world safe from harm taught her one more valuable lsson – trust no one. The last thing rugged navy SEAL Dakota Smith needs on his mission is a tempting woman he doesn't trust.But a sketch by Leonardo da Vinci has gone missing, and the art conservator's skill in detecting forgery would be invaluable, if only her ties to the criminal world are as dead as she says they are.Soon an edgy partnership and white-hot attraction are forged between Nell and Dakota as they race to Draycott Abbey to track down a ruthless criminal with terrorist ties before time runs out – and the da Vinci is lost forever.

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 100

CHRISTINA SKYE
is code for romance and adventure!

CODE NAME: BIKINI

"A fun, antic read."

—Publishers Weekly

"When it comes to sexy suspense and high-tech adventure, the Code Name series delivers big time."

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—Kristin Ramsdell, Library Journal

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—Booklist

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—Publishers Weekly

THE DRAYCOTT LEGACY

"Christina Skye's delightfully haunting Draycott Abbey

tales…pass the test of time, as they remain some of the better romantic fantasies available."

—Harriet Klausner

Christina Skye
To Catch A Thief

Dear Reader,

Some characters you never forget.

Some stories grip you from the first word, locked deep in the heart. For me, that love struck with a great gray cat, a brooding English abbey and its aristocratic guardian ghost, Adrian Draycott.

I’ve walked through eight books and two novellas set at the abbey now. Each story brings more secrets and the heady scent of rich heritage roses climbing up tower and parapet.

Dangerous magic.

White-hot passion.

Undying love.

How could any writer resist?

And just to keep the tension hot, I’ve brought a rugged Navy

SEAL from my Code Name series to the abbey, locked in pursuit of a vicious enemy.

I hope you enjoy the adventure.

See you at the abbey.

Christina

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Acknowledgments

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You know who you are. But you may not realize how far your influence extends and how deeply you touch the lives of readers every day.

I hope you will accept my heartfelt thanks for all the thousand things you do to care for every new book you unpack from a box or straighten on a shelf.

I also want to send a special nod to Cindi in Wisconsin, Ellen in New Jersey, Sharon in Pennsylvania, Marcy and Tom in Oregon, Beth Anne in Colorado, Sharon in Ohio, Rosemary and Margaret in Australia, Kellie in Hawaii, Terry in Chicago, Penny and Janet in Indiana, Molly in Louisiana, and Phyllis, Kathy and Vicky in Arizona.

You are all totally amazing.

That's why this one's for you.

To Catch A Thief

PROLOGUE

Draycott Abbey
Sussex, England
May 1622

THE BOOK WAS THE KEY.

All its dangerous secrets lay inside fragile yellow pages. He had to hide these secrets now, while twelve guests slumbered over their spilled port, with wigs askew. Their sleep would not hold forever, and he must act before their greed and suspicion returned.

In the shadows across the elegant room, the Earl of Wetherton mumbled in drunken dreams, his heavy goblet cracking as his wrist sent the glass flying to the floor.

Motionless, Viscount Draycott studied the ornate walls of the house he knew and loved beyond all logic. As the last candle guttered out, the cynical aristocrat stood in a bar of moonlight, cradling a fine leather book. The weight of history pressed down, filling him with excitement.

And finally with dread.

Such a treasure, a notebook from the hand of Leonardo da Vinci, carried too many secrets. According to the man who had lost the notebook, it was cursed. Equally cursed was the exquisite piece of art now hidden upstairs in his suite. But the memory of the luminous beauty of the art made the viscount forget the

danger.

A sudden movement at the drifting curtains made him slip back into the shadows. Who came in stealth through the darkness?

But the figure was only a great gray cat, slipping up the stairs with black-tipped paws, as quiet as the night. Behind the cat the viscount saw a new maidservant, her eyes wide as she crossed the hall, a basket of freshly folded linens in her arms. A cat and the new maid.

But his worry would not be gone. Men would kill to hold the art of Leonardo da Vinci even if the art was cursed by its creator.

The abbey's lord was a careful man, a generous man, and the weight of duty drove him hard from the moon-touched Long Gallery to the library and to the shadows of a stone staircase above his wine cellars.

The cat was somehow before him as he took the stairs in hurried steps, a lantern held high to mark his way. The worn notebook did not move, cradled at his chest for safety.

Maledetto con gesti e' parole.

The words burned like poison in his head.

Cursed by hand and tongue.

Cursed to dream and want, all who hold this book.

Up the stairs a chair fell with a clatter. Drunken voices echoed through the sleeping house, calling his name. No more time.

Quickly he pressed at the wall, opening a niche between stone and mortar. In the small, snug opening he shelved the notebook.

For now, the sketch that had come from the hand of Leonardo da Vinci would hide in his own chamber inside a similar wall recess. He would make a safer hiding spot for it later.

The abbey's lord could do no more. A prize won in a turn of cards, the sketch caught at his heart. Da Vinci's hand was clear in every stroke and curve of the Mona Lisa's face, all distant grace and soft seduction.

According to the notebook, the sketch was the artist's final study before he began his painting. As was his custom, the Italian master often chose chalk to sketch the details of all he would later attempt in oil, and the notebook recorded his process of creation.

Both were priceless. Together they provided an unmatched look into the mind of a genius.

But there was no time for the viscount to linger. Upstairs boots rang out and petulant voices shouted for more port. Draycott felt a sudden disgust for his dissolute guests.

They were not real friends. He knew that any one of them would kill for the notebook and the art it described. The worn leather cover taunted him. His hands shook as he sealed the niche.

Here the notebook and its secrets would rest. With luck his descendants would have the strength to preserve this treasure, keeping it safe along with the priceless sketch it described in such intricate detail, capturing all da Vinci's agony of creation.

Frowning, Draycott raised the lantern for one last look. All was sealed. No signs of cracked stone or shifting mortar gave

away the notebook's hiding place. By all appearance the wine cellar wall lay untouched, ancient as the house.

It was done.

But the weight of the curse remained.

Maledetto.

Draycott Abbey

Summer 1785

THE WALL WAS EMPTY.

Plaster spilled from a gaping hole, wood beams broken crudely. Blood stained the silk wallpaper where the thief—or thieves—had worked in painful haste. Boot tracks crossed the white snow of fallen plaster, vanishing at the far window, where the curtains fanned out like searching hands.

Adrian Draycott scowled at the hole in the wall. He cursed as he saw the broken recess, the hiding place of his family's da Vinci masterpiece. Now only a carved and gilt frame remained, its pieces discarded on the marble floor.

The thief had come by night, moving straight to this room while Adrian was in London on estate matters. No one had heard the furtive steps. No one had seen the knife that slit the wall and dug to find the hiding place of Leonardo's chalk study.

Now the elegant smiling face, accursed in its glory, had vanished. The eighth Viscount Draycott closed his eyes, breathing hard in the shock of the theft. Yet even then he felt something close to relief.

Maledetto con gesti e' parole.

The words drifted, twisting like smoke.

Cursed by hand and tongue. Cursed to dream and want.

The still-hidden notebook had recorded Leonardo's curse long centuries before. Both sketch and notebook had been stolen from Leonardo's studio by a charming servant ever alert to the chance for profit. For his crime the servant had earned the artist's curse. So had all others who came in contact with the stolen possessions.

Adrian Draycott ran a hand across his eyes. Well did he know the bitter pains of great loss, of trust betrayed. That pain he kept well hidden beneath a cold, languid facade. He cared for no one and nothing—only his beloved home.

The great gray cat pressed at his boots, tail raised, eyes alert. The viscount bent low, smoothing the warm fur. "So here ends both the tale and the curse, my friend. The art is gone, and though I should feel fury, I do not. I am…relieved. Let another poor fool carry the curse's weight. The Mona Lisa's smile is too cold and enigmatic for my taste."

The cat meowed, brushing against the viscount's boot. "I almost wish they had taken the notebook, too. In truth, I care not for this curse it carries."

The cat's eyes moved, keen in the spring night. Slowly Adrian turned, facing the open window that marked the thief's retreat.

Drops of blood stained the broken sill.

Maledetto.

"No matter," the viscount muttered, trying to believe his words. "The curse cannot hold power here. Not after so many

years. It is done. Over.”

Adrian Draycott prayed it was so. But the cold wind through the tall windows and the prickle at his neck argued otherwise.

CHAPTER ONE

The Isle of Skye
Scotland

SHE WAS COLD and tired and hungry. Her blistered feet ached and right now all Nell MacInnes wanted was a hot bath and a steaming cup of Earl Grey tea, followed by a warm bed to rest her weary body.

She closed her eyes, listening to the buzz of quiet pub conversation around her. The little inn nestled up against a pristine loch with towering mountains on three sides. The locals were far too polite to intrude on Nell's reverie, and when she dumped her mountain gear and backpack on the floor, sinking into a worn wooden chair, no one raised an eyebrow.

It was heaven to be warm and dry after six days of climbing the nearby peaks, battling rain and wind on every ascent. If not for her climbing partner, Nell might have curtailed the trip three days sooner, but Eric's enthusiasm was hard to resist. No doubt he would appear from his room upstairs within the hour, after taping his badly sprained ankle.

Warmth began to seep into her bones, as gentle as the low burr of the Scottish voices around her. Scotland was truly heaven, she thought.

"And I'm telling you it was no such thing as my imagination, Angus McCrae. A grand fish it was—bigger than two arm spans,

I'll tell you this."

Over the muted, good-natured argument about a lost fish, Nell heard the pub's front door open. Cold wind snapped through the room as two men entered, scraping booted feet. "Where is the American man, Angus? We need the climber called MacInnes."

Nell stiffened at the flawed description. Who wanted her now, when all she craved was one precious night's rest? No one from San Francisco even knew she was in Scotland.

The man at the door wore a muddy parka and broken-in boots. A satphone was gripped at his chest. "We've bad weather up on the hill and I need the American—assuming the man's as good as I'm told."

Nell took a short, wistful look at her half-eaten shepherd's pie and the cup of tea, but a request for aid was never refused.

She gulped the rest of her tea and stood up. "I'm the American named MacInnes."

"You—a woman?" The man looked startled.

Nell nodded, used to the surprised glances after twelve years of climbing on four continents. "How can I help you?"

"A team of young climbers has gone missing on Blaven, and there's bad weather already, with more due through the night."

Blaven.

Nell recognized the name of the dark peaks that girded the valley on three sides. "They're on the peak now?"

"Aye. They were expected down three hours ago and no sign of them yet. We have just now received word that they're

stranded." He raised the satphone, his eyes grim. "A German climber saw them scattered out over the south slope like lost sheep. They did not answer his hails, and at least two had the look of being hurt." His voice fell. "Badly hurt."

Nell thrust her arms into her waterproof jacket, already making mental notes. "How many are in the group and what level of climbing experience? I'll need to know the exact coordinates where they were last seen, too." Even in a blizzard, the GPS would help Nell track those missing.

"I'm assembling that information now."

Nell unzipped her pack, assessing her resources. "I'll need drinking water and dried high-energy food, along with a more extensive first-aid kit."

"I will have it prepared for you, Ms. MacInnes, and our thanks to you for your help. My SAR team is understaffed, all but myself sent over to assist in the recovery of plane crash victims on Uist. A terrible thing, that. I only wish I had two more people and I'd climb up myself."

"No, you're right to stay here. Someone experienced needs to be available to coordinate resources and guide the authorities. Besides, I'm familiar with Blaven." She smiled crookedly. "I worked SAR here myself nine years ago during my summer vacation."

The man looked pleasantly surprised—and a little relieved. "So you know the Cuillin, do you now? I'm glad to hear it. There are those who take our Cuillin lightly. Some of them do not live

to learn their error, I'm afraid."

"I won't make that mistake, rest assured." Nell's voice was firm. She had seen enough dazed climbers and shattered bodies during her rescue summer to know just how fast conditions could change up on the nearby peaks. Within minutes an exhilarating climb could turn into a zero-visibility nightmare. "What's the weather prediction up there?"

"Northerly gale force eight. Snow already falling on the summit. Temperatures dropping to minus nine Celsius."

Nell made the conversion to Fahrenheit quickly, taking the bottles of water and zippered food bags that the local SAR coordinator handed her. "One more thing." Ruefully, she looked down at her feet. "I'm afraid I'll need dry socks. These are fairly well soaked after walking down through the rain all day."

Without a word, every man in the now silent pub bent down and began to unlace shoes or unzip boots, hearing her quiet words.

In seconds hand-knit socks appeared on every table.

Nell smiled at this instant generosity.

She cleared her throat. "I appreciate your help. What I meant is, I have special climbing socks up in my room. I'll do better with my own gear, you understand."

"Of course." The local SAR man said a few words of explanation in Gaelic. The men around Nell nodded. The socks vanished back on hidden feet.

She started toward the stairs to her room, calculating exactly

how much she could cram into her pack and what injuries the lost climbers might have incurred. There was only so much possibility for medical intervention on the top of a mountain with limited supplies.

"One word, miss. Your partner—he will be going with you, will he?"

Nell shook her head. "Not with a sprained ankle, he won't. But Eric will stay in contact. He can help you down here with backup arrangements. I'll tell him the situation."

Nell knew her friend would insist on joining her, sprained ankle or not, but he'd be no help with an injury that had kept him limping for most of the day. She'd have to make the climb alone. She didn't need any amateurs slowing her down.

"I'll be down in two minutes. If someone can drive me up to the trailhead at the end of the loch, it will save twenty minutes."

"A Land Rover is already waiting for you, miss." The local rescue coordinator ran a hand through his hair. "I'd much prefer to go up the hill with you, truth be told. It's a fair nasty stretch across the south slope in weather like this."

"I'll be fine." Nell was calm, with years of climbing experience, focused on planning her route. She was used to facing the worst. Climbing a rugged peak in nasty weather wasn't half as bad as the other shocks that life had thrown her.

HE WATCHED her shoulder the heavy pack and then adjust both padded straps, working with the intense focus of someone used to carrying heavy weight well into the pain zone.

The woman clearly knew what she was doing, Dakota thought, slouched out of sight inside a dusty delivery truck parked up the road from the inn. The bug in her backpack was working perfectly, allowing him clear access to every word she said. So far she'd made no slips. Her conversation with her climbing partner had been full of good-natured bantering and reminiscences of earlier climbs.

No talk of art theft or organized terrorist activities, the Navy SEAL thought cynically.

His orders were absolutely clear. Close surveillance and assessment of all contacts made by Nell MacInnes. She'd done something to land on the government's highest priority watch list.

Better than anyone, Dakota Smith knew that SEALs didn't get called up for aimless threats. Nell MacInnes was up to her slender neck in trouble.

With or without her father's help, she was suspected of participating in the theft of one of the most valuable pieces of art ever to enter the National Gallery. Dakota's job was to find out who she was working with and locate the stolen Renaissance masterpiece before it vanished forever, traded through a shadow network of international criminals, sold to finance the activities of an elusive terrorist group active on American soil.

The SEAL's eyes narrowed on the woman's back as she climbed into a battered Land Rover, accompanied by the head of the local search-and-rescue volunteer team. Dakota wondered what made her tick, what drove her back out into a pounding

storm after six days of strenuous climbing. He doubted it was simple selflessness. No, he figured that Nell MacInnes enjoyed walking on the edge, tasting danger. She looked like a classic thrill seeker, which would also explain her involvement in a complicated, high-stakes robbery.

Not greed. She didn't drive a late-model Maserati or own a string of houses. Her apartment back in San Francisco was neat but small, and her only hobby appeared to be climbing. Yet appearances could be the most unreliable thing in the world, Dakota knew.

Still, he wondered about that brief note of resignation he'd heard in Nell's voice back at the pub. The confidence had faded, along with the high energy, and she had sounded tired and worried, as if she genuinely cared about the missing climbers.

Forget about the target's emotions, a voice warned flatly as Dakota pulled onto the road, following the Land Rover at a careful distance. He'd track her up the brooding slopes of Blaven and make certain she came down in one piece. But he'd break his cover to save the other climbers only if it was absolutely necessary, mindful of his orders to stay well under the radar until all Nell MacInnes's shadowy contacts were bagged and tagged. The mission came first.

Always.

After parking down the slope from the small trailhead, Dakota pulled on an all-weather parka and a fully stocked backpack, then fingered his shortwave radio. His contact would be waiting for

an update. “Teague, are you there?”

“Yo.” Izzy Teague’s voice was clear, despite an edge of static. “I’ve got the topo map on the screen in front of me. I checked with SAR and got the coordinates. You’ll have a straight ascent for an hour, followed by a fairly strenuous climb through shifting rock when you near the south face. A chopper is on its way over from the mainland, but the weather may prevent a landing until tomorrow.”

“So I’m on my own,” Dakota said calmly. “Fine with me. I don’t need anyone slowing me down or asking questions.”

“Watch out for yetis up there,” Izzy said wryly. “I’ll keep a bottle of Glenlivet on ice for you.”

“You do that. Alpha out.”

The dark face of Blaven was veiled in clouds as Nell set off up the rocky trail. The Land Rover headed down to the inn. The first wet flakes of gale-driven snow lashed at Dakota’s face as he started up toward Blaven’s brooding darkness, Nell already out of sight before him.

FOR SOME REASON she couldn’t shake the sense that she was being followed. For the third time Nell stopped, peering through fingers of clouds, looking for other climbers behind her.

Only rocky slopes met her sharp scrutiny.

Of course you’re alone, idiot. Any climbers with good sense are inside huddled before a roaring fire right now.

But a climber didn’t turn away in an emergency. Rules of the road.

Rules of life, too.

Turning back into the cutting wind, Nell nursed her aching right knee and chose each step, careful not to trigger a slide in the loose rock. Her face was cold, wet from the wind driving up from the sea. She estimated she'd reach the missing climbers' last coordinates in another twenty minutes. If the weather didn't shift, she could begin guiding them down off the peak immediately.

But Nell was prepared for a dozen unknown variables from shattered morale to shattered ankles. Any one of them could hamper a fast descent.

No point tilting at windmills, MacInnes. Every rescue was different, so she'd tackle each obstacle as it appeared. She eased her pack lower on her shoulders, trying to stay loose.

Once again she was struck by the twitchy feeling that someone was down the slope in shadow.

Watching her.

Blaven face.

One hour before sunset.

WIND RAKED Dakota's neck.

Icy rain howled over the cliff overlooking the restless Sea of Hebrides.

Visibility was down to zero and already the storm was driving intermittent gusts of nearly sixty miles per hour.

Over the slope Nell MacInnes had made contact with the frightened climbers. Thanks to the howl of the wind, Dakota could only pick up one word in three, but from what he heard,

Nell was dealing with the rescue quickly and by the book.

She assessed injuries, boosted morale and passed out dry trail rations and chocolate, then radioed down to the SAR leader to have transport with a medical team waiting at the foot of the mountain. The climbers were teenagers from an international school in London, and their leader, a burly ex-naval officer from Brighton, was clearly out of his element. Why he had tried the ascent was still unclear, but Dakota knew the speed of weather changes on Skye could take anyone by surprise.

He fingered his transmitter. “Alpha to Teague.”

Instantly static crackled. “Pizza to go. What can I get you, Alpha?”

“I figure a large cheese with double pepperoni is out,” Dakota said dryly. “So I’ll settle for backup medical response at the lower trailhead. One girl up here has full-blown asthma with signs of respiratory distress.”

“Roger that. I’ll wander on by to help and make sure it looks like a coincidence. What about the other climbers?”

“There are seven in all, plus their leader, Ian Westlake. He might have had a heart attack. He’s holding on, but he’s no help to anyone. Nell’s about to try guiding the able ones down and I’m going to meet her on the slope to help out.”

“Copy that. Better get the lead out, Alpha. That storm is picking up speed.”

Bad news, Dakota thought. “Roger. I’ll check back in ten. Alpha out.”

The SEAL stared across the slope. To his right a steep cliff fell away in a vertical drop straight down to the loch. To his left a lower ridge vanished into the notched teeth of the Cuillin range.

There would be no climbing down tonight.

They were on their own. No rescue chopper could land in this wind, even if any were available in this remote corner of Skye. Dakota had to help Nell hold the kids together, dig in on the ledge for the night and wait out the storm.

In exactly eight minutes he rounded a turn and saw the little group, huddled beneath a ledge. Nell was snapping out crisp orders to a gangly teenager in a brand new parka.

"Hamilton, get your pack lashed over that boulder. Then I want you and Meyerson inside your tent in sixty seconds."

"Yes, sir. I mean ma'am."

Once the boy's pack was secure, he joined his terrified partner in the tent that had been pitched and tethered around stones in the lee of the wind.

What lee there was.

Another icy gust pounded over the ridge.

"Wu, secure your tent. Hernandez, get that lantern ready to help him."

Dakota watched Nell work beside the kids, making temporary shelter. She was using their last names, which created distance and the comfort of hierarchy, making orders easier to give and follow.

He noted that two other boys were working to secure another

tent to nearby boulders, with packs tied down near the tent entrance.

"Good job," Nell called. "Now all of you get inside."

So where were the wounded ones? Dakota wondered.

A tent flap opened. A slim girl crawled out, looking for Nell. "I found that radio you asked about, ma'am. "It's—"

"Wilson, go back inside and take cover. This wind is—"

The rest of Nell's order was swept away in an icy gust that screamed over the ridge, caught two unsecured backpacks and threw them into the teenage girl, knocking her into a spine of sharp granite. As her scream was swallowed by the wind, Dakota dove forward and caught her waist, pulling her away from the cliff edge. She moaned brokenly as he lifted her into his arms. Blood streamed over his fingers from a gash down the side of her forehead. Dakota noted her erratic pulse and diminished pupil response.

Neck wound and probable concussion. Internal injuries were also possible.

"Who the heck are you?" Nell blocked his way, looking angry and wary and relieved, all at the same time.

"I was climbing over on the far side of Blaven when I picked up a distress alert from the local SAR. I changed route, circled the corrie and came up to see if you needed help."

Nell bit her lip, studying him intently. "You're American."

"Navy." Dakota gave a wry smile. "This was supposed to be a little holiday until I'm redeployed out of Coronado. I wasn't

counting on the weather going all to hell."

Nell seemed to relax slightly. "It does that a lot here. So you're a good climber? Can you help me get these kids down?"

"I'll do whatever I can. Say the word." Dakota frowned. "You're up here alone?"

"Yeah, I am. Look—it's a long story and I don't have time to fill in the gaps. I'm Nell MacInnes."

"Lieutenant Dakota Smith."

"Well, Lieutenant Smith, you can put Amanda Wilson inside this tent." As she pointed to her right, wet sheeting snow cut off every sign of the terrain. "All of you stay in your tents and keep your backs to the rock. No one moves. Hammond, get that flap closed."

Dakota checked his watch as the teens obeyed Nell's terse commands. She had chosen the camp site well, bunkered down under a ledge in the narrow rift between two cliff faces.

The teenagers looked cold and confused as Nell went from tent to tent, giving calm orders. "Remember, you are fit and you are smart. We will survive this. Lieutenant Smith out there is going to help us."

"But what about Amanda?" A younger boy cut in, his voice shrill with panic. "She hit her head. Is she going to be okay?"

"She'll pull through." Dakota's voice was firm as he set the wounded girl carefully in the tent Nell had pointed out. Despite his assurances, he knew the girl was far from safe. If she had internal injuries, she might not last the night without medical

intervention.

Briefly, he considered packing the wounded girl into an improvised travois and pulling her down as soon as visibility returned. But that would leave Nell alone in deteriorating conditions—and protecting Nell was his mission priority.

FUBAR.

As he rose from the tent, the wind howled over the ridge. Nell staggered, tossed sideways, and Dakota caught her quickly, his arms locked around her waist.

He felt the strength of her slim body as she fought the wind, trying to stand. “Thanks,” she rasped. “We’d better get inside.”

Beneath her safety helmet her eyes were calm and dark, the color of racing gray water through the mountains near his home in northern California. As the two squeezed inside the tent next to the girl named Amanda, Dakota pulled a silver thermal blanket out of his backpack. “Looks like you could use this. The girl’s shivering. She doesn’t seem to be breathing very well either.”

“Asthma.” Nell spread the blanket over the girl’s body and tucked it in. “Thanks again, Lieutenant—”

“Dakota will do fine.”

“Don’t suppose you’ve got a few other seasoned climbers with you who could help guide these kids down?”

“Afraid not. I’m traveling alone.”

Nell glanced at him intently. “Not many people I know climb alone.” She raised an eyebrow, waiting for his answer.

“If I wanted noise and crowds, I would have stayed in

London," he said easily. "I prefer climbing alone."

She nodded. "I can understand that." She unclipped a rope from her belt and wrapped it in neat coils, every movement smooth and precise.

She was definitely a professional, Dakota thought. He gave a small nod toward the motionless girl and the boy at the other side of the tent. "She needs care. The sooner the better."

"Tell me something I don't know," Nell muttered. She turned to the other frightened teen, made a little light banter, then leaned back toward Dakota. She studied his shoulders, his high-tech boots and climbing gear. "How good are you, Lieutenant?"

"Good enough." There was no empty boasting, just cool truth in the words.

"Then you can help me rope a safety line?"

Dakota shook his head. "Maybe you haven't looked outside. This storm is gaining steam. I heard that sixty-mile-an-hour gusts were clocked near Portee. With windchill factored in, we—"

"We're screwed," Nell said quietly. "I got that much already. Right now as I see it, our only choice is to get these kids down as soon as possible. They're not dressed for a night of wet, freezing conditions." Short copper hair tumbled around her flushed cheeks as she leaned down to check Amanda Wilson's pulse.

Dakota had seen that hair before. He'd seen her excited and tired. But he'd never seen her so focused or so worried, as if these kids really mattered to her. Somehow it didn't fit with the thrill-

seeker image captured in her file.

But what she was suggesting was one step short of crazy.

"You can't get them down in a whiteout. One wrong step and they plunge into freefall, and you'll go over with them." Dakota kept his voice low so the others wouldn't hear. "We'll have to stay put."

Nell looked down at the girl named Amanda, whose breathing was growing more labored. "I know a way. This ridge leads down to a back trail. If you help me, I can set a safety line in fifteen minutes. I can get them down one at a time after that."

"How?"

"I'll clip each one into a harness, secure them to the safety line and work back down to the mid-peak."

"You've got only an hour of light left, and that will be pushing it." Dakota stared out the tent flap at the gray slope. He didn't like the risks—not for Nell or the stranded kids. "Have you ever handled a rescue like this?"

"At least a dozen times. A lot of climbers get cocky and forget that the weather up here can change on a dime. But I can get these kids down to the SAR meeting point. Trust me, I know this area pretty well." Her mouth curved in a sudden smile, and Dakota blinked at the force of the determination. Did anyone say no to Nell MacInnes?

The danger didn't seem to bother her, and her choices seemed logical. A good leader took controlled risks as necessary.

Dakota couldn't help but admire her courage and her skill.

“I’ve got a radio for contact. I’ve also got this.” Nell pulled a silver whistle from inside her parka. “The SAR people will be expecting an alert once I’m close to the bottom of the safety line. I’ll hand off each teenager and then head back up.” She smiled gamely and gave an experimental whistle. “But if we’re going to do this, it has to be now.”

Dakota had to admit that her plan made sense, especially since staying put offered a risk of exposure and hypothermia.

But habit was habit. A SEAL never trusted any plan he hadn’t tested himself. Watching on the sidelines wasn’t in a SEAL’s job description.

He had to keep Nell safe.

But he couldn’t let any of these kids die in the process.

He watched Nell slide her climbing rope through her fingers, testing each coil. The fibers were smooth with no frays, clearly well tended.

She tugged on fingerless climbing gloves, frowning. “Look, Lieutenant—”

“Dakota.”

“We have to move, Dakota. In twenty minutes we really will be boxed in here. Do you want to save these kids or not?”

“I want to see all of you get down safely.”

“Don’t worry about me. Last year I took third at Chamonix. That’s an open climb with professionals—both men and women.”

“But you were probably climbing in good weather, fully roped and hydrated.” He glanced back and lowered his voice. “These

kids are frightened and near the end of their endurance."

"I'll get them down the ridge. My safety line will hold, trust me." Nell leaned closer, her voice falling. "Otherwise we could lose them up here in the cold."

Dakota listened to the howl of the wind beyond their narrow, protected ridge. It was a perilous point of safety, one that would vanish as the temperature fell and the poorly dressed group of kids faced hypothermia. With gale-force winds in a whiteout, the disoriented teens could crack at any minute, driven by panic to do something stupid.

He was trained to be flexible, and he did that now, assessing the choices and the risks. As wind roared over the ridge, Dakota made his decision.

He zipped up his parka. "Show me where you want to set this safety line."

CHAPTER TWO

NELL SHIVERED IN THE biting wind, painfully aware that every second they were losing light.

So far she had managed to guide five of the teens down, turning them over to the Scottish SAR people at the waist of the mountain. The sixth one was clipped in and ready to escort down.

But conditions were getting risky. In a few minutes all light would be gone.

She rechecked all the carabiners and anchors, then gave a reassuring smile to the gangly boy who was watching her in abject adoration. "You'll be fine, Jess. Just keep breathing and count your steps the way I told you. Stay cool and stay focused. I'll be on the rope right in front of you, so don't crowd me. Can you do all that?"

"I—yes." He tried to hide his fear. "Let's go."

Nell touched his face and held his gaze with the force of her own. "You're going to survive this, Jess. The others are down and you're next. Just do what I told you and you'll be fine."

"You—you're amazing." The boy gripped the safety line with both hands, but his gaze was locked on Nell. "I thought we were all dead, but you walked out of the rain like some kind of angel."

"I'm glad I was around to help."

"What about Amanda? Is she going to make it through this?"

He was a nice kid, Nell thought. They all were. None of them

were going to die, she vowed. Not while she had hands to knot a rope and lungs to breathe in icy air.

She checked that all the carabiner gates were fully closed and secure, then gave the boy a jaunty smile. “Now get yourself down to the inn and warm up. They’ll have a fire and dry clothes ready. Drinks tonight in the pub are on me. Cokes, of course.”

He smiled crookedly. “I’ll be waiting. You couldn’t keep me away.”

Nell looked down into the swirling blanket of clouds and gave two short bursts on her whistle. Seconds later she heard the faint answering notes from the SAR people waiting at the end of the safety line, followed by the answering whistle from her climbing partner lower down the slope.

Then a gust of wind slammed over the cliff face and she forgot everything but keeping her footing as darkness closed in around them.

WHAT THE HELLwas taking her so long?

Dakota stood at the top of the safety line and checked the luminous dial of his watch. Nell had been gone almost twenty minutes.

He fought an urge to follow the line in search of her, but he needed to go back to keep an eye on Amanda, who had roused once, asked for water, then slipped back into unconsciousness, struggling for breath.

Asthma and possible internal bleeding, with hypothermia a distinct risk. In addition, the British tour leader had nausea,

sweating and crushing chest pains that radiated down his left arm, clear indicators of a heart attack. Dakota had given him a small aspirin to chew, followed by sublingual nitro, but the man didn't look good.

He couldn't afford to lose Nell in the storm, the SEAL thought grimly.

He stared down at the safety line, thinking about the night two weeks before when a Renaissance masterpiece worth thirty million dollars had disappeared from a locked vault….

Washington, D.C.

South Conservation Workroom of the National Gallery

Two weeks earlier

THE SECURITY LIGHTS BLINKED, a nonstop race of green against a high-tech control panel. The night guard, fresh from six years at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, reached for his log sheet to verify a completed security cycle.

Even then his eyes didn't leave the sleek security panel, where half a dozen cameras picked up deserted hallways and an empty loading dock. Two floors above, Rogers walked the offices, checking every door. At the end of the hall he used his passkey to call the elevator, then continued on his rounds.

The night was quiet and uneventful. Even the streets were calm, with no sirens for several hours. But the museum was on special security measures due to a new piece of art entered for appraisal. Only five people on the staff knew that the work was judged to be from the hand of Leonardo da Vinci, a Renaissance

masterpiece that would command millions when it eventually went up for auction.

The air-conditioning clicked. The head guard, Everett Jonell, checked the control panel. Lights flickered briefly. The locked room with the new da Vinci blurred to gray.

Everett's hand went to the alarm.

Then the power came back on, with the hum of the HVAC restored. The row of monitors showed empty corridors. The door to the vault in south storeroom #3-A was locked as before.

Everett Jonell relaxed, leaning back in his chair. He felt sweat bead his forehead and shook his head. He'd be relieved when the art in storeroom #3-A was on its way and things settled back to normal. Until then, people would be edgy, under orders to report anything that seemed unusual.

On the black-and-white monitor, Jonell watched Rogers cross the big atrium and move toward the new sculpture wing. There was something off about the man. Two nights earlier Jonell had stopped at a small jazz club for a drink after work and he'd noticed Rogers getting out of a parked car across the street. The sleek black Mercedes M-Class sedan had seemed way above Rogers's pay grade, so Jonell had made a point of checking out the driver and noting the license plate.

He'd been surprised to see one of the senior curators emerge, a slender workaholic from Harvard who never went anywhere without her cell phone headset in place. There were no explicit rules forbidding social contact between security and academic

staff, but you didn't see it happen just the same. Different worlds, different goals, Jonell thought. But the way the curator had plastered herself all over Rogers as they'd kissed long and intimately in the shadows across the street had Jonell scratching his head.

Maybe you never knew what made people tick. After twelve years in the Marines he'd seen a lot of things and figured he was a good judge of people. Rogers seemed like an okay guy, but it wasn't up to Jonell to judge.

He'd report what he'd seen to the head of museum personnel, just in case. Until the da Vinci in storeroom #3-A left the premises safely, they would all be under extra scrutiny and Jonell wasn't risking his job and a nice pension for anything. Not with a new grandbaby on the way and three more years until Medicare kicked in.

He frowned into the security monitor as he saw Rogers reach into his pocket and pull out a cell phone.

What was the man doing? He knew that personal cell phone use was forbidden during work hours for security. Now Jonell would have to write the man up, which involved reports in triplicate and copies to both union representatives.

Blast the man. Didn't he know that the video cameras would pick him up?

The monitors flickered again and the HVAC clicked off. Lightning crackled high overhead, the sound muffled by the museum's thick walls.

Jonell sat forward as all the monitors went dark. Cursing, he lunged for the security phone, but the line was dead. He grabbed the battery-powered walkie-talkie to put in a radio alert to the general switchboard, standard procedure, even though a backup generator would kick in any second.

The movement came from his left and he dropped the walkie talkie as a leather strap locked him to the chair, his hands caught behind his back. He struggled against cool fingers that gripped his neck.

"No, you can't—"

The needle prick came quickly, burning against the inside of his nose, which made no sense at all. The room blurred and he tried to speak as he heard the sound of the security panel door being unlocked. Someone was removing the surveillance board timer, he realized. Blurring fingers ejected the surveillance disk.

It had all been planned to the second, Jonell thought dimly. Planned by someone on the inside.

Was it Rogers? Another one of the new guards they had hired in the past month?

He moaned, caught by crushing pain at his chest. As his body went slack, Everett Jonell realized that he'd never see the new grandbaby or his wife or his proud daughter again. The sorrow was the last thing he felt.

SIX MINUTES, fifteen seconds to go.

The figure at the security command post inserted a new time stamp digitally at the security panel, typing in a string

of computer code. Then he pocketed the old surveillance disk and inserted a new one, already formatted and complete with museum images calibrated to the current time stamp. Nothing had been left to chance.

Nudging his boss's lifeless body onto the floor, the figure finished his disk exchange and then checked the black-and-white images that appeared on the row of monitors.

All good to go.

He opened his cell phone, dialed a number and hung up after one ring.

Though the far monitor showed no activity, he knew that someone was carefully easing open the door of storeroom #3-A at that very moment.

He closed his eyes, savoring his memory of the exquisite chalk sketch of the most famous woman on the planet.

Thanks to his discreet program override, the monitor display would loop back with preset images and movements timed to coincide with normal museum patterns. After the thorough infrared assessments that had just been completed, no new tests on the art were scheduled for thirty-six hours. Only at that point would the theft be discovered.

By then, da Vinci's preparatory ink and chalk study for the Mona Lisa would be safely locked in a vault, ready for covert transport out of the U.S.

He checked his watch.

Three minutes, twenty-two seconds to go. Calmly he lifted

Jonell's fallen walkie-talkie and studied its face. Everything appeared to be in working order, he was happy to see.

His cell phone buzzed quietly, one burst and then no more.

All clear.

Target acquired and clues in place. Ready to exit the building. Everything was moving nicely ahead of schedule.

He thought briefly about the funds that would be wired to four of his offshore accounts by this time tomorrow. Maybe he'd buy that island in the Seychelles after all. It was remote enough and there was a fresh water source as well as a sizable bungalow with upgraded docks.

He shoved away the thought. There was still risky work to be done. In two minutes he would phone in an emergency call notifying the switchboard of Everett Jonell's collapse, sounding suitably shocked and upset. Once his regular shift was complete, he would drive to the short-term apartment that he leased in northern Maryland under one of his many other names. Once there he would collect the carefully wrapped piece of art. After the transfer was done, he would follow his normal schedule with no deviation.

He'd even attend Everett Jonell's funeral and offer deep and sincere condolences to his wife.

He'd stay in place after the theft was discovered, monitoring progress on the investigation inside the museum. In six months he would resign quietly, pleading health problems, and then vanish.

He glanced at his watch.

Showtime.

He took a deep breath, schooling his features to a frown. When he triggered the walkie-talkie alert, the alarm in his voice was deeply convincing.

“Command post one. Guard down. I repeat—guard down! Backup needed immediately.”

He was kneeling over Jonell’s lifeless body, looking pale and agitated, when the first security patrol car screamed up the museum’s back service drive.

CHAPTER THREE

DAKOTA WATCHED A SMALL shape appear out of the windblown snow. Relief kicked in when he saw Nell wave one hand in a brief thumbs-up gesture.

She looked like hell, he thought. Her hair was flecked with frozen snow. She had mud on her gloves and a welt across one cheek.

"Amanda's stable," Dakota said, catching the anxious glance Nell sent to the first tent. "The group leader needs hospital care, but he's finally calm, which won't create such an oxygen debt. Go inside. You need to rest."

Nell looked exhausted as she crawled into the second tent, snow swirling up behind her. She pulled off her climbing gloves and flexed her hands. Her teeth began to chatter. "There's more snow on its way. I can feel the moisture. In icy conditions—"

Without a word Dakota unzipped his parka and pulled it around her shoulders.

She stiffened and tried to push away his hands. "What are you doing? I can't take this. What about you?"

"I'll be fine. I've got excellent cold tolerance. You need this more than I do right now."

She continued to protest, but Dakota cut her off.

"How did it go?" He held out a canteen with water, taken from his pack.

Nell took a drink, then handed back the canteen. “They’ll be fine. A doctor was waiting at the inn.” Her voice tightened. “The last trips down were pretty bad. The wind—” She closed her eyes, hunching over to cough sharply.

“Let it go, Nell.” Dakota leaned over and zipped his parka around her trembling body. “You’ve done all you can. Once the weather clears, a chopper will be dispatched for Amanda and the group leader.”

Nell nodded slowly, but her body remained tense. She didn’t seem to notice when Dakota pulled a thermal blanket around her and tucked it into the rope wrapped around her waist.

“How do you let it go?” She shivered, ran a hand across her cheek and stared at a line of dried blood covering her palm. “The last boy, Jess, panicked and he was going to let go of the rope. If he had, I would have lost him. No doubt about it. And it was so close.”

Dakota heard the horror that she had tried to hide beneath anger. “Nell, you did everything right. Let it go.”

“I can’t. Not until everyone is safe.”

He was acutely aware of her scent and the sounds of her breathing as he pulled her slowly toward his chest. He told himself the gesture was entirely impersonal, meant to drive off her panic and uncertainty.

She’d just completed one of the riskiest rescues ever undertaken, but even strong people had limits, and Nell MacInnes was at hers now. Dakota didn’t wait for more

arguments, didn't try to reason or explain. He pulled her against his chest, sliding her thighs around his waist. His hands moved under her jacket, massaging her back and shoulders for warmth and circulation.

He was keenly aware of her hair, pressed against his cheek. In different circumstances he might have turned his head to taste the smooth line of her throat and test the full curve of her mouth with his lips.

Very bad idea. Here and now there was no place for emotion or desire. She was his mission.

Their eyes met. She shivered and studied his face as if she'd seen something there that she couldn't understand.

She looked down and seemed to realize how her legs were wrapped around his waist.

With a low gasp, she tried to pull away.

Dakota held her right where she was. "Don't fight me, Nell. We need to stay warm. Now close your eyes and rest. I'll keep an eye on things."

"Why should I trust you?" she whispered.

"Because right here, right now, I'm all you've got," Dakota said gruffly. As he wrapped the thermal foil blanket around them, the wind howled out in the darkness.

OKAY, THE MAN was tough and he thought on his feet. Calm under pressure, he had a way of moving in and taking charge before you realized what was happening.

But Nell wasn't a skittish child and she didn't take orders from

strangers.

She yawned. Even as she struggled to keep her eyes open, she couldn't ignore the hard lines of Dakota Smith's thighs. The man had a great body, and the warm strength of his arms was like a dangerous drug.

She felt the hammer of his heart beneath her cheek, felt the rise and fall of his broad chest. Even his scent teased her, a blend of salty air, sweat and heather.

As he stretched slightly, Nell felt his thighs tighten against her, and his arms shifted to hold her steady. Though they were thigh to thigh, chest to chest, he didn't brush her breasts or make suggestive comments.

Life seemed small and very fragile as they waited out the storm's fury. Idly Nell rubbed her elbow, which had begun to ache. Might as well try to sleep until the storm ended, since they were going nowhere.

She closed her eyes, feeling her hips slide over his thighs. The man had excellent thighs, too.

Maybe sleep wasn't going to be so easy.

"So what do you do when you're not on a climbing vacation?" she muttered. Anything to distract her from the feel of his lean, sculpted muscles.

"My job keeps me busy."

"Before we went down, Jess told me that you're amazing. I've never seen a kid in such an advanced state of hero worship. This is probably a walk in the park for you, Lieutenant."

“I never take any threat for granted,” he said roughly. “That includes weather and people.”

Was there an edge in his voice? Nell opened one eye, but in the darkness she couldn’t read his expression.

His arm cradled her head. His chest was warm and he seemed calm, but absolutely distant.

Probably she’d been wrong about the edge in his voice.

Quietly, he slid free. “Time to check on Amanda.”

“HOW IS SHE?” Nell was feeling a little blurry when he returned. Actually a lot blurry. A wave of dizziness hit her. She had forgotten the adrenaline spikes of rescue work—and the inevitable crash.

“Her pulse is stronger. Right now I’ll take small favors. The cardiac patient is holding on, too.” With economical movements, Dakota sat down and drew her against him, covering them both.

She tried to focus, but the growl of the wind was distracting. “So what made you decide to be a hero, Lieutenant?”

“I just happened to be around when you needed me. It’s nothing heroic.”

Nell studied his face as he switched on a small penlight. “When did you start your climb? I never saw you before today.” She angled her head, trying to read the expression in his eyes. The man didn’t reveal anything, she thought irritably.

“I arrived yesterday. I’ve been on the move.”

It made sense. As he pulled her closer, the soothing warmth of his body made her relax.

The man would make a fantastic climbing partner, she decided.

The penlight flashed off. Rough fingers opened on her hair. “What are you thinking about?”

“I figure you have great deltoids,” Nell said sleepily. “That’s always the first thing I look for in a man.”

“You look for his deltoids?” He sounded amused.

“Absolute first thing.” Nell yawned. “Always look for the deltoids. Best way to judge climbing strength. How long can you hang, hands only, unassisted?”

“Seventy-one minutes.” His breath was warm against her ear. “More or less.”

Even in a growing haze of cold and exhaustion, Nell was impressed. “No way. Not for over an hour.” Nobody could do that. At least nobody that she knew.

“I could be lying,” he said calmly.

Nell didn’t think so. He didn’t strike her as the type for casual boasts. In fact, nothing about the man seemed casual. “What exactly do you do in the navy?”

“This and that. Nothing you’d be interested in.” His hands slid slowly into her hair. Nell felt the strands spill over his fingers.

At every movement, she was stunned to feel little jolts of desire. The heat grew where their bodies were joined.

Crazy. They were camped on the edge of a cliff and he was a complete stranger.

But the heat didn’t go away. His hands kept moving, slow and

thoughtful, until Nell thought she'd scream.

Or curl up against his chest and sigh in noisy pleasure.

She frowned. She knew better than to relax or trust a stranger even if the gentle motion of his hands was hypnotic. "The tents are taking a beating. I need to go check to see if they—"

"Already done. The lines you rigged are solid. Nice work."

"Two of my best ropes are out there," she said sleepily. "I've got trail mix and three protein bars in my left pocket," she added. "Take them if you need to."

"I'll be fine. Go to sleep, Nell."

She wasn't used to being taken care of. It had been years since her father—

Don't go there.

The past was a sinkhole filled with bad memories. And this man was still a stranger. She wiggled, trying to find a position that wasn't starkly intimate, with their shoulders touching and their thighs locked together for warmth. Finally she gave up.

It was just one night, after all. She'd never see this man and his powerful body again. There was no chance for mingled laughter or shared secrets.

And that was exactly the way Nell wanted it.

She twisted, shoving away his hands as she closed her eyes. "Just don't get any ideas while I'm asleep," she said huskily. "That cliff wall is only a few feet away. You wouldn't like the drop."

She thought she heard his quiet laugh before she drifted off with the howl of the wind in her ears.

NELL FELT the wind in her hair.

Hands sweaty, she was chalking up before her last climb of the day. The sun lay hot and heavy on her shoulders in a band of liquid gold. Body straining, muscles in the flow while Yosemite spread out like a Technicolor postcard.

Beautiful.

Then the sudden hiss of falling rope. A violent jerk as a cam broke free, slamming her into a wall of granite, breaking her nose and cheekbone, blood gushing onto her neck.

The sound of her own scream jerked her upright in the icy darkness.

"Nell, wake up."

Lines broken. Carabiners blown. Falling, falling…

"Hey, wake up." Hard hands locked around her shoulders.

She fought blindly, her nails raking warm skin.

Panic. Falling…

"Stop fighting, Nell. It's Dakota. You're just dreaming. Something about Yosemite, but it's over now. Calm down and breathe."

Breathe.

Nell forced her muscles to loosen.

Just another dream. Always about falling, somewhere alone in the darkness…

She took a deep breath and shoved a damp clump of hair from her eyes. "Okay, back among the living—more or less. Thanks for the wake-up call. What time is it anyway?"

“Almost five. Should be light soon. You okay now?”

Nell straightened the small light clipped to her belt. “Great,” she said through clenched teeth.

“You keep that light with you all the time?”

“When I’m next to a three-thousand-foot drop, I do. In case you didn’t notice, that first step can be really unpleasant.” Nell slanted her small light through the tent. “How is she?”

“No change. Stable and warm.”

“Westlake, our fearless tour leader?”

“Asleep, last time I checked.”

Nell frowned. “What about you? Don’t you ever rest?”

“I closed my eyes for a few minutes. It’s all I need.” His hands smoothed the thermal blanket around her shoulders. “Do you always ask this many questions?”

“Yeah, I do. Call it terminal curiosity.”

Amanda Wilson tossed in her sleep, and Dakota leaned down to check her pulse.

At his touch the teenager twisted, muttering hoarsely. “Mummy, you left the window open again. It’s so c-cold…” Then her eyes opened and she coughed, staring blankly up at Dakota. “My arm hurts.” She craned her head anxiously from side to side. “Where are the others?”

“Back at the hotel. We’ll get you there shortly.” Dakota raised the tube of her hydration pack. “How about you drink a little water?”

“How long have we been up here?”

“Most of the night.” After Dakota helped Amanda drink, he pulled the silver blanket back in place around her. “But the weather looks to be clearing. Just think of it this way. You’re going to have a great story to tell all your friends.”

The girl’s lip quavered. “I want to g-go home.”

“We’ll get you there,” Nell said firmly. “We’re going to make it through this.”

Amanda took a labored breath. “Is that what you do?”

“Sometimes life gets messy and complicated, but I don’t look down and I don’t look back.” Nell’s voice was flat.

She sensed that Dakota was studying her. “Something wrong?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were thinking plenty loud, Navy.”

Across the tent Amanda giggled. “She’s got you there. You do seem kind of—intense. I guess that’s a navy thing.”

Dakota moved to help her drink some more water. “What, can’t a man enjoy the company of two gorgeous women in peace?”

The teenager wheezed out a laugh. “Very funny.”

Over the howl of the wind, motors droned closer. Nell could see the dim pattern of light around the flap of the tent. “They’ll have to land below the ridge. Someone needs to guide the rescue team up.” Nell pushed to her knees and grabbed her climbing gear.

“Sure you’re up to it?” Dakota asked quietly.

Nell shoved a coiled rope over her shoulder. “No offense, but I think I’m the best guy for the job.”

His expression was unreadable as he reached out and brushed one finger along the corner of her lips. It was almost as if he was memorizing her smile, Nell thought.

Then his expression hardened. “I hate to admit that you’re right. Watch your six out there.”

“SHE’S REALLY GREAT, isn’t she?” Amanda was watching the spot where Nell had disappeared. “I don’t think anything in the world frightens her. I wish I was that way.”

Dakota listened to the chopper approach. “You never can tell what makes people tick. I think Nell enjoys the thrill of being in danger. Besides, you’re pretty brave yourself. You took a real beating.”

The teenager shrugged. “Not like you two. So why don’t you like her? I mean, you smile at her, but it never quite reaches your eyes.”

The girl was a little too observant, Dakota thought irritably. “Nothing wrong with Nell MacInnes. I like her fine.” He just didn’t trust her.

“How’s Ian doing? Is he…” Her voice trailed away.

“He’s still alive.” Barely, Dakota thought. “That’s a helicopter coming in out there. With luck, you’ll be down at the hotel in ten minutes. How do you feel?”

The girl swallowed hard. “Like I might throw up.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret.” Dakota slanted her a quick smile.

“Happens to the best of us.”

The tent flap rose and Nell appeared, snow on her cheeks. “A team is headed up to hitch you into a sling, Amanda. Ready to go?”

“I guess so. You’ll both go down with me, right?”

Dakota zipped up his pack. “You bet.”

“Do you need any help in here?” Nell’s climbing helmet was hanging over her shoulder and she was half turned to the light, looking relieved that the ordeal was nearly over.

“Not a bit. I’ll help Amanda outside and then go see if I can help them with Westlake.”

Nell stuck out one hand. “Nice to meet you, Navy. You can climb with me anytime.”

Dakota gripped her hand and studied her face, looking for traces of cunning or arrogance, but there was only excitement and a hint of a smile.

“I hear the girls are placing bets down at the inn.”

“What kind of bets?”

“Whether or not your butt is as incredible as they all think it is.” She gave a wicked smile. “I’m guessing it is.”

Dakota’s brow rose. “I thought you were into deltoids.”

Amanda gave up trying to hide her laughter. “Where are the deltoids?”

“Right here.” Nell reached out and tapped Dakota’s upper arms. “Something tells me these are pretty spectacular. Too bad I’m never going to find out.”

“I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours. Just name the time and the place,” Dakota said huskily.

Nell’s smiled faded. “I don’t think so. Something tells me it would cost a lot more than I’m prepared to pay.”

“How much are you prepared to pay?”

She studied him a long time. “I’m not sure. Whatever it is, you’d probably cost more. Watch yourself on the big walls, Lieutenant.” She tossed a coiled rope over her shoulder and headed out into the cold gray light of dawn.

Dakota was still watching her as the snow swirled up and the rescue team appeared on the ridge below them.

CHAPTER FOUR

THIRTY MINUTES LATER the storm clouds had moved inland and Amanda Wilson and Ian Westlake had been transferred to a medical flight bound for Edinburgh. Now the rescue team was relaxing, glad to have a successful end to their dawn ascent.

Meanwhile, Dakota's Foxfire contact was waiting in a military helicopter on the far side of the loch. Izzy Teague was roughly six foot five and could have passed for Denzel Washington, but his grave eyes made him look older than his years. One of the government's finest security operatives, the man could assess photographs or triangulate cell phone positions faster than most people could breathe.

The chopper was quiet. Restless, Dakota drummed on the window, waiting for the pilot to return.

"Something wrong?" Teague opened his medical bag and pulled out a small metal case.

"Not a thing."

"Yeah? Then why are you scowling?"

Dakota shrugged.

"How's your hand?"

"Fine." Dakota didn't look up, intent on stowing his gear. He especially refused to look around in hopes of seeing Nell.

Teague glared at him. "Fine? You've got two lacerations that

need sutures."

"Nothing that can't wait."

Izzy stared at him thoughtfully, then glanced down and made quick notes on the sleek laptop that was never far away. "How did that climbing gear work out?"

"The shoes get high marks. Solid traction and balance. The gloves were useless. No possible way to handle a weapon in them."

"I'll pass the word to Ryker and his science boys." Izzy gave a cocky smile. "Back to the drawing board on the gear." When Dakota didn't answer, Izzy raised an eyebrow. "Something eating you, Smith?"

"I'd like to get moving, that's all. Has my surveillance mission changed?" he asked quietly.

"First things first." Izzy's eyes narrowed as he held out a digital keypad. When he triggered a button, a row of lights flashed red-orange. "Before we leave, Ryker wants a medical update. Log in for Madonna and record your response times."

Madonna, as both men knew, was the code name for Dakota's unique visual skills, part of the biomedical program based at a top-secret government lab in New Mexico. Thanks to his extensive training and ongoing enhancements, the SEAL could see far beyond the normal spectrum into infrared, ultraviolet and thermal ranges. His skills offered unique applications for military surveillance in high-risk, fast-extraction situations.

But excellent was never good enough for the head of the

Foxfire program. A cold, untrusting bureaucrat, Lloyd Ryker demanded constant updates on all his assets.

"Madonna is doing just fine." Coolly Dakota logged on to the handheld unit and ripped through the tests, shifting easily from light source to light source. Like every man handpicked for the elite Foxfire team, Dakota liked difficult challenges, and he always played to win.

Izzy watched the lights flash, scoring Dakota's speed. "Want to tell me about Nell MacInnes?"

"Not much to tell. She saved those kids, no doubt about it." Dakota started to add a character assessment but decided against it. Saying more would amount to empty speculation.

"Did she say anything useful? Any comments about her father or her future plans?"

"We didn't get around to trading life stories," Dakota said flatly. "There was a gale up on the summit, if you recall. And now maybe you'll let me concentrate here."

For some reason the questions about Nell irritated Dakota. When he was done with the test, he handed the unit back to Izzy.

Across the snowy field, Nell was talking animatedly to a man in a bright green parka and high-tech climbing gloves. "Is that her partner?"

Izzy nodded. "He helped coordinate the rescue ascent. I understand he's climbed with Nell for almost twelve years."

Dakota watched the tall climber squeeze Nell's shoulder. "Are they sleeping together?"

“He’s married with two kids.”

“Which means nothing,” Dakota said curtly. “Married men can screw around as much as single men. Maybe more.”

Nell laughed at something her partner said, and for some reason that irritated Dakota, too.

“My research says no. The relationship is strictly about climbing.”

“Any sign that he’s involved in the theft?”

“I’ve got him on the radar just in case. He’s had no large bank deposits that would indicate unusual payments.” Izzy closed the digital unit and stowed it in a secure case.

“Neither did Nell.” Dakota rubbed his shoulder idly. “Maybe he’s being careful.”

“I’ll handle him. Right now I want you to calm down and rest.”

“I’m not—”

“Of course you are. You’ve been wound up tight ever since you got down. I checked out Amanda Wilson and gave her one of the field hydration lines before she was flown out. You could use one too.”

“I’m fine, Teague.”

“Can it.” Izzy slipped a syringe expertly into Dakota’s arm. “There’s a serious nutrient boost in that line. Shut up and let it take effect.” Dakota muttered something gruff that made Izzy laugh. “I doubt that’s physically possible, my friend, and I don’t intend to find out.”

As the liquid dripped into his arm, Dakota’s gaze slid restlessly

over the lower glen. He couldn't seem to stop thinking about Nell. What made her tick and how many secrets was she hiding? Both questions were suddenly very important.

Izzy followed Dakota's gaze. "What's eating at you?"

"Nell. She doesn't add up, Izzy, and I don't like things that don't add up." He took one last look across the loch, where Nell was laughing with her partner, piling ropes in a canvas bag.

The woman had guts to spare and a quick, clever brain. If things had been different he would have enjoyed a little recreational climbing with her. They could start on a cove in Thailand near the South China Sea.

A beach where clothing was optional sounded good.

The thought of Nell in a tiny string bikini—and no top—made muscles tighten all over Dakota's body. He let the 3-D fantasy smolder.

And then he put the thought away.

Never gonna happen, pal. She's the target and you're too smart to forget that.

Staying focused on the moment was the best way to stay alive.

Dakota's rules.

He glanced down at the sealed security file Izzy was holding out. "New developments?"

"An international terrorist group just took credit for the da Vinci theft via the Internet. Ryker wants you fully briefed within the hour. The mission just got elevated to a level-four priority."

Dakota watched the loch glitter silver beneath them as the

chopper pilot returned, squinting into the wind. “What group?”

“The October Twelfth Brigade. They’ve been on our watch list for almost two years now.”

“That’s the same group who claimed credit for the theft of the Rembrandt last year?”

“One and the same. The painting never resurfaced, and we assume it was sold clandestinely.” Izzy’s eyes hardened. “I don’t need to tell you the money will be used in very unpleasant ways.”

“How much money?”

“The da Vinci could bring somewhere in the area of thirty million dollars.”

Dakota said something low and vicious.

“My sentiments exactly. Meanwhile, no more surveillance. Our new orders are to locate that piece of art and make certain it does not leave U.S. soil at any cost.” He pointed to the file in Dakota’s hand. “Read it. We have new information from a prison source that Jordan MacInnes is involved. You’re to use Nell to locate the painting. Use her in any way that’s necessary,” Izzy said coldly. “Is that clear?”

“I TOLD YOU already. I’m fine.”

Despite Nell’s protests, a young paramedic was scrubbing her hands with Betadine. When he pushed up her sleeve, she was surprised to see cuts and bruises covering her wrists. In all the chaos, she hadn’t noticed.

“Bad night up there, I’m thinking. Nasty patch of weather you had.” The paramedic glanced out at the remaining clouds that

drifted across the dark summit of Blaven. “At least no one was killed.”

“The cold was the worst part.” Nell’s teeth chattered a little. She was feeling dizzy, which irritated her. Fighting exhaustion, she rubbed her face with her free hand. “Where did my partner go?”

“He’s helping to sort out the last kids. They’re phoning their parents now.”

“I should go help—”

“You’ll stay right where you are. Your friend is managing fine.”

Nell had trained with Eric and climbed with him on three continents. They had shared dangerous conditions, then traded stories when they came down. And after that Eric went home to his beautiful, understanding wife and two kids back in Idaho.

End of story.

There was no other man in Nell’s life.

Nell looked up as she heard the roar of a motor.

“One of the choppers is pulling out.” The paramedic glanced through the ambulance’s rear window. “They seemed in quite a rush, according to my crew. Your American climber was aboard.”

Nell shifted, trying to look out the window, seeing Dakota’s outline inside the helicopter. So he was gone. No farewells or an exchange of phone numbers, just a swift, silent departure.

Which was for the best, wasn’t it? There had been something

too physical and intense about Dakota Smith.

"Did you need to speak with him? You look upset."

Nell stared out at the dark peaks trapped in heavy clouds. "No. He's just someone I met up on the mountain."

She felt an odd punch at her chest as the dark chopper lifted off.

He could have said goodbye.

He could have found time for that.

Well, she didn't care one way or another.

"I hear you've climbed at Chamonix."

Nell nodded, trying to ignore the chopper as it droned past. She didn't let men into her life, not ever.

No trust.

No leaning.

MacInnes rules.

"I thought I recognized your name. You took third prize, didn't you?"

Nell nodded, barely listening. In the gray light the chopper's black body grew smaller.

"It makes you feel alive," the paramedic said quietly. "Nothing can touch you up there. You'd know that feeling, I guess."

Nell knew exactly what he meant. Her art restoration work kept her busy, but her climbing kept her sane. She had to admit that Dakota Smith would have made one heck of a climbing partner. Maybe he could have been something more.

Instantly she forced away the thought.

“By the way, did you get the messages?”

“Messages?”

“Your father has been trying to reach you. The manager of the inn asked us to tell you that he had called six times. He said it was urgent that you phone him as soon as you returned.”

“Did he say why?”

“I’m afraid not. But I’m almost done here. Then I’ll drive you down to the inn.”

Nell felt an odd prickle at her neck. Her father wouldn’t have phoned her here unless it was something very serious. “You’re sure he called six times?”

“That’s what I was told.”

Out over the Sea of Hebrides the big black helicopter thundered south and was swallowed up by the fog.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jackson Square Art District
San Francisco

JORDAN MACINNES SAT in a pair of worn leather slippers and watched night claim the San Francisco skyline. Home, he thought. Such as it was.

He closed his eyes, angry that he had bothered Nell with his urgent calls to Scotland. It was only natural that he needed to be certain she was safe, but he wished he hadn't bothered her with his worries. He'd served his seventeen years in prison and he knew how to protect his back. He'd also taken steps to protect Nell now that the shadows around him were closing in.

They'd never release him now. He'd finally accepted that and factored it into his final plans.

The phone rang beside his chair. He forced a smile when he heard his daughter's worried voice. "Nell? Of course I'm fine. Why aren't you asleep? Worrying about me? Now that's a waste of precious time. No, I'm not having any health problems." Jordan winced a little at the lie, but there would be a time and a place for explanations. "I shouldn't have called you like that, Nell. Sorry if I scared you."

But deep inside, the quiet man sitting in the darkness knew all the risks before him. He understood the kind of people he was dealing with, people who wouldn't hesitate to kill if they were

crossed. As long as he did exactly what they wanted, he would be safe.

Even more important, Nell would be safe, too. He'd seen to her protection as his first priority.

As the bridge lights shimmered over the bay, Jordan MacInnes cross-examined his daughter about her Scottish climb and her upcoming conservation projects, keeping any uneasiness from his voice. But he kept thinking about the calls that came at odd hours of the night. Calls with rough, whispered warnings, a reminder that his life was always under scrutiny now. Everywhere he went, he was watched. And it was all because of his years of success—followed by one failed robbery that should have been the perfect crime. Every detail had been precisely planned for almost two years and no expense had been spared in buying insider information. But no one had expected an extra guard to key in and drop off a clean uniform off-shift at three in the morning. As a result, the guard had tripped over a set of glass cutters on the museum's stairs. Falling headfirst, he'd plunged over a banister and dropped two levels, his neck broken instantly.

A terrible accident, and the only mistake Jordan had ever made in his burglary career of almost two decades. Of course criminals always said that, didn't they?

He forced a smile into his voice. "I'm listening, Nell. Of course I heard you. Stop worrying about the Tintoretto. No one has better hands than you do. I saw you clean that last Caravaggio, remember? The dealer was delighted."

With every calm word, he hid the bitter truth from his daughter. He'd sweated out every week of his prison sentence, determined to put the past behind him, but now he was being pulled right back into that world of shadows.

He couldn't let Nell be pulled in with him.

He stretched his right arm carefully, feeling a sudden throb at his elbow. With every weather shift the ache returned. The beating he'd received the night of his arrest eighteen years before hadn't helped. Nor had the later beatings he'd received from guards and fellow inmates during his years in prison.

Jordan blocked out the grim memories. All that mattered was the now.

The lean, white-haired man cupped his right elbow, wincing as fresh pain radiated out from the bone. The weather was definitely changing again.

He remembered how Nell had warned him to be prepared, that the world would look and sound different after his release. How right she had been. Wise and quiet and stubborn, his daughter was the only thing that mattered to him. He had failed her miserably by breaking the law and failed her yet again by being clumsy enough to get caught afterward.

Most of all he had failed her by indirectly causing the accident that had left a museum guard dead.

As Jordan MacInnes stared out at the Oakland Bay Bridge, he felt his fear return. Finishing his prison sentence should have brought a measure of peace and a chance at happiness. But you

never walked away from your past. He saw that all too clearly now.

Nell deserved a father she could rely on, a man she could be proud of. In the years he had left, Jordan MacInnes was determined to be both those things, even if it killed him.

"What did you say, honey?" When his daughter repeated her question, he frowned. "Watch that Chinese vermilion. Mercuric sulfide is toxic in minute amounts, no matter how careful you are." Nell knew all about toxic material safety, of course, but a father couldn't stop worrying.

Jordan was reaching for one of his old books on Renaissance pigments when he heard a click on the line. Another call was coming in. Another whispered warning.

He scanned the number.

Blocked.

Damned cowards.

But he was ready for them now. He trusted only three people in the world, and two of them knew about his dangerous plan. Even if he failed, Nell would be protected from the shadow world and those who refused to let him go.

"Lunch tomorrow? That sounds fine, Nell. I want to hear all about Scotland. You haven't said more than a few words about the climbs you and Eric made, and that's not like you."

Jordan MacInnes was almost certain he wouldn't be at that lunch, but he didn't want to alarm Nell. She would be told all she needed to know in due course. His old friend would see to that.

The white-haired thief with the aristocratic face stared out at the darkness, sensing the danger waiting in the shadows.

There was no turning back. Now his death might be the only gift he had left for Nell.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WIND OFF THE BAY was freezing.

Nell shivered as she rubbed her arms, glancing up at the fog that covered the Oakland Bay Bridge. For some reason the advancing white curtain reminded her of a gate opening slowly, swallowing all light and motion.

Nell forced away her uneasiness. Her windows were all closed, her doors locked. Her workroom alarm was set, which made her absolutely safe.

Of course you are. You always set your alarm when you work late. Stop dithering and finish the painting.

She had been uneasy since her return from Scotland the week before, and to her great irritation she hadn't been able to get Lieutenant Dakota Smith out of her mind, even during long days of intense restoration work.

Now that project was almost done. Looking down at Tintoretto's jewellike study of Saint George fighting a dragon, Nell didn't want to let go. Living in the mind of a genius could be extremely addictive.

But now the exquisite restoration was complete. She studied the area near the dragon's head and then put down her fine Russian red sable brush.

Done.

There was nothing more to add, no detail that would intrude

to place her vision over Tintoretto's. No art restorer allowed personal technique to challenge the integrity of the original image.

The moment Nell was finished, exhaustion struck. The restoration process required fanatical focus and patience. When you were hunched over a sixteenth-century masterpiece, you couldn't afford even one slip of the hand. So you never let down your guard. Not ever.

And that also happened to be one of Nell's un-shakable life rules, right up there under don't trust and don't lean. If most people would consider that cynical, it was too damned bad.

Life had not exactly been a kind teacher.

She rubbed her face. After long hours of meticulous brushwork cleaning the canvas, her eyes burned, her fingers ached, and her shoulders felt as if they'd been impaled by razors.

One more reason that Nell was looking forward to walking home after closing her workshop. San Francisco's cool, salty air always helped her loosen up and put the work behind her.

After that, she would call her father to check in. If she was lucky, she might get the truth about his urgent calls to her in Scotland. For the moment, he was sticking to his story of sudden chest pains that had made him panic and call her from the emergency room.

Nell didn't buy it—she knew her father well enough to know that he cared little about his own health. He was worrying about something else. She just didn't know what.

She locked her workshop door and triggered the alarms for active monitoring, jogging in place to warm up. So far she'd been lucky, with no robberies or thefts of any sort, but she made it a point not to take chances. Her alarm system was the best you could buy. Even her father had approved of it.

She stretched from side to side, savoring the silence of the street while mist curled past in pale tendrils. The cool air felt good on her face as she settled into a stride up Geary Street.

A few blocks later she noticed him, a lone figure in black. He'd been half a block behind her for almost five minutes now, which didn't do much for the coincidence theory.

Nell picked up her pace. Geary Street was deserted, its boutiques and wine bars closed for the night. There could be a good reason for a man to be following her; she just couldn't think what it was.

At least she had her pepper spray.

Nell sprinted across the street and cut down an alley that led to an all-night coffee shop with poetry readings fuelled by unlimited caffeine. Right now she wanted bright lights and warm bodies.

She was one block from the shop's beckoning lights when she heard the snap of gravel behind her. A hand snaked around her neck, groping for her throat.

She reacted before panic could set in, spraying him and then tucking her chin as she snapped forward and sent the man flying over her head. Blood geysered as he hit the dirty concrete and moaned brokenly.

Nell kept on moving toward the end of the alley. Maybe the creep would think twice before hitting on another woman walking alone at night.

Or not—given that more figures had appeared from behind a parked car. She sprinted to the wall at the far side of the street.

One of her pursuers pulled something long and narrow from his pocket.

A big cardboard box rustled near her feet. Nell recognized the homeless man who looked out of the torn box that was his current home. She had made a practice of leaving him a sandwich or a jar of his favorite honey maple almonds on her night walks.

His grimy face creased in a smile. "How ya doin', Legs?"

"I've been better," she muttered.

Her first attacker was back on his feet now. The two men crossed the street, headed toward Nell.

"What are you doing?" The old man stood up un-steadily, one hand on the graffiti-covered wall. "Leave her alone, you shits."

The closer man, a Caucasian with gang tattoos on one arm, gave two vicious kicks of his steel-toed boot and crumpled the old man onto the pavement.

Nell reacted in fury, kicking his legs out from under him. When he toppled, she twisted sharply to the left and swung a piece of discarded plumber's pipe toward the other man's face. He was big, but Nell was quicker and she knew these streets and alleys well from her frequent walks home. Jumping onto a cement wall, she struck hard at the side of the man's head, catching him

unaware.

Creep number two hit the alley, gurgling as his face slammed into the greasy pavement.

That had to hurt.

Something rolled across the ground near her feet. Nell realized it was a syringe. Had it been meant for her?

She felt her hands start to shake. She tried to think, digging in her pocket for her cell phone to call 911.

Off to her left, the homeless man gave a groan and spit out two decayed teeth. When he saw the attackers out cold, he gave Nell a crooked smile. “Hell, Legs, where were you when I needed you back in January ’68? My boys and me coulda used you when we stormed the crap out of Hue.”

“A little before my time.” She helped the old man to his feet, dug in her dropped handbag and held out some bills. “Dessert’s on me tonight. Watch yourself out here.”

“Count on it. Got my Purple Heart to protect me.” He pulled out a medal from beneath his stained jacket, the ribbon caught around his gnarled fingers.

One of the nation’s highest honors, the medal was the only thing of value left to a forgotten hero. Talk about crappy unfair.

“Thanks for the ducats, Legs.”

“Anytime.”

Nell was dialing 911 when she saw two men slide out of a gray van parked across the street. Under a broken streetlight she noticed that the closer man had a small pistol level at his leg.

She fought a sickening sense of fear. This was no simple robbery. They had come here for her. But why? Were they after the Tintoretto? Maybe another piece of art in her workshop?

The old man in the torn jacket pushed Nell toward the far end of the alley. “R-run, honey. They got—”

A sudden crack of gunfire cut him off. Nell saw blood splash over his pile of boxes. He groaned and then a bullet screamed past her ear.

Nell pushed past her fear, struggling to keep her mind sharp and focused. Above all, she knew that fear was her worst enemy. Her father’s friends had taught her that, along with an array of carefully selected judo and kickboxing moves. She had never forgotten any of those lessons.

But she was running on caffeine fumes now, exhausted from a twelve-hour day, and there was no telling how many more of the creeps were waiting in nearby cars.

Nell scanned the shadows and then grabbed two heavy lids from a row of garbage cans. She threw the lids at her pursuers, then ducked behind a VW bus with four flat tires. Bullets drilled the garbage can lids and cracked the windows of the VW. Falling glass rained down around her.

Nell’s heart pounded as she peered through the broken windows, looking for fresh cover.

A low voice called out of the darkness. “Stay where you are, Nell. We don’t want to hurt you.”

They knew her name?

Fighting panic, she threw a third garbage can lid behind her, then crawled along the foot of the wall, staying low until she reached a smaller street behind a dilapidated warehouse.

A bright beam of halogen lights cut through the darkness, blinding her.

"All we want to do is talk, Nell. Your father will explain everything to you."

Her father? Surely he didn't know these people.

Fighting a sense of horror, Nell crawled on in the darkness. Could her father be involved with men like these? He'd sworn that he was done with stealing and she'd believed him.

A bullet whined over her head, hitting a big white Dumpster at the far end of the alley. Nell tried to remember how far it was from the Dumpster to the nearest cross street.

Ten feet and she'd be eating lead.

"Last warning, Nell."

She kept inching backward. Her foot struck an empty can, the sound echoing down the narrow alley.

A bullet hit the wall near her shoulder. Cement fragments tore at her cheek and she tasted blood on her lip.

They were cutting her off.

She saw a sudden movement at the end of the alley, beyond the Dumpster. She froze, boxed in completely now. There were too many of them.

"Nell, over here." The voice from the darkness seemed familiar. "Turn around."

She blinked, trying to place the voice. A client? No, not that. Scotland.

Dakota?

“Keep moving six more feet. I’ve got your back covered.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

NELL BACKED UP slowly, straining to breathe, straining to make sense of why this man had suddenly reappeared in her life. “How did you find—”

“No time for that. Just keep moving.” He sounded very calm, not remotely surprised to see men with guns following Nell and circling warily.

In one smooth movement, he pulled her toward him and then shot out the halogen light. Behind them, bullets cracked on cement, the noise deafening in the confined alley. Rough fingers gripped Nell’s arm and then she was yanked back behind the protective metal walls of the Dumpster, out of range of the gunfire.

Where were the police when you needed them? Hadn’t anyone reported the disturbance?

“Three feet behind you, Nell. Focus. Reach up and you’ll feel the top of a metal fire escape ladder. Pull yourself up and move. Don’t look back and don’t stop, no matter what happens down here.”

Nell didn’t even consider arguing. She was already grabbing for the ladder. “What about you?” she said breathlessly.

“I’ve got unfinished business here.” His voice was cold. “Move.”

Nell didn’t hesitate. With one jump, her hand closed around

the middle rung of the fire escape and she swung her legs up.

But when she reached the third rung, a retaining brace pulled free, dumping her and twelve feet of rusted metal right back in the middle of the alley.

"Go out the alley behind me," Dakota snapped. "My car is the black Explorer at the crosswalk. Here's the key."

He shoved something into her hand. "Drive home, lock your door and stay there."

Footsteps hammered toward the far end of the alley, cutting off that route of escape.

"Forget it." He sounded irritated. "Stay right behind me, but keep clear of my right hand."

His shooting hand.

But Nell wasn't about to slow him down against what looked like increasingly bad odds. With both ends of the alley blocked, that left only up.

She ran past the fire escape and grabbed a heavy rain gutter. A bullet ripped over her right shoulder. Pain burned through her neck as the round gouged a piece of brick out of the wall.

Ignoring her pain, Nell pulled her way hand over hand up the gutter until she reached the roof. To her right, a limestone wall rose to the neighboring apartment building.

Another bullet tore through the air beneath her, nicking her calf. Certain that he could handle himself better alone, she grabbed the end of a heavy gutter and climbed onto a second-story patio.

She had to get to Dakota's car and call the police.

She heard the first wail of distant sirens as she hit the adjoining wall at a run, channeled her momentum up into a vertical walk, then swung her arm to the wooden flagpole near the roof. Rocking hard, she jammed one ankle into the eaves.

Standard moves for a free climber.

Except for the bullets, she thought grimly. But the rounds appeared to be high, going over her head, and she had the feeling the attack was meant to be a kidnapping, not murder.

The same wasn't true for her homeless friend…

Or for Dakota.

The thought stole her breath, freezing her in place. Her fingers were bleeding, both elbows rubbed raw. Panting, she forced herself to move, pulling herself up over the eaves and onto the roof. Below her the gunfire cleared. When she peered down into the darkness, no one was there. The alley was empty.

Her fingers locked on Dakota's car keys, shoved deep in her pocket. She didn't have a clue who these people were, or how they knew her name, or why they had mentioned her father.

Currently, she had half a dozen art projects in the process of restoration, but none of them was exceptionally valuable. Private dealers all over the city had more valuable art in their back rooms awaiting sale. So she didn't think the attack was for simple theft.

She sprinted down the opposite fire escape to Dakota's black Explorer and jammed in the key, relieved when the big motor growled to life.

They had mentioned her father. This had to involve him.

The thought left her sick at heart. In his criminal career Jordan MacInnes had made dozens of resolute, life-and-death friends. Unfortunately, he'd made just as many enemies, competitors with no scruples and very long memories. Had one of them targeted him now?

Nell checked the street, but there was no sign of Dakota or her attackers. As she drove slowly north, she passed two police cruisers with sirens flashing headed the way she'd just come. She briefly considered pulling over and flagging them down.

And tell them what? My father, who happens to be an ex-con, may be in some kind of trouble and I may be a target, too.

Yeah, like that would work.

Especially since any hint of contact with other criminals would send her father right back to prison for parole violation.

As a compromise, Nell placed a shaky 911 call to report a wounded homeless man in the alley. After leaving the exact address, she hung up before they could ask for her name or number. They might be able to trace her cell phone, but it was a risk she had to take for her friend's sake.

Driving through the dark streets, Nell fought a wave of exhaustion. She didn't feel safe, even at the door to her apartment, where she stood frozen, listening for any sign of intruders. But there was no sound except the low whir of her refrigerator. Her locks had not been touched.

Was she really safe?

The past hour was a blur, and she gave up trying to process it. Instead she dropped her purse and jacket and headed for the bathroom. The sight of her face in the mirror stopped her cold. She had the beginning of a black eye, cuts on both arms, and a long welt down her right cheek. Her condition would have been far worse if the SEAL hadn't appeared out of the darkness to protect her. Nell still couldn't figure out how he'd found her—or why. Only one person would have that answer.

Her hands were shaking as she dialed her father. After six unsuccessful tries, she tossed the phone down on her bed. Nothing made sense.

Her clock read 3:04 a.m.

Impossible to believe that in sixty-eight minutes her life had collapsed in on itself like a black hole, dropping her straight into a nightmare.

Meanwhile, she had cuts to attend to. Quickly, she bandaged her arms, then washed her face. One of the bullets had grazed her calf, and she cleaned that next. She'd had enough falls while climbing that the shallow wound didn't panic her.

Finally done, she looked around her silent apartment, trying to plan her next move. The logical choice was to find her father and pray that he had a solid explanation. If not, she would have to go to the police.

Cool air drifted across her face. Out of the corner of her eye Nell saw the curtains drift out above her kitchen window. She swung around so fast that she dropped a box of bandages.

A shadow crossed the kitchen.
Dakota was back, and he looked mad as hell.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"YOU'RE…SAFE." NELL heard her voice crack. She felt cornered as he studied her in taut silence. "Allan, the homeless man on the street—did you see if he was okay?"

"An ambulance picked him up. He was loudly demanding food and a hot bath when they left. I take that for a yes."

Nell felt a wave of relief, but it didn't last long. Dakota looked hard and distant, like a complete stranger.

An angry stranger.

He stalked closer, eyes narrowed on her face. His powerful shoulders were outlined by a black turtleneck, his legs encased in dark jeans. This was definitely a man you didn't want to mess with, Nell thought.

But he owed her some answers, and she was going to get them. "Why are you here?"

"You tell me."

Nell crossed her arms and fought the urge to back up. "I don't know what you mean." Why did the man seem to fill her living room?

"I doubt that."

Nell ignored the challenge in his voice. "You're certain that my friend was conscious when the ambulance came?"

"Positive. Now why don't you stop worrying about him, and start worrying about what just happened to you. Those men in

the alley weren't playing around, Nell. Neither am I."

"Did you—are they—alive?"

"One took a round in the chest." Dakota's voice was clipped. "He's gone. Two others got banged up. They're in custody now, and I'll be interested in what they have to say. The rest ran when the cruisers got close. Why don't you give me your version?"

Nell cradled her bandaged arm. "I don't have a version. You're not making any sense. And how do you know where I live?"

"My question first. What were you doing in that alley?"

She stood rigidly. "Walking home from work. Then boom—those men appeared." Her voice wavered. "And if you hadn't arrived when you did, I probably wouldn't be here."

The cool look in his eyes told her he agreed. "Nice move on the rain gutter. But if you'd lost your hold, I'd be scraping you off the pavement right now." Frowning, he lifted one of her bandaged hands. "It was reckless and unnecessary."

"But I didn't lose my hold, and it gave you time to deal with them without me slowing you down. So it was hardly unnecessary." She pulled away, angry at him and angry that her life was slipping out of control. She needed to think, but she couldn't, not with Dakota studying her as if she was some kind of one-celled lab specimen. "If you won't tell me why you're here, you'd better leave."

He did some muttering, then stalked toward her kitchen, ignoring her completely.

"What are you doing?"

“Getting some water. It’s been a trying night.”

“I said, I want you to leave or I’ll—”

“Take one.” A water bottle flew in her direction. Nell caught it by instinct.

“Go get packed.”

“Packed for what? Why should I?”

“We’re leaving. Together. In ten minutes.”

Oh, sure she was.

He stared at the luminous dial of his watch and pushed a button that changed one of the sets of numbers.

Nell had never seen a watch do that before. The fiber of his turtleneck seemed strange too. Heavier than cotton, it looked smooth and tensile; it also appeared to shed water. Nell stared at the drops that dotted his sleeve.

Dotted, but didn’t sink in.

She watched more letters scroll over the face of his watch. “Who are you?”

“Someone you’ll have to trust,” he said flatly. “Whether you like it or not.”

“I don’t like it, Navy. And I’m going nowhere with you.” She didn’t bother to explain that trust wasn’t part of her vocabulary.

But she wanted answers about the thugs who had followed her into the alley and what her father had to do with them. Clearly, this man knew what was going on. It was equally clear that he assumed she knew too. “Look, let’s talk.”

“Later.” He walked past her down the hall toward her closet.

“Where’s your suitcase?”

When he saw that she hadn’t moved, he took a long drink from his water bottle and pulled a file from the backpack angled against her antique coffee table. “Okay, I’ll spell it out. I need you to do a job.” He spoke curtly, as if he wasn’t happy about the prospect. “It’s all there in the file. You can read it on the way.”

“This is a joke, right? I barely know you, and I have a full schedule of restoration commissions for the next six months. Even if I didn’t, why would I consider—”

“Because you don’t have any choice. And because those men in the alley won’t be the last ones who come looking for you. Most of all, because this is the only way you can help your father.”

HE WAS EITHER GOING to strangle her or pin her against the wall and tear off all her clothes, Dakota thought grimly. Right now the odds were running about fifty-fifty.

He never lost his calm, never broke a sweat. Not during a mission and definitely not with a woman. But for some reason Nell MacInnes punched through his detachment and hit raw nerves he didn’t know he possessed. She hadn’t fallen apart in the alley, and she’d surprised him when she’d climbed up that rain gutter, all edgy grace and fearlessness.

Her move up on the roof had scared the hell out of him. He knew she was an excellent climber, but the fool could have lost her grip and landed on her head. End of story.

And now he was stuck with her.

Dakota cut off a curse. Things were starting to get

complicated and he hated complicated. If he had a choice, he'd let Izzy handle Nell while he took over the backup surveillance, but asking for a reassignment would be admitting failure, which was not a word in his vocabulary.

He could handle one smart woman with a bad attitude.

What he couldn't handle was the way this whole mission was starting to feel wrong. Everyone from the FBI to the head of Foxfire assumed that Nell's father was back at work, orchestrating a complex theft within days of his release from prison. They also believed that his daughter was involved. The local FBI team had made that much crystal clear in their reports.

It just didn't feel right.

He had watched Nell cross an icy ridge in Scotland, showing quick judgment and courage. She had herded the teens and gotten them to safety at considerable risk to herself. No whining, and no backing down. She was many things—prickly, stubborn and a little reckless, but Dakota wasn't convinced that she was a thief.

Not because she wasn't smart enough. Not because she didn't have the skills. It was her personality that didn't fit the pattern. Doing undercover work, you learned to read people fast, and Dakota had pegged Nell for a loner, while a complicated job like the museum theft required a big, well-knit crew, long weeks of coordination and close communication as well as dependence on one another.

Not Nell's style at all, he thought.

But Jordan MacInnes was a different story. The man was smart enough and manipulative enough. According to his file, he had highly placed criminal connections scattered over every continent. The art fraud experts in the FBI were convinced that MacInnes was back at work with a vengeance, and Dakota could buy that. But his stubborn, gutsy daughter?

He watched Nell pace the room, her face wary but intent. She wasn't beautiful, he thought. She didn't have perfect features or the kind of cool sexuality that would make a man turn to watch her in a crowd.

But for all that he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her.

When they'd huddled together inside the tent, with her legs wrapped around his waist, he'd wanted to do a whole lot more than talk. He couldn't get the memory of her body out of his mind. He woke up dreaming of how she'd feel when he drove her over the edge to a blinding climax. Starkly erotic fantasies involving her had already cost him more sleep than he cared to admit.

The SEAL shook his head. He had to forget how her body had felt on that snowy cliff. Sex with Nell MacInnes wasn't happening in this or any other lifetime. She was his target to assess, the key to the location of thirty million dollars worth of missing art.

She was work, nothing more.

Since the museum break-in, Dakota had been fully briefed about her habits. He knew her usual route home, the names of all her friends and her favorite foods, along with everything else of

importance in her life. He would use all those details to assess her response and ensure that she followed orders. This blood-stirring response to her body would change nothing.

Her cell phone rang on the table, and she reached out to answer it, but Dakota cut her off. His hand circled her wrist. "Let it ring."

He felt her stiffen, her cell phone dropping to the big leather sofa. "You can't make me—"

"I just did. I will keep on doing it, too. Right up until my mission is complete."

Her face paled in the glow of the overhead light. "Do you always treat people this way?"

"Only when it's necessary."

The phone stopped ringing. He saw her glance down, reading the caller ID. Dakota didn't bother checking, because he knew Izzy was already in place nearby, monitoring her phone and e-mails.

She still hadn't opened the file.

"Are you afraid to read it?"

"Tell me instead."

Dakota crossed his arms. "I'll talk while you pack."

"No, now." She sat down on the sofa beside her phone, but made no move to reach for it. "Exactly what is this urgent job that I need to do?" she said tightly.

Dakota prowled the room, choosing his words carefully. "Last month a newly discovered, unpublished and unrecorded piece of art was brought to the National Gallery for assessment. Two

weeks later it was stolen."

"What period and provenance?" Nell sat up a little straighter, frowning. "And how did they get in?"

He watched her face closely but saw only questions. There was no guilt or calculation. He moved closer, reading the heat spots of her body using his enhanced vision. Normal flow at pulse points. Normal respiration heat patterns. She wasn't trying to block him.

Which proved nothing.

Dakota narrowed his focus. His orders were to see how much she knew. His Foxfire training gave him the ability to assess changes in eye response, pulse rate and skin temperature. All those factors would indicate whether she was involved in the theft or not.

"It was an English landscape painting," he said. "Very old, very rare."

As he spoke, he watched Nell's face. There was no sudden flare of heat. No spikes in pulse or pupil dilation at his lie. Not satisfied, he eased into the deeper skills he'd been taught as a Foxfire agent, reading her emotions through thermal shifts and eye response. But Dakota picked up only curiosity and confusion.

She didn't know about a theft at the National Gallery. And that first piece of evidence made him doubt everything else he'd been told by Ryker and their FBI contacts. How much else was wrong with this mission?

"So a painting was stolen. I don't understand why you need me?"

Dakota crossed his arms. “Because we already know who took it and we have to steal it back.”

“I don’t steal things, Lieutenant.”

“But your father does.”

“Did.” Nell glared at the unopened file on her table. “Not anymore.”

He sipped some water, watching her face, checking her. It was time for the detail that would hurt her most.

“We know this piece art was stolen from a locked room in one of the most secure institutions in the world.” He waited a heartbeat, watching her face. “The thief or thieves were exceptionally skilled and left nothing behind but a single fingerprint. The print belonged to the president of the United States.”

Nell’s hands clenched.

“Obviously, we do not consider the president to be a suspect. Given the thief’s m.o.—”

“No,” she whispered. She shot to her feet. “You’re wrong.”

“I’m not wrong, Nell. You know what that mark means. Your father always left a single carefully transferred presidential fingerprint behind when he stole a piece of art. It was his signature.”

“My father did not do this.” Her voice tightened. “I know that was his pattern, but half of the law enforcement personnel in this country knew it, too. It’s hardly a secret now. Any thief could have done this.” Color flared in her face, and Dakota picked

up shock and anger. The anger came in waves, registered in a sudden thermal flare at her face and neck, signs that could not be hidden from him. No, Nell definitely hadn't known about this detail of the theft, either. She was fully convinced of her father's innocence.

"Get out. You've wasted enough of my time."

"Those are the facts, Nell. Why don't we call your father and ask him about those men in the alley. Let's see what he says."

"You weren't on vacation in Scotland," she said slowly. "That was a lie. You were following me, weren't you?"

When Dakota started to counter with a question, Nell cut him off. "I told you to get out." She gestured furiously toward the door. "I don't have time for more lies and accusations. I've lived with too many in my life."

"Your father's in trouble, Nell. The only way to help him is by telling me the truth. All of it."

"I don't—"

Outside in the hall the elevator chimed softly and footsteps crossed the corridor. Nell's doorbell rang twice. She turned, frowning at the clock.

Dakota took her arm and shook his head, one finger covering her lips.

The doorbell rang again.

"F.B.I. Ms. MacInnes, open the door."

Dakota felt her flinch as if she'd been hit. "Did you call them?" she whispered.

He shook his head and pulled out his cell phone.

"Ms. MacInnes, please answer the door. We know you're in there. The doorman saw you come home."

Dakota's hands tightened on her arm. "Ask them for names and badge numbers," he whispered.

Nell looked at him as if he was crazy. "You think it's someone else out there?"

"I told you there would be other men coming."

Nell swallowed hard and then asked for their ID numbers. Dakota quietly relayed the information to Izzy via cell phone, then nodded. "They check out. You'd better see them. I'd suggest you tell them no more than necessary and leave out what happened in the alley unless they ask directly. Leave me out, too."

A muscle worked at her jaw as she watched him grab his file and backpack and move quietly into the bedroom, closing the door partway.

The doorbell rang again. Dakota found a position where he could see the middle of the room and the couch and then he waited, still and silent.

The FBI was supposed to be updating Izzy on all developments, but government agencies were well-known to play power games. Dakota's rule was to trust no one until you had solid proof or clear orders to do otherwise.

He watched Nell open the door warily.

"Nell MacInnes?"

"Yes."

“I’m Agent Fuller and this is Agent Kolowitz. May we come in?”

“Do I have a choice?” Nell said coldly.

“We could come back with a warrant and twenty other agents and trash your apartment.”

“There’s no need. I’ve got nothing to hide.” Nell held open the door, reading the woman’s badge. “Agent Amy Fuller. I’ll remember that name.”

Agent Fuller was a thin woman with sharp gray eyes. She scanned the apartment, then tossed a sealed envelope onto Nell’s coffee table while her partner, short and heavily muscled, sat down on the sofa.

Nell stared at his holstered gun, visible beneath his jacket. “What do you want?”

“Tell us what you know about the da Vinci,” the female agent said curtly.

Nell frowned. “The one in the Louvre? The ones in the Uffizi? Which da Vinci do you mean, Agent Fuller?”

The woman’s face reddened. “Patience was never my strong point, Ms. MacInnes. Either you cooperate now or I’ll have your ass locked up in a cell so you don’t see daylight for five years. Do we understand each other?”

“Perfectly.”

The agent opened a small notebook. “Do you know a man named Vincent de Vito?”

“He’s an old friend of my father’s.”

“Vincent de Vito of San Francisco—alias Vincent Mosconi, alias Vito Corso.”

“I wouldn’t know about any aliases.”

“But he works with your father, using his criminal contacts.”

“I wouldn’t know about any criminal contacts. He is just a friend.”

“That must be very convenient, having a known organized crime figure on tap for a favor. Did he help you and your father set up the theft from the National Gallery last month?”

Nell’s expression turned stony. “I’ve never heard a more outrageous and ungrounded set of lies. Does speculation pass for field research these days at the FBI? If so, Agent Fuller, I can see why we haven’t won the war on terrorism yet.”

“We’re losing nothing.” The federal agent tossed a set of photos on the coffee table. “Take a look at those surveillance photos, Ms. MacInnes. They show your father and Vinnie de Vito having dinner at the Golden Szechuan restaurant in Berkeley last week.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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