MADALYN REESE

NO PLACE TO HIDE

INTRIGUE ...

Madalyn Reese
No Place To Hide

Аннотация

It began with twisted words, then escalated to threatening photographs that revealed dangerous intentions.But Emma Toliver would sooner take her chances with some stalker than play safe house with the man who'd tried to destroy her once…even as he'd seduced her. A man now prey to the same unseen evil - and her unwanted protector….Anthony Bracco had traded Armani for Levi's and corporate raiding for redemption. Still, Emma couldn't be sure if the passion between them was pure…or plot. For she'd trusted Anthony before, only to suffer heartache. Could it be her greatest danger wasn't the enemy outside…but the enemy within?

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 80

How much worse could this get?

First a stalker, and now Anthony Bracco in her home.

There was still anger simmering between them, and no matter how many ground rules they hid behind, it would eventually boil over.

Worse, anger wasn't the only thing simmering. Already she'd felt that familiar separation of brain and body. Her brain would tell her to keep away, but her body couldn't possibly get close enough.

And now, sitting beside him, she could feel herself responding. Emma had never understood why he affected her this way, but apparently it was something that would never change or lose its power.

When his eyes had fallen to her mouth a few minutes ago, she'd known she wouldn't have rejected his kiss. Struggling to pull herself together, she rushed into the hallway with Anthony in pursuit.

With no place to hide…

Dear Reader,

This is definitely a month to celebrate, because Kathleen Korbel is back! This award-winning, bestselling author continues the saga of the Kendall family with Some Men's Dreams, a journey of the heart that will have you smiling through tears as you join Gen Kendall in meeting Dr. Jack O'Neill and his very

special daughter, Elizabeth. Run—don't walk—to the store to get your copy of this genuine keeper.

Don't miss out on the rest of our books this month, either. Kylie Brant continues THE TREMAINE TRADITION with Truth or Lies, a dicey tale of love on both sides of the law. Then pick up RaeAnne Thayne's Freefall for a haunting, mysterious, page-turner of a romance. Round out the month with new books by favorites Beverly Bird, who's Risking It All, and Frances Housden, who'll introduce you to a Heartbreak Hero, and brand-new author Madalyn Reese, who gives you No Place To Hide from her talented debut.

And, as always, come back again next month, when Silhouette Intimate Moments offers you six more of the best and most exciting romances around.

Enjoy!

Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Editor

No Place To Hide
Madalyn Reese

MADALYN REESE

has always had a cast of extras roaming through her head. Imagine her relief when she started writing and realized they were characters!

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For my Beautiful Things:

My family, my friends and Susan Litman,

whom I could never thank enough for giving me

their support, patience and guidance.

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Chapter 1

"I don't know why you insist on canary diamonds. Your skin tone needs cool colors like sapphire or deep amethyst," Emma Toliver said.

"Amethyst?" Ginny Lewis balked, her lined, pixie face crinkling with distaste. "Isn't that a semiprecious stone?"

"Ginny, it's the new millennium. It's not about showing off your money anymore. It's about showing off yourself."

"Don't give me that bunk, young lady. I want the most expensive piece you've got."

"Having a spat with Mr. Lewis again, are we?"

"He wants to buy a motor home."

"Ooh, that's serious. I have just the thing."

Mrs. Lewis leaned eagerly forward, her voice fallen to a hush. "One of your own designs?"

"Of course, but don't tell anyone. I'm supposed to be out of stock right now. This piece is fresh from Charles's hands and the only one I'll have for a while," Emma said, producing a black velvet box marked with her private design label's logo, Beautiful Things.

"My lips are sealed," Ginny said. "But I wish you'd quit running out of material. Weren't you bidding on some huge stone and metal auction thing? Please tell me you got it."

"Yes, by some miracle, we did. But it's been held up in the

insurance process forever. They always seem to have trouble with rough, uncut stones, and of course that's what we need before we can get started again."

"Quit whining and show!"

Emma lifted the lid, watching Mrs. Lewis's face light up.

"Oh, Emma… Black orchids! How did you do it?"

"Enameled gold setting, the petals are carved obsidian and lab-darkened purple jadeite. See how beautiful semiprecious stones can be?" she asked reverently, casting critical eyes on the bracelet. It was one of her favorites, a seven-inch line of miniature sensual blooms strung end to end.

The telephone drew Emma's attention from the unveiling. "I'm on phone duty. We'll haggle in a second."

"Toliver's Treasures," she said, watching Mrs. Lewis's expression turn more acquisitive by the second.

"It's me, boss lady."

Wrinkling her brow, Emma turned to see her caller standing twenty feet away, speaking on his cellphone.

"What's the problem?" she asked. Brady, her jewelry department manager, looked positively dour. As always.

"Get rid of Mrs. Lewis. We need to talk."

"If it's about the auction lot—"

"Save that argument for later. You got another e-mail from the Creep."

Emma's stomach lurched. "Lovely. Any luck tracing it?"

"None. I called the Internet people again, but if you don't call

the police today, I will."

"I don't… Never mind. I'll call as soon as I'm through."

Emma hung up and took a few deep breaths. Definitely a cheesecake in her near future. Between her crazed schedule, Beautiful Things's material shortage, constant attitude from Brady and the world's scariest e-mails, she deserved at least three pieces.

Brady was right, though. They should have reported the e-mails immediately. He and the Internet guys had done everything they could. Now she'd have to involve the authorities.

But not until she'd dealt with her friend. Putting on her game face, Emma turned and calmly fastened the orchids around Ginny's wrist. "There you go."

"Please tell me this costs as much as a motor home."

"Sorry," Emma replied, hoping she didn't sound distracted. "I'm asking twenty-five hundred. Not a penny more."

"Five thousand."

"Three. Final offer."

"Sold. But you're never going to make money if you don't take advantage of your clients, dear."

"Who says I'm not?"

Ginny's face split into a grin. "That's my girl. I don't suppose you could make a necklace and earrings to match?"

"Of course. You'll have to be patient, though. Charles and crew can't start carving until we have more jade."

"Fine by me, long as I can wear them for the motor home's

maiden voyage." Ginny shrugged.

"You're very good to me."

"Nonsense. I'm a superstitious creature. At this very counter your great-grandfather sold my grandfather his wedding set. That marriage lasted sixty-three years. Given my husband's retirement plans I need all the help I can get. And speaking of—"

"Don't start."

"I will start, thank you very much. A pretty girl like you should be married with children."

"I am married. To this store. And Beautiful Things is my baby. I barely have time to breathe, let alone start a real family, and if you don't stop harping I won't have time to fast-track your necklace and earrings, either."

"Tyrant. Keep acting this way and you'll be single forever."

"God willing," Emma replied with a wink.

Ginny clicked her tongue and bent to sign the charge slip, muttering, "If your parents were alive I'd tell them how rotten you turned out."

Pulling a tolerant but affectionate face, Emma handed over the bag and leaned forward to accept Ginny's peck on the cheek.

"No more bickering with Mr. Lewis."

"Bah. He loves it and you know it. Behave yourself," the older woman ordered, then scurried away in a waft of expensive perfume.

Emma put the charge slip in the till and faced the stairs. They loomed, beckoning her to another of the Creep's e-mailed

photographs, which would make her flesh crawl.

The Creep had been following her with a camera, and over the last six days he'd sent forty-two pictures.

Being followed was bad. The photographs were worse. But the big black Xs superimposed on her face in every shot were downright creepy. Hence the nickname.

It wasn't really necessary to look at this morning's new arrival before calling the police, was it?

No, she'd spare herself that much. Dealing with the police could turn into an all-day project, but at this point Emma didn't care how long it took. Her apartment was on the fourth floor of the Toliver's Treasure's building, and she'd already lost an entire weekend, waiting for the Internet company to track this person down.

The e-mails had stopped over the weekend, probably only because she hadn't gone out. No opportunity, no photos, right? So Friday's trip to the bank had been her last venture until this morning's coffee run, when the promise of caffeine and a crowded sidewalk had lured her from the building.

Obviously, the Creep had been waiting.

Every hair on the back of her neck prickled at the thought, and Emma's eyes narrowed. She dared whoever it was to keep this up. She'd be more than happy to introduce the Creep to the infamous Toliver temper. And her stun gun.

Squaring her shoulders, she marched for the stairs. No way would she let some whacko ruin the most important week of her

life.

But she never made it to the stairs. A few feet away those suspicious hairs snapped to full attention.

She was being watched. She could feel it.

Turning instinctively, Emma found herself eyes-to-chin with Anthony Bracco.

She had to be imagining this. Fate couldn't be this cruel.

Emma blinked and prayed the apparition would disappear. It didn't. And he was angry. Muscles along a sharp jawline pulsed like a heartbeat as he ground his teeth.

Her day now completely destroyed, Emma looked up. Anthony hadn't changed. Not male-model handsome, but close enough. His eyes were an odd, indefinable color somewhere between brown and gray, like rich, dark smoke quartz. Framing them were thick lashes even blacker than his hair, and his eyebrows had a natural, devilish arch.

How fitting, considering the man was Satan.

"What fresh hell is this?" she snapped.

"A new record," Anthony replied in his raspy, chocolatey voice. "It only took you ten seconds to quote Dorothy Parker. Get upstairs. We have a problem."

"No, we don't have a problem. You have a problem. If you don't get away from me I'm calling security."

"Go ahead. You'll undoubtedly need them in a few minutes."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Hold the tantrum, please. Believe me, if this wasn't urgent

I wouldn't be here. Go. God forbid one of your precious clients should discover how awful you really are," Anthony said, forcibly turning Emma and propelling her up the stairs.

Emma felt as if she'd been struck by lightning. She was numb everywhere but her waist, where Anthony's hands transferred their heat through thin yellow silk.

What was he doing here? This was insane.

Arriving at the top, Emma batted his hands away and turned into her office, barely giving him time to step inside before she slammed the door.

"What do you want?"

He ignored her to hurry behind the desk. Too stunned to react right away, she stared. What a waste of gorgeous male. Wide shoulders in an expensively shiny white T-shirt, and tight, narrow hips in button flys. Sinful. He was even more gorgeous than he'd been two years ago, when he'd lived in hand-made Italian suits.

But she hadn't fallen hopelessly in lust with the man for his looks. It was the way he crackled with energy that had initially caught her attention. In second place was his self-confidence. She'd learned too late it was actually cold, hard arrogance, but he'd been enchanting up till then.

Emma's temper gauge shot straight to the red when Anthony shoved her chair out of the way and started fiddling with her computer.

"What the— All right. That's it," Emma spat, lunging for the telephone.

In one deft move Anthony caught her wrist, then quickly captured the other as she went for the security button.

A brief, futile tugging match ensued, ending when Anthony landed on the desk chair with her in his lap. Glaring at him, she warned, "Get your hands off me."

"Mmm," Anthony murmured, far too close to her mouth, "just like old times."

His eyes were hooded as he watched her. Waiting. Daring her to do her worst.

Much as she'd love to accommodate him, her hormones had other ideas. Damn the man. He had some colossal nerve, showing up here like he owned the place. He'd disappeared two years ago after trying to seize control of her store, and she'd prayed daily that he'd stay gone.

No such luck, but she had to be careful. If she mashed him into a pulp he'd probably sue. Leaning away, she said, "There'd better be a point to this."

"There is. Look," he ordered simply, swiveling the chair so Emma faced the computer monitor.

On the screen was the Creep's latest e-mail, a picture of Emma in the yellow dress outside the local coffee shop. And as usual, there was a big black X superimposed over her face.

Forgetting herself for a moment, she slumped in his arms. "I was only outside for three minutes."

"That's all it takes."

Emma turned to lock narrowed eyes with Anthony. Seeing

a certain smugness there she tried to wriggle free, demanding, "How did you know about the e-mails?"

"Your Internet provider called the FBI for help. How long has this been going on?"

"Let me go. And how did you know my Internet—"

"Would you stop digging your bony butt into my thigh? That hurts."

Her temper blew and Emma pushed at him, grinding the heels of her hands into his chest.

"Ow! You—" Anthony said, cut off by Emma's yelp as he let go.

Silk slid on denim, and she would have landed on the floor if he hadn't grabbed her arms. But as soon as she had a foot on solid ground she stumbled away, choking on angry words.

Anthony followed, asking, "Why didn't you report these? If you don't start explaining I'll tie you to the couch."

"Try it, Anthony. You think I fought dirty last time? Try me again and see what happens."

"A deliberately provocative statement. I might take you up on that offer someday."

"Lucky me."

Anthony huffed out a laugh. "Okay. We've established that I still hate you and you still hate me. Very productive. Can we move on now? I have a lot to say and not much time to say it."

"Start with how you knew my Internet service called the FBI."

"I've been getting e-mails like this for three weeks," he said.

“Pictures, mostly.”

“Yeah? And?”

“And I don’t have time to explain everything right now, so close your mouth and listen. We’re in trouble, Emma. The FBI’s right behind me and you need to promise you’ll cooperate.”

“Oh, I’ll cooperate, all right. Just as soon as you get out of my store.”

“I can’t. They’ll be here in a second. I’m under FBI protection until this guy’s behind bars,” he told her.

He looked sincere, but Emma knew that meant less than nothing. He’d looked sincere last time, too.

“Do you think I’m stupid? I have no reason to believe a word you’ve said.”

“You’re impossible.”

“I’m impossible? After what you tried to pull last time you were here, I think I’m entitled to a little skepticism. So why don’t you tell me what you’re really doing here? And cut to the chase so I don’t have to waste my time foiling your evil plans again.”

“Fine. We’ll do it your way.”

Emma’s eyes widened as Anthony began pulling his shirt from his jeans. “What are you—are you insane? If you think I’m going to—”

“You asked for this,” Anthony said, dragging the T-shirt over his head, leaving his hair a shiny mess. “Just remember I tried to be reasonable.”

He locked eyes with her again, twisting around to expose the

back of his left shoulder. Raw challenge shone from those eyes, and Emma felt her anger seep away in a moment of breathless regret. Why could she never rein it in until it was too late?

Disobeying every order issued in her head, Emma's eyes fell to Anthony's back.

This couldn't be happening.

But the gruesome evidence on Anthony's left shoulder was all too real.

A scar. A very big, very fresh, X-shaped scar.

Chapter 2

"Oh my God."

When those words wheezed from Emma, Anthony knew he'd gone too far. He'd come prepared for the temper, but he'd forgotten an actual human being lurked beneath its fire.

A brilliant diamond quivered on her right ring finger, shooting rainbows as she lifted her hand to touch his back.

"Don't. It itches like sin."

Emma's normally glowing complexion blanched, almost matching her icy green eyes as she jerked her hand away. "What happened?"

"Self-explanatory. Are you ready to listen now?"

"Yes. No. I…"

At the sudden unfocused look in her eyes, Anthony dropped the shirt to grab Emma. "Oh Lord. Don't faint."

He registered the feel of ropy muscles beneath cool skin and felt a surge of powerful disappointment. This wasn't how he remembered her at all. The Emma Toliver he recalled had been lusciously ripe and tough as nails. She was still beautiful, but she looked wrung out. Tired.

Tired was bad. When she reached her limits, Emma always came out swinging and God help her target. The fight wouldn't end until she was the only one left standing.

He should know. He was still recovering from the last time

he'd backed her into a corner.

As she blinked away the haze, Anthony regrouped. "Emma, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you, but I need your attention."

"Mission accomplished," she said, shaking off his hands to swoop down for his shirt, then slam it against his chest.

Anthony grunted at the impact and while he hurried back into the garment, she said, "I understand this is serious, and I can only imagine how you ended up with an X on your back. Finally messed with the wrong person, did you?"

"Is that your version of 'I told you so'?"

"That's beneath my level, Bracco. I'll cooperate with the FBI, but if you set foot in my store again, I swear to God I'll—"

"Hold it," Anthony interrupted. "If you'd stop ranting for three seconds I'll explain why I came here alone."

Emma's haughty, expectant expression made him want to howl. Letting the sarcasm flow, he said, "In case you weren't aware, you have a tendency to fly off the handle, and the people trying to catch this guy don't deserve the wrath of Emma. They're stretched so thin they can barely cover me, let alone produce a second team for you. So that means you're stuck with me, and there's something I want to say before this gets any worse."

Hands on hips now, Emma inquired, "What?"

Against his wishes, his body recognized that parts of her were still as lushly feminine as he remembered. The pose stretched silk across her breasts, highlighting a wispy lace bra barely containing the objects of many an unwanted erotic dream over the last two

years.

Oh God. Total disaster. Why had he let himself panic like this? The FBI would protect her. He didn't have to, and she wouldn't let him anyhow.

But making sure she was safe wasn't the only reason he'd come. The agents didn't need her attitude, so he had some work to do before they got here. After a deep breath, he said, "I apologize."

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Why?" he asked, praying his reaction to her wasn't visible.

"I figured you must be gravely ill if you're apologizing. Or is that scar finally showing you the error of your ways?"

He couldn't help it. "And I suppose you consider your own actions completely justified."

"Let's compare, shall we? You tried to seduce me out of my store. I simply allowed you to tie your own noose. I'd say I was completely justified."

"You would say that. All I wanted was the businesses, Emma. Nothing personal."

He watched as a red taint bled up her neck into her face. "You made it personal."

"All right, let's stop this," Anthony said. "If it makes you feel better, I admit what I did was unforgivable. I was an ass, and believe it or not, I am truly sorry. Are we understood?"

"Yes. I get what you're saying. Now that you need something, you're trying to kiss up."

“Fine. If that’s the way you want it to be, so be it. But I refuse to spend this entire investigation sniping with you, so either we agree to act like adults or we don’t speak at all.”

“Can I have that in writing?”

Anthony squeezed his eyes shut and visualized throttling that long, skinny neck. Ten minutes. That’s all it took Emma to drive him nuts.

How was he supposed to survive this? First some psycho calling himself the Doppelgänger had sworn vengeance for the companies Anthony had chopped up. And now he was face-to-face with the biggest wrong he’d ever committed.

All he wanted to do was find the nearest corner and die quietly of guilt. But no. Dop meant to punish him, and making him deal with Emma again definitely took the cruel and unusual prize.

And he’d just made it harder on himself by lying straight to her face.

Coward. She’d find out how he knew about those e-mails and tear him apart with her bare hands. And considering this newest nightmare she’d been sucked into, he wouldn’t blame her one bit.

Watching Emma stare at him with one eyebrow raised, Anthony marveled at his own stupidity. God help him. Lies told in the heat of the moment were the least of his worries. There were other lies she could uncover. Like what had really happened two years ago.

He had to tell her. He owed her that much. But how did you tell someone they’d been nothing more than a convenient pawn,

a casualty in the cold war between you and your father?

Still not the worst of it. If she found out what he'd done more recently, he was a dead man. Why couldn't he have left well enough alone?

Footsteps sounded in the hall, preempting self-recrimination hour. He knew who was outside the door: a group of seriously unhappy FBI agents who were about to encounter one of the bigger challenges of their careers.

They didn't even knock. Jim DeBerg came in first, followed by Layne Crawford and Walter Hornsby. The three of them looked at Anthony accusingly, while Emma's angry expression shifted to tolerance.

Stepping forward, she seized control. Huge surprise. "Good morning. I'm Emma Toliver. You must be the FBI."

She shook hands with Jim first, Anthony's best friend and a man very young to be where he was in the bureau. Thirty years old, and already in the Behavioral Sciences Unit.

Jim introduced himself. "Special Agent Jim DeBerg. I don't know how much Anthony told you, but we've certainly got a mess on our hands, Miss Toliver."

"So I hear," she acknowledged, turning to Layne Crawford.

Layne scared Anthony to death. She was a tiny little thing, sixtyish, with brilliant blue eyes that never stopped watching. Jim had summoned her a week ago and Anthony still knew nothing about her. He didn't even know what position she held in the Bureau, if she even held one. All he knew was that she loved to

make people talk.

Not a big fan of talking himself, Anthony avoided her at all costs.

He waited for Layne to introduce herself by title, but she gave only her name and stepped back in deference to Walter Hornsby. A giant in his mid-thirties, his job was to coordinate the practical aspects of the investigation—security and communication with the police.

Hornsby gave his usual muttered greeting while Anthony watched Emma. She was an expert at reading people, but this time he could see her struggling. Good luck. He would enjoy watching her realize these three lived to annoy.

Jim began. “Do I need a warrant to look at your computer?”

“Not necessary,” Emma responded. “Be my guest.”

While Jim clicked through messages, Layne’s eyes burned into his skull. Silence thundered through the room until she finally glanced at Emma.

“Miss Toliver, is there somewhere I can speak to Mr. Bracco in private?” she asked.

“No one will disturb you in the boardroom,” Emma said, “Anthony knows where it is.”

He led Layne from the room like a man leading his own executioner to the gallows. Two doors down on the right was the boardroom, brightly lit by wide, paned windows and dominated by a long walnut table. The room smelled of aged wood, and the old leather chair he slumped into creaked beneath his weight.

Layne sat primly, ankles crossed. She stared at him awhile before saying, “You were placed in protective custody for your own safety. I thought that was understood.”

“It was.”

“Interesting, as you completely disregarded our cautions this morning. Jim said you were already halfway here by the time he called you with the Internet service info, so I’d dearly love to hear how you knew about Emma’s e-mails before we did.”

“I’m psychic?”

Layne smiled. “She’s a beautiful woman. Lovely bone structure, and all that delightful blond hair. Given your rather… colorful past together, I would assume there’s unfinished business.”

Anthony bobbed his chin, neither denying nor admitting anything.

“You’re right,” Layne said. “It doesn’t matter, does it? But I must insist you share your insight with me. Frankly, I’m concerned I might have missed something in your e-mails.”

Knowing he was being played with, Anthony lied, “It wasn’t anything concrete. There was a lot of publicity on what I did to Emma, and Doppelgänger could have seen it. Then Jim was talking about sympathetic symbols, someone this guy might relate to as one of my business victims, and it got me thinking. That’s all.”

Layne shocked him by uttering two syllables that crisply defined her disbelief. “Pardon my French,” she added as an

afterthought. “But I wasn’t born yesterday. Tell me the truth or I’ll start digging. You know I’ll find…something.”

Purposefully mirroring Layne’s speech patterns, minus the French, he asked, “Hypothetically speaking, if I admitted I’d found out about the e-mails in a less…intellectual manner, would you find it necessary to inform Emma?”

“That remains to be seen.”

“Why are you threatening me? I’m not the criminal in this equation. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Excuse my need to poke holes in your reasoning, but there’s a very dangerous man out there who disagrees,” Layne said. “In his mind you’ve done many things wrong. Now, I fully appreciate the fact that you’ve turned your life around, and believe me, I applaud and respect you for it. But if you hide things from us we can’t move forward.”

With a sigh of defeat, Anthony said, “I have an insider here at the store. Charles, Emma’s goldsmith.”

Layne’s brows shot to her hairline. “Dare I ask why?”

“I tried to call Emma about four months ago. She was out so I got Charles instead, and we talked. I told him the truth about what really happened back then, and it sorta developed into something else. Anyway, Brady told him about the e-mails this morning, and Charles called me. You were gone. Jim was out. I panicked.”

Ignoring his admission, Layne asked, “Sorta developed into what, exactly?”

Anthony rubbed his eyebrows. “Emma didn’t have enough

capital to get this auction lot of metals and stones she needed for Beautiful Things, so Charles and I rigged her bid. I've got about half a million sunk into her design label and she doesn't know."

Layne was silent for a decade or so, then observed, "You can't help yourself, can you? Emma's a proud woman. If she finds out she won't be amused."

"No, she won't. After what happened two years ago you can imagine what she'll think, but I took measures to make sure she'd never find out."

"Is there a chance she'd understand why you did it?"

"Are you kidding?" Anthony asked. "I had my reasons, but at the time I didn't know any of this would happen. So what's done is done. There's nothing I can do about it now."

"Agreed. However, we have a problem. If we're to continue baiting this Doppelgänger creature—"

Anthony interrupted, "No way. Forget it. I may not care much for the woman, but I can't condone using her as bait. Besides, sooner or later her temper will take over and she'll run for the hills. Maybe that's for the best."

"You cannot allow that to happen. This is a game for him, Anthony. A sick, twisted game. He's become fixated on Emma and we need to maintain his target area—the store—in order to trap him. If it closes or she leaves, he'll believe we've cut off access, and I don't want to imagine what might happen next. However, Jim, Walt and I have better things to do than play referee between you and Emma. That means you have an

occupation now—to ensure the store stays open and she stays here, come hell or high water."

"I can't!" Anthony argued. "She hates me."

"Then I guess you'd better remedy that, hadn't you? Whatever you have to do to keep her here, you'll do."

"No way. It won't work. You haven't witnessed her in action, Layne. If you want my honest opinion, Emma might be put to better use. Get her talking to this guy on the Internet. She'll have him crying for his mommy inside of an hour."

"Interesting, but let's put it this way. Either you keep Emma here or I'll tell on you."

Anthony ground his teeth. "Speaking of sick, twisted games…"

Layne smiled.

Left alone with Jim and Walter, Emma worried at a thumbnail while the two men crowded over a file on her desk.

This was insane. Absolutely insane. One minute she was stressed over business and now this. And no one seemed too interested in telling her anything.

Taking matters into her own hands, she slipped behind the agents to see what was in that file.

Neither of them objected as she watched them flip through printed-out e-mail photographs of Anthony. There were twenty or so, and it turned Emma's stomach to see the big black Xs over his back in every shot.

Don't think about it. If she thought about it, she'd lose more

than her cool.

But she couldn't believe her eyes. Not a single suit in any of them. And in all the pictures, Anthony's hair was much longer than it was today. He hadn't shaved, either.

Anthony scruffy? What the heck was going on?

She had to admit the fresh-out-of-bed look was no insult to the eye, but back then, Anthony had always been preening, his appearance like an arsenal for corporate warfare.

The smile was his nuclear warhead and the scruff would steal some destructive force.

The scruff was gone now, but her curiosity was on full alert. If he was gearing up for a return to Bracco Inc., his father's Chicago-based acquisitions company, he wouldn't be running around looking like that. And Toliver's Treasures was gossip central. It seemed inconceivable she wouldn't have heard he was back in St. Paul after his highly publicized disappearance.

But with Anthony looking like that, no one would have recognized him. He'd better not be up to something. If he was, he'd have much more urgent problems than a stalker.

And she couldn't get that scar out of her mind. The sight of it was burned indelibly on her brain, and a very unwanted pang of sympathy whispered to the surface.

Stop it, she scolded herself. Don't let him get to you again. Even in the throes of an unhappy reunion he still had that annoying aversion to explanations, and the live-wire quality was so subdued she could hardly believe he was the same person.

And what was that apology about? It was two years late but she suspected he'd actually meant it.

Something was wrong with him. Something more than a scar.

"You keep at this," Jim told Hornsby. "Write down anything that strikes you even if it seems coincidental. I'm off to depose Miss Toliver."

"Depose?" she repeated. "Will I need an attorney?"

"Nah. Is there another private space available? Someplace comfortable. We probably won't take that long but you never know."

Emma led him up a discreet staircase tucked in one corner of her store office. They emerged into what used to be a guest room but was now her design office. Passing through it, they entered a hallway and finally convened in her living room.

"Colorful place," Jim said. "Jewel tones. No surprise there, I guess."

Emma shrugged. "I love shiny things."

He sat in a Queen Anne armchair, spreading a file open in his lap. He scanned a few pages and Emma stole the opportunity to examine him more closely. Not what she might have expected an agent to look like. He was way too young, for one thing, and handsome. Not quite in Anthony's league, but handsome.

"All right," he said, catching her staring.

He raised his eyebrows and she crossed her arms over her chest. If he planned to grill her she should at least be allowed to stare.

He began again. “I’ll just index the info we already have. If we need to make corrections, go ahead and stop me. Emma Rae Toliver. Age, twenty-six. Five foot ten and I’ll spare you the weight estimate. Blond hair, green eyes. Owner, Toliver’s Treasures. Beautiful Things, too. Started the design business three years ago. No siblings. Mother, Meredith Sullivan-Toliver, deceased—let’s see. Twenty-two years ago. Aneurysm?”

Emma nodded.

Jim continued, “Father, Marshall Toliver, no middle initial. Remarried one, two, three times. Deceased four years ago. Passed in his sleep. Cardiac arrest at age fifty.”

She nodded again and Jim scratched his cheek before saying, “Says here the final Mrs. Toliver, Vivian, retained the family residence upon his death. How’s your relationship with her?”

“Fine. We don’t see each other much but we’re very close.”

“What about the other two wives?”

“We talk once in a while, exchange Christmas cards. That’s about it.”

“It doesn’t say if there were any children,” Jim stated.

“There weren’t any.”

“Why not?”

Emma fought a rising tide of irritation and answered, “My father didn’t want more children.”

“Is Vivian remarried?”

“Excuse me.” Emma stopped him. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s just a question. I might ask a lot of seemingly irrelevant things, but please answer anyway.”

“Why? Trying to catch me in a lie or something?”

The agent gave her a tolerant look. “Can I do my job without the hostility, please? I understand you’re less than thrilled to be involved in all this, but the sooner you cooperate, the sooner it’s over.”

Emma sat back in the chair, unrepentant but answering, “Yes. Vivian is remarried. Twin boys, obviously quite young. I baby-sit for them occasionally but I don’t know her husband very well.”

“Better,” Jim said. “Toliver’s Treasures. Opened 1876. Hasn’t changed much. China, silver, art and books still on the main floor, jewelry on the second floor balcony. Famous for its loyal clientele and architectural features like original oak paneling and staircase. Very beautiful, by the way. I was impressed.”

“Thank you.” Emma said. “Now will you humor me by answering a technical question?”

“Maybe.”

“If you didn’t know I was getting e-mails, why do you know so much about me?”

Jim gave her a long look. “Shouldn’t be a surprise that you were a suspect until this morning. Never our chief suspect. You don’t fit the profile. Too much to lose.”

Emma absorbed that as Jim went on. “Next, the security system. Major upgrade when you expanded the workroom for the design business. Many a service call since then. What’s the

problem?"

"If the roof component's set to full sensitivity, it goes off all the time. Thunder, planes, anything can trigger it."

"Risky. I'll have Hornsby take a look. See? Something positive. You'll get your security system fixed for free."

"Be still my heart," Emma muttered. The security system worked just fine the way it was.

Jim watched her down the length of his nose. "Sarcastic, aren't you?"

"Not usually. It's been quite a morning."

"Well, we'll try to keep this as painless as possible. And I should bring you up-to-date quickly…."

He hesitated at the sound of footsteps in the hall.

"That would be Brady," Emma explained, just before Brady hollered.

"Emma? You up here?"

She said, "He's my right hand, so I'd appreciate it if he's allowed to hear whatever you have to say."

"Saves time." Jim shrugged.

Emma got up to meet Brady in the doorway. Seeing Jim, he asked, "What's going on? Who's that? And who's the guy in your office?"

"I'll explain in a minute. Brady, this is Jim DeBerg, FBI."

"That was fast," Brady said, crossing to shake Jim's hand. Emma watched them size each other up. Jim calmly scanned Brady's dark features as Brady disguised his wary expression.

As the department manager headed for the couch, she caught Jim's eyes on his ponytail. It stretched halfway down his back, just a few inches shorter than Emma's hair. Over the years they must have gone fifty rounds about the danger of long hair in a jeweler's workroom, but Brady refused to cut it off.

Too bad his wife liked it or Emma might actually have an ally in harping about safety.

The two men muttered social niceties while Emma sat down next to Brady, groaning as Jim produced another file.

Same drill as last time. "Brady Edgar Wilson. Age, thirty-eight. Married to Tanya. No children. You manage Toliver's Treasures' jewelry department. Supervisor for Beautiful Things. I see that your father, Edgar, worked as a goldsmith here as well. Fifty years? Is that correct?"

"Yes," Brady answered. "He was very happy here."

"Must have been. Anything to add before we get started?"

"Nope."

"All right then, here's the deal."

Jim proceeded to explain that their suspect referred to himself as "The Doppelgänger," a German word meaning a ghostly double that haunts its earthly counterpart. They'd taken to calling him simply "Dop."

The situation began when Anthony was attacked just over three weeks ago, on June fifteenth. Dop claimed responsibility the next day, telling them in a virtually untraceable e-mail that Anthony was evil and Dop had marked him so the world would

beware.

"But it's been two years since Anthony was fired from Bracco and no one's heard a peep from him since," Emma said. "Why now?"

Jim said, "We're guessing Dop couldn't find Anthony before he came back to St. Paul. Very few people knew where he was and they weren't real likely to share."

"Any guess why this person's after Emma now?" Brady asked.

Emma frowned at him. Jim might be young but at least he was finally giving them details. And she couldn't help but be impressed when Jim took Brady down a couple pegs with, "Let me be honest. We're not dealing with your garden-variety stalker. It would be irresponsible on my part or yours to assume there's a logical reason for what Dop does. So what I need you to do right now is listen. Let me get through the facts and maybe something will ring a bell with you. Until then, bear with me."

Brady relaxed while Jim backed up to clarify a few things. Anthony hadn't had any warning. No e-mails like Emma was getting. They hadn't started until afterward but the pictures had been taken beforehand, showing them that Dop had been following Anthony for at least two weeks prior to the attack.

Emma couldn't help it. "Where was he when it happened?"

"At home. But he'd spent most of the night at his parents' house. Well, his mom and stepfather's, actually. I understand you've met Sophia and Geoff?" Jim asked.

"Yes," Emma said. Geoff Turner was a thoracic surgeon at

the hospital where Sophia was Director of Nursing, and they'd gotten married shortly after Anthony disappeared. "We're on a charity board together. American Red Cross."

"Oh yeah." Jim nodded. "You have a fund-raiser this Thursday night, right?"

Emma looked at Brady again. The Red Cross charity auction was a loaded topic around here. During the festivities, she was supposed to meet with Trenton Neville, one of the world's most influential jewelry merchandisers. He needed to be in St. Paul that day and he'd added the auction to his agenda so they could discuss Beautiful Things.

And he wasn't messing around. Neville planned on bidding upward of twenty-thousand dollars on whatever she'd donated.

But last week, Brady had accidentally sold the gardenia necklace earmarked for the auction, forcing Emma to sacrifice a piece she cherished. Not only was the rose necklace the first piece Charles, her master goldsmith, had ever crafted for Beautiful Things, but it held other, more personal and private meanings.

Thanks to Brady and their material shortage, she had to give it up.

And now it seemed all the arguing and juggling might have been unnecessary. With this psycho on the loose, they probably weren't going anywhere Thursday night and it was to be hoped Trenton Neville had a heart. Or a really good sense of humor.

Her temper meter nudged upward a bit. She'd seen Anthony's

mother, Sophia, a week ago at a fund-raiser planning meeting. All things considered, Emma understood why she wouldn't have said anything. But if Sophia had, the Creep's e-mails would have been reported instantly to the proper authorities.

She turned her attention back to Jim, who told them Anthony had stuck around after his parents' party, talking with his stepfather into the wee hours. He went to sleep there for a while, but around four-thirty in the morning he drove home.

Anthony remembered seeing movement in the backyard as he pulled into the garage and was jumped almost the second he stepped outside to investigate.

Dop made the first slash immediately from Anthony's neck to the base of his shoulder blade. Blood trail evidence showed Anthony had fought for an extended period of time before blood loss and a blow from his attacker rendered him unconscious.

Anthony couldn't remember Dop finishing the X. The working theory was that the second cut had been made after he'd gone down.

"Dop's calling card, presumably," Jim said.

Listening in horror, Emma felt her stomach begin to churn again. Even if Jim was an agent and had probably told worse tales, she couldn't believe his nonchalant delivery.

But she'd seen Anthony with her own two eyes. She knew the outcome, so there was no reason her stomach should be performing acrobatics.

"Problem," Jim said. "It was a new moon, and Anthony's yard

light was out. Probably not a coincidence. At any rate, the only physical description he can give us is that Dop is fast, taller than himself, and wore black clothes and a ski mask. Finding someone taller than six-two does narrow the field, but that's all we've got for a physical description."

Still in gruesome narrative mode, Jim explained that Anthony had been found two hours later by his housekeeper. The X itself hadn't been deep enough to damage bone or muscle, and the EMTs didn't find another knife wound. But time had been Anthony's enemy. The fight had cost him copious amounts of blood and his prognosis at the scene had been "grave."

Emma's stomach seized. Thank God she'd skipped breakfast. Her entire mind was flooded with a vision of Anthony lying helpless on the ground, bleeding and unconscious. He might have been ambitious and unethical, but no one deserved that.

This couldn't be happening.

And then Jim said, "The worst part was, those people who'd been at that staff party were on duty when Anthony was brought in. So everyone was shook up and Sophia was a wreck. Luckily, Geoff kept his head and was calm enough to resuscitate him."

Emma covered her mouth, feeling bile rise into her throat.

"Emma?" Jim asked sharply. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, no." Brady panicked, dragging her off the couch and explaining, "Weak stomach."

Emma stumbled along after him, limp as a rag doll. Her mind seemed to have exited stage left with the word resuscitate.

Brady herded her into the hall bathroom, propped her against a cool tile wall and asked, “Are you gonna throw up?”

Unsure of the answer, Emma bobbed her head vaguely and closed her eyes to avoid his inspection. The last thing she needed right now was Brady asking why she was so completely shattered.

But that’s exactly what she was. Horrified. And eaten alive by guilt and shame.

Her stomach lurched again at the thought that the only thing separating her from Dop was a push over the edge of sanity. They both hated Anthony Bracco with a passion, but she wouldn’t wish this on anyone.

Anthony was just a man. A bad man, but she should have listened to her therapist. It was time to let go. If she didn’t, ancient history would taint the rest of her life and she’d never get rid of her temper.

“Deep breaths,” Brady ordered. “As soon as they’re gone I’ll get you the biggest cheesecake I can find… Oh. Sorry. We’ll wait until your stomach calms down. But for now, sit down, and for once in your life, let someone else take the wheel.”

He stopped to wet a washcloth and press it to her forehead. They’d spent so much of the last three months arguing over the business that Emma almost started bawling at the simple act of kindness.

“I’m gonna go speak with what’s-his-name out there for a few minutes,” Brady said soothingly. “I’ll give you time to pull yourself together, but don’t leave this room until I come back.”

Emma nodded, hoping he was aware that Anthony was in the building. She could read between the lines. Brady looked calm, his square face stoic and watchful, but if he came across Anthony, his perpetual bad mood might turn ugly.

Chapter 3

The boardroom had fallen quiet. Only the sound of Layne's pen scratching on a legal pad could be heard while Anthony stoically picked at a brass rivet on his chair arm. He didn't know what came next, but the day had to take an upward turn soon.

But not quite yet. The door opened for Jim and Hornsby, followed by Brady Wilson, who hadn't changed one bit. He still had that snooty demeanor. Anthony had no idea why Emma put up with the guy.

"Where's Emma?" Layne asked after chilly introductions.

"Upstairs," Brady answered. "I hope you're proud of yourself, Bracco."

"Mr. Wilson," Jim cautioned, "Your personal grievances with Anthony can wait. Right now we have business to discuss."

Brady sat down at the head of the table, the snootiness evaporating before their eyes as he said to Jim, "Look. Let me be straight with you. There's a lot going on around here that you don't understand, and I'm not at liberty to share. But I have to ask that you keep Emma out of this. She's got enough on her plate."

"What do you mean?" Jim asked.

Brady looked down at the table. "Just understand that if she's not real cooperative, it's not her fault."

"So how do you suggest we make things easier?" Jim asked.

Turning his eyes on Anthony, Brady said, "Get him out of

here, for one thing."

"I'm sorry but we can't do that," Walter said. "I appreciate the warning but you need to understand what we're up against. We're trying to install a reliable security system at Anthony's house, and we've had to tear out and upgrade all the electrical wiring to support it. The same drill you went through when you upgraded the store's system."

Brady grimaced.

"Yeah. It hasn't been a small or easy task. So until that's finished we simply don't have the men available to protect two people at separate sites."

But Brady started shaking his head. "We've got security here at the store. Can't we use them?"

"No," Jim said, "They have their own job to do."

Layne said, "Anthony, why don't you step outside for a while? See what you can do to smooth things over?"

He got up while Brady protested, "It's not that simple. He can't just—"

"Give him a chance," Layne said. "Trust me, Brady, none of us wish to upset Emma. But this is the hand we've been dealt, so we've all got jobs to do, including you. You're in charge of protecting Emma's businesses during this investigation. The Bureau's job is to protect her from the suspect. But none of us can protect Emma and Anthony from each other. That's something they have to work out for themselves."

Brady sucked his teeth, took a deep breath, then shot Anthony

a glance full of defeat and frustration. “She’s in the guest bath upstairs.”

Anthony left and stood in the hall, thinking about what Brady had just done. Pretty shocking, considering what Emma might do if she found out what Brady had told them.

What did he mean by “a lot going on around here that you don’t understand”? Was it business or personal? Charles had told him Emma was ready to rip the roof of the insurance office to get at the stones they’d helped her acquire. But that would hardly be enough to send someone like Emma over the edge.

Hoping Brady was exaggerating, Anthony headed toward the office steps, and on his way upstairs he gave himself a pep talk. He wasn’t the same person he’d been back then. Not everything was win or lose. There were degrees now, and he had rules.

Rule number one: Keep life simple. That was laughable under the circumstances. Dop aside, Emma was as complicated as it got. Keeping her here wouldn’t be easy because he was already fighting the urge to run rather than tangle with her again.

The woman was flat-out vicious. He hadn’t known how vicious until that night they were supposed to sign the contracts giving him fifty-one percent control over Toliver’s Treasures.

Not for one second had he planned on actually taking the store from her. He may have been jealous of her for who she was and what she had, but he’d never intended to let things go that far. He’d singled her out for one reason and one reason only. The temper. He’d been counting on her to use it. But not the way she

had. She was the one who'd made things personal.

When he got to the apartment that night, he found candles, champagne on ice and Emma in a filmy black silk dress that didn't hide one dang thing. And she'd stroked his ego, thanking him for solving the crisis he'd created.

He should have seen it coming—should have known she'd mercilessly use their powerful attraction against him the same way he'd used it against her. Giving him hungry looks and touching him, whispering things that made his blood roar after ten days of a strict hands-off policy.

She'd ripped his original plan completely off the rails. Made him believe, if only for a few minutes, that he could pull it off. Get what he'd come for, and keep Emma and the store, too.

By the time dinner was over, she'd had him so drunk on his own power, and so beyond ready to rip that dress off with his teeth, he'd never considered he might already be in her temper's grasp.

Idiot. Just before she'd nuked him, the only thing on his mind was feeling her beneath him, making her surrender everything until his greed for Emma Toliver had been sated.

And nuke him she had. One nanometer away from a kiss and she'd punched him so hard his jaw was sore for weeks afterward.

Then she'd started yelling, things that were carved into his skull to this day. Sadistically awful things, like he destroyed companies to make him feel as powerful as his father.

One ego brutally murdered. Granted, it had needed killing.

But for a couple weeks, he'd refused to relive what she'd said. Why should he? Emma hadn't really known anything about him. She couldn't understand the pressure he'd been under or the hell his father put him through. She'd been his ticket out of the war with Maxim Bracco, and another casualty had meant nothing to him. Especially a casualty who had a fiercely loyal clientele, a perfect life and a respectable business to run.

She'd made a fool out of him, and since that's what he'd singled her out to do in the first place, it shouldn't have hurt quite so much. Somehow those moments where he'd believed he could defeat his father and win Emma had never completely gone away, despite the nuking. And her judgment of him hadn't been exactly accurate, but she'd been right enough that two years later he still judged himself by it.

Anthony took a deep breath and let it out. Sometimes it floored him to remember the way he'd been. He couldn't even conceive of that mind-set anymore and he'd spent most of the last year trying to make up for his former life, donating time, money and brain power to the people he'd hurt.

Emma had been a problem, though. He'd had no idea what to do about her. Eventually the guilt goaded him into picking up the phone and the rest was history. Charles had been a godsend. When he'd called about that material auction, it seemed like the perfect solution: a way to make amends without having to see her again.

Face it, pal, he told himself. You're scared of her. And if that

auction comes back to haunt you, you'll have no one to blame but yourself.

Which reminded him of rule number two: Never take yourself too seriously. Also laughable. Between Jim and Emma, there wasn't a slug's chance in a salt mine he'd be allowed to regrow the ego.

And in light of the reunion with Emma, Anthony wouldn't even touch his third rule: No women for a while. Now that he'd seen her again, his sacred, final law was dead as a doornail. He might be afraid of her, but she owned him.

Reaching the top of the staircase, Anthony hesitated, finding himself in an office that hadn't existed two years ago. It wasn't really a surprise that the business was invading her living space, nor that it was right next door to her bedroom.

Don't peek. Get your mind right before you go any farther.

Pressing fingertips to his forehead and grimacing, Anthony tried not to look. But he couldn't help himself. He peeked into her bedroom, and all he could see was that evil black dress.

It took more than one deep breath to clear the image from his mind. The war is over, he told himself. You don't have to be like your father anymore. You can't. You learned the hard way. Now be a real man and face the music.

Keeping his eyes out of her bedroom, Anthony moved on down the hall to knock on the bathroom door. "Emma, let me in."

"Go away."

"I'm not going away. In fact, I'm pretty certain you'll have

houseguests for the foreseeable future."

There was no response.

"Are you gonna make me stand out here all day? What if one of your employees comes upstairs?"

That did it. "The door is open, Einstein."

Anthony drew one more deep breath and turned the knob. Stepping inside to find her slumped on a brocade bench, he said, "My mother did teach me some manners, you know."

The jade eyes turned on him and for a moment Anthony hardly recognized her. She seemed shrunken. Vulnerable. And white as paper. He'd never seen her this way and he abruptly realized why Brady was so concerned about Emma.

Not until that moment had he ever realized how much he relied on Emma Toliver being evil. It was easier to justify what he'd done to her when he thought of her as a witch.

Blowing out a breath, Anthony leaned against the door and stuck his hands in his pockets. He needed to get her talking, so he said the only thing that came to mind. "Did Jim upset you?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"Neither would I, but tell me anyway."

Emma bit her bottom lip, an action Anthony remembered well. She always did that when trying to control her temper. After a pause, she said, "He told me what happened to you."

"Jim has a tendency to be blunt. I'm sure the truth isn't half as bad as what he told you."

"It doesn't get much worse than nearly dying, Anthony."

“No, you’re right. It doesn’t. But you can see for yourself I’m fine. No harm done other than the obvious.”

“How can you be so…”

Emma trailed off and fiddled with the big diamond on her right hand. Feeling relatively safe—safe enough to let his guard down a bit—he soothed, “I’ve had more time to deal with this than you have. Believe me, a week ago I wasn’t quite so flippant.”

Keeping her eyes on the gem, Emma nodded. “You’re moving in?”

“I believe so. We’ve been hopping from one hotel to the next because they’re still installing a security system at my house. Here, everything is contained under one roof, needs-wise.”

“Yes, everything of mine. What happens if you need to work?”

“I don’t work. My former life as a lecherous, corporate-raiding swine was very profitable.”

He’d given her the perfect opportunity for sarcasm, but she didn’t take it. Instead, she said, “How’s your mother? She must have been terrified.”

“She was, but Mom’s resilient. So far she’s doing all right. And she’s got Geoff. My stepfather, in case you didn’t know.”

The platinum head nodded, but Emma still wouldn’t look at him. “Do you like him?”

“Yes. I didn’t always. We’ve gotten to know each other better, though, and that helps.”

“I suppose saving your life helped, too.”

Anthony grunted out a laugh. “Yeah, that helped, too.”

He wondered about this gentle probing she was conducting. Asking after his mother was the last thing he would have expected. But he could handle this. In fact, it would almost seem restful if the subject wasn’t so dire.

He shouldn’t have relaxed. The next probe was not gentle.

“You said ‘former life.’ Are you asking me to believe you’re no longer a lecherous, corporate-raiding swine?”

“I’m not asking you to believe anything.”

Emma finally looked up, and to his relief there was color in her cheeks. Not the blazing, angry stain he’d learned to fear, just an innocent, healthy glow as she said, “Try to understand. As much as I’d love to blame you for this, I know you’re not really responsible for Dop’s actions.”

Anthony raised his eyebrows. Someone had been in therapy. She said, “But you and the FBI can’t be here. I’ve got a storeful of employees who’ll be in danger if I stay. And I know you want to scream every time I say this, but my clients are like family. I can’t see any other solution than to leave. If we’re gone, nothing will happen.”

A silent curse echoed in Anthony’s head. She’d already made up her mind, and it wouldn’t be easy to sway her now.

“You can’t leave,” he said, buying time to come up with some leverage. “Mom said you have a Red Cross thing Thursday night. And there’s a rumor going around that some jewelry honcho will be there to see a design that might earn you a patent. Well, it

wasn't a rumor. Layne told me."

"How did she know that?"

"I wish I knew. She scares me senseless. I haven't gotten away with any of my usual tricks since she showed up," Anthony said, only half-joking.

"Liar. You managed to get here, didn't you?"

"Yes, but she probably let it happen. Look, I know this situation has to be overwhelming, but if you turn your intelligence on it, you might prove to be a valuable asset to—"

Oops. Anthony thudded to a halt at the sight of her hostile glare. He'd attempted to call on her pride, and she'd seen through him in seconds.

"Nice try," she muttered as he backpedaled, crouching in front of her to make eye contact she couldn't evade.

"If you run we'll never catch him."

"Run? That's your department. I'm protecting people because I care what happens to them, not saving my own a—"

"Emma." He cut her off, his eyes involuntarily dropping to her mouth. Blood pounded through his veins and a slow breath escaped as Emma's own eyes mirrored the action a moment later.

He had to get out of here. The attraction still had him in a stranglehold. If she did that again he wouldn't be able to stop himself from doing what he itched to do. Touch her. Feel her cool skin heat as his hands explored.

But if he did it, Emma would leave. Layne would find her, tell her about Charles and that auction, and then Emma would

hunt him down.

"Listen," he said, starting again. "I know you're scared right now, but you need to understand something about Dop. If he feels you've cut off access, he'll take his frustration out on someone important to you. Or he could pick another victim who doesn't have the resources we do. How will you feel if that happens?"

She scratched at an eyebrow with a long pink nail, and the scar on his shoulder burned in response. Pushing harder, he added, "I know you don't trust me, and frankly, I don't blame you. But I haven't been idly sitting by and letting this happen. I've learned there are ways of surviving the FBI, and if you're not careful, your perverse nature might find it amusing."

"Jerk."

"Sorry, but I'm sick of being serious all the time. So how about this? We could work out some ground rules so we know how to act around each other."

"Can I ask you something first?"

"Can I stop you?"

Emma gave him a pained look and fired. "Is this whole attitude adjustment a near death epiphany or what? Because I find it very disturbing."

"There you go, sugarcoating everything again."

"Answer the question, smart aleck."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Why won't you ever talk about anything?"

“Isn’t this where the nun smacks our knuckles for bickering in class?”

Emma sagged against the wall, looked up at the ceiling and shook her head. “I’d forgotten how irritating you can be.”

Relaxing a bit, he scooted her over on the bench and sat beside her. “So you’ll stay?”

“As if I have a choice,” Emma answered, leaning away. She still couldn’t believe this was happening.

How much worse could it get? On top of everything else, a stalker and Anthony Bracco had been added to the pile. Not to mention having him in her home, along with the FBI.

And was she supposed to be buying his act? He’d deflected the question about his attitude the same way he used to deflect any question that hit too close to his schemes. She wasn’t blind. He might have changed, but not in any significant way.

All the same, he was playing the responsible role quite well, warning her about Dop and what he might do if she left.

But whether Anthony had changed or not, there was still anger simmering between them, and no matter how many ground rules they hid behind, it would eventually boil over.

And anger wasn’t the only thing simmering. He hadn’t been here more than an hour, and twice already she’d felt that familiar separation of brain and body. Her brain would tell her to keep away, but her body had its own ideas.

Even now, sitting beside him, she could feel herself responding. His energy may have been subdued but it was still

there, if a little different. Emma had never understood why he affected her this way, but apparently it was something that would never change or lose its power.

When his eyes had fallen to her mouth a few minutes ago, she knew she wouldn't have rejected his kiss. Any form of comfort would have been welcome, but she must be losing her mind if she considered Anthony Bracco an acceptable alternative to cheesecake.

Struggling to pull herself together, Emma answered, "I need time to think."

"How much time?"

"You know what? Forget it. I can't believe I'm even speaking to you. I'm going back to work."

She rushed into the hallway with Anthony in pursuit, urging, "Emma, you can't pretend this isn't happening."

Just as he figured, reasoning with her was a waste of breath. By the time Emma reached the stairs leading to the sales floor a professional smile was plastered on her face.

Denial. Complete and utter denial.

Emma's attitude worried him, but Anthony knew he'd dodged the first bullet. It took him a moment to figure out how he'd accomplished that. And then he realized something vital as he watched her shake hands with an older gentleman and lead him gently toward a counter.

Quiet moments were the enemy. If Emma was angry, she'd run, just like he always did. Except she'd run straight downstairs

to work, where he was supposed to keep her. And since angering Emma Toliver seemed to be Anthony's specialty, Layne might never get a chance to deliver on that threat.

"Where'd she go?" Jim asked from down the hall.

Anthony turned, gesturing toward the counter. "Downstairs."

"We'd better give her some time to recover before we take it any further. Hornsby'll be talking to store security in a minute. I'll have to help with the employees, but let's have a talk first."

Jim closed the door as Anthony sank into a creaky chair. "So," the agent said simply, his eyebrows raised.

"Would you accept a bribe in lieu of this particular conversation?" Anthony asked.

"Not on your life."

"Don't even think it. You know why I'm off women."

"Yeah, you screw up and run away," Jim said. "Been doing it as long as I've known you. But Emma's got a lot going for her. She's smart, gorgeous and doesn't take any of your crap. Not too many women around with all those attributes."

"There's one key factor missing in your summation. She's a witch of the first order. You want her? She's all yours."

"Generous offer. I'd accept, but you'd probably rearrange my anatomy if I did. Anyway, Layne told me what you and Charles have been up to. Can't help thinking you went through an awful lot of trouble for someone you can't stand."

"I didn't do it for her," Anthony told him. "It was my version of making amends, which, translated, means I did it to make myself

feel better."

"Okay." Jim sighed. "But you have to keep her here somehow. Are you grasping the irony? You, the speed and distance record holder, have to keep someone else from running away."

"Yes, one of those moments I'm convinced God's up there laughing."

Jim didn't bite. "You know, if you'd talk about things once in a while, you'd be better off. Emma's father wasn't exactly saint material, either. Maybe if you explained what happened—"

Giving his friend a wry look, Anthony interrupted, "Sorry, but I like to keep the number of people trying to kill me down to a bare minimum."

"Ah, yes, here comes the sarcasm. I'll stop. So back to business. We're about to get a whole lot more aggressive."

"How?"

"Several ideas are on the table. Dop's gotta make a mistake somewhere along the line. We'll help him do that."

Anthony held up his hands and waited expectantly.

"You and your results mentality," Jim complained.

"Well, it's a little hard to be patient, Jim. He's already blown every profile you've come up with. It's like he's deliberately changing course just to throw you off base."

"You're right, he is doing that. But meanwhile he's showing us he's done time in either law enforcement or prison. I'd guess the latter. Guys in there study how we work. He's also highly intelligent, efficient and patient. When we bring him down I'll

definitely be publishing his case."

"If we bring him down."

"Oh ye of little faith," Jim commented. "Look, I need to go help Hornsby. You keep an eye on Emma. Make sure she doesn't take off on us."

"Yes, sir. Hey, wait a second," Anthony said. "What did you make of Brady?"

"I don't know yet. I'm not sure I buy his altruistic act. He grew up at the store, same as Emma, but she's holding all the reins. And Brady's wife left him a couple of weeks back. Emma doesn't know that, though, so keep quiet about it."

Anthony sighed. "Did some digging before this morning?"

"It's a sickness. I can't help myself. And speaking of which…"

"I'm going!" Anthony groused. He left Jim to his beloved cellphone, which seemed to be permanently attached to the man's ear.

Descending to the jewelry department, Anthony found Emma stubbornly immersed in work. She was still attending to the older gentleman, talking over a tray of rings.

Anthony took up position by the workroom door, receiving a flurry of suspicious looks from Emma even while she showed the utmost patience to her client. It was a learning experience, seeing her smile the way she used to when he'd first met her. Genuine. Kind. He found it hard to believe that striking face could turn so cold.

Wondering how, exactly, one got on Emma's good side,

Anthony rubbed his shoulder against the doorjamb. The itching was a constant reminder of Dop, and though the doctors said it was a sign of healing, it was yet another irritant in an already full load.

As Emma moved on to the next client, Anthony decided to do double duty. There were ways to make this easier. He'd done enough damage in her life already and now he was adding a stalker to the tally. Right now, planning might do more good than an apology that would satisfy no one.

So he took out his own cellphone and got to work, spying as Emma milled around a constantly busy sales floor.

Her state of denial began to slip when Hornsby and Brady pulled a security guard from his post. She went white, then red, but didn't interfere. That was good, Anthony supposed, although she would almost certainly take it out on him later.

She handled the next round better, showing nothing but calm as Jim made off with department heads, one by one. Emma rotated to cover their absences, and it wasn't always easy for Anthony to find an unobtrusive vantage point. He finally gave up and sat on the oak staircase as she took over the china department. It was nearly noon by then and the hot, viciously humid weather had slowed down even the most avid shoppers.

Anthony was virtually alone with her now, watching as she tidied an already pristine set of displays. He wondered what she was thinking, but didn't mind the cold shoulder. It gave him a chance to stare.

The yellow dress was straight out of a Doris Day movie—sleeveless, tailored and prim, yet somehow managing to show a mile of tanned skin. His eyes moved to her legs, where high heels, nice ankles and the curve of firm calf muscles held his interest for quite some time.

And then suddenly she was walking right toward him, like a warrior on a mission. Anthony's spine straightened abruptly at the obstinate look on Emma's face. He was unprepared for another showdown.

"You need to answer a question," she said.

He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Did you really believe I was behind this?"

"At first, yes," he said. "And you thought it was me."

"The thought did cross my mind."

"Well then, that's out of the way. How's your stomach doing? Better? Feel like lunch?"

Emma eyed him warily for a moment. "No," she said. "But I suppose if I'll be having houseguests I'd better call the grocery store."

"Already taken care of. My housekeeper will be here later with provisions. And I'll make a deal with you."

"What?"

"I'll cook if you scratch on demand."

"If I what?" she asked.

"The scar. It itches and you have long fingernails."

There was another pause, but this time Anthony could see

what she was thinking. Having houseguests was one thing. Touching him was another. They both knew they were in trouble under the enforced proximity. It only remained to be seen which one of them would slip first.

"Are you supposed to be scratching?" she asked.

"Probably not. But the deal stands."

"Fine."

"All right. Why don't you come upstairs for a while, anyway? I can scare up lunch and tell you what the FBI's been up to."

"I can't. When they keep pulling people off the floor we're short of help."

"You're also short of customers. Look, I know this is awkward, but I promise no mischief if you promise not to flirt."

"Excuse me?" Emma exclaimed indignantly.

"I'm only teasing. Lighten up."

"Easy for you to say," she muttered. "You don't have to watch your back every—"

Anthony laughed out loud at the horrified look on her face.

"What's so funny?" she chirped, then smiled sheepishly. "Man, talk about putting your foot in your mouth. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I think that's the first time I've laughed in weeks."

They started up the stairs, Emma's expression sour. "You must be pretty desperate if you're laughing at that."

Chapter 4

"A cantaloupe? That's it?" Anthony complained.

"There's some butter and mayonnaise, too," she said, watching him dig in the fridge. "I think there's some tuna fish in the cupboard and I know there's bread around here somewhere."

"Oh, good. And here I was hoping for actual food. Don't you ever eat?"

"Yes, I eat. I just don't have time to cook much of anything."

"Then my presence will serve a purpose. And it'll be a nice change from hotel food for me. If I ever see another room service tray again it'll be too soon."

"That bad? I would think hospital food would be worse," Emma said, wondering if he'd talk about the attack. Now that she wasn't quite so overwhelmed she was ready to hear the rest of the story.

But Anthony sidestepped the topic, saying, "I was only laid up for a week, then had to move into the Whitney for a night or two because Jim knew we'd have good security. After that it was the St. Paul Hotel. The rest of that second week's pretty much a blur. Painkiller fog. But that ended after Dop's last swipe."

"What happened?" she asked, sliding a cutting board toward him when he pointed to it with a knife.

Emma refused to look at the melon while he cut it.

"Nothing much," he said. "Dop drew an X on the door across

from ours. Hornsby turned the place inside out but there was no sign of him. Probably happened while we were all asleep. And then Layne decided to show up."

"You don't like her?"

Anthony shrugged a shoulder and Emma's eyes lingered on the shiny white fabric covering smooth, rounded muscle. "It's not that I don't like her. I just don't know anything about her, and Jim's being very tight-lipped. Hornsby hinted she's pretty high up the ladder, though."

"A surprise around every corner," Emma said. "But how did the FBI get involved, anyway? I mean, this place is gossipville and I never heard one word."

She snagged a piece of melon off the cutting board and nibbled, watching his arm flex as he worked. Her stare followed a line of tendon to his hand. She was an expert on male hands, after years of staring at them while fitting wedding rings on innumerable couples.

Anthony's had changed. Back then she could have sworn he got manicures, but now they looked beat-up, as if he'd been doing some sort of manual labor. Hard to believe, but scattered across the square backs, palms and long knobby fingers were calluses, scratches and a scar or two. Not too many. As with everything concerning Anthony, he seemed to have the exact amount to suit her taste.

Here we go again, she thought. Very depressing. Two years later and she was still hopelessly in lust.

But the bad things had not been forgotten. He may have changed somewhat, but it would take a heart and brain transplant for Anthony Bracco to be someone she could count as a friend. Or anything else, for that matter.

He explained. “Mom checked my e-mail while I was in the hospital and found it flooded with Dop’s pictures. Pretty hard to miss the connection between the Xs and the assault. So since Internet crime is the FBI’s jurisdiction, she had an excuse to call Jim, and he slapped a gag order on the cops right away.”

“I take it you already knew Jim?” Emma asked. With Anthony one had to fish diligently or details had a tendency to be brushed over.

“Yes. We were roommates at college and kept in touch. Luckily, he had enough pull to get my case assigned to him.”

“Does he have a specialty?”

“Criminal profiling, mostly. You know, where they try to discern personal attributes by a suspect’s behavior, and then use it to predict what he might do. Not easy with Dop.”

“Hmm,” she murmured, trying not to think about that. “And who’s Hornsby?”

“Jim’s partner. A security expert.”

“Ah. You said something about messages? Like word messages instead of pictures?”

“Yes, but not a subject matter to discuss while eating,” Anthony said, turning away from the sink. “They came in fast and furious when I was in the hospital, then dropped off that second

week. After the X on the hotel wall they all but stopped. Jim was starting to get concerned, but now we know what Dop's been up to. Following you around."

Emma sighed impatiently, "Are you ever going to tell me what he said in those e-mails?"

"There you are," Jim said from the doorway. "Brady was having a fit, thinking you'd been abducted."

Pressing one hand over her thumping heart, Emma exclaimed, "Do you have to sneak up on people like that?"

"Yes, it's a job requirement. Is Anthony bringing you up-to-date?"

"Sort of," Emma replied, sliding Anthony a piqued look.

"There's really not all that much to tell. Just the messages and the hotel thing," Anthony said.

"You're forgetting the phone calls," Jim stated. "But I need to get back downstairs. Just wanted to make sure you were up here, and hadn't run off somewhere again."

Emma raised her brows at the glowering looks that flashed between the two men, but Jim darted away before she could comment. Ignoring Anthony's irritation, she prompted, "Phone calls?"

"A few. Not pleasant. I know I'm leaving things out, but trust me, you don't need to hear the gory details."

"Isn't that my decision?"

"No, it's not. You might as well get used to guessing what's happening because no one tells the whole story. Not even Jim."

“Great. I ought to be crazy in about twenty-four hours.”

“Slacker. I was there in twelve. But then I learned I was better off. And you, the biggest worrywart on the planet—”

“Ha,” Emma said. “As if I don’t have reason. Especially where you’re concerned.”

“You’re just spoiling for a fight, aren’t you?” Anthony challenged, sliding her a plate. He had the gall to smile at her as if it were cute that she was still angry after two years.

“I wasn’t until you said that. Now that you mention it, maybe I am. I can’t believe you’re acting like nothing happened.”

Anthony hooked his foot through the rungs of a stool and pulled it up to the island counter. “Fine. You want to yell? Go ahead.”

Emma gaped at him for a moment, then said, “I hate it when you condescend.”

“I wasn’t condescending. If you want to yell, feel free. Get me mad enough and I might even yell back.”

“Oh, can I?” she asked sarcastically, annoyed that she’d actually missed the way they used to bicker over nothing. Only this wasn’t nothing.

“All right, Emma, listen. What’s done is done. Neither one of us can go back and undo what we did to each other—”

“As if I have anything to take back,” she muttered, and took a bite of her sandwich.

“You have plenty to take back. Like shooting your mouth off and being a tease just for extra revenge. Not very nice after being

Miss Don't-Touch-Me for a week."

"And that compares to what you did?"

"I never said it did. I'm just saying you didn't play fair, either."

"Do you think I'm proud of that?" she asked, wondering just how obtuse the man was.

"Are you saying you're not?"

They stared at each other for a moment, and Emma noticed Anthony squirming a bit. His shoulder itched.

Let him suffer.

"No, I'm not proud of it," she sighed. "What about you? If you could do it all over again would you bribe your way into owning my company?"

"Honestly?"

Emma let out a groan of sheer disgust. "You would!"

"In a heartbeat."

Rolling her eyes, she said, "Some people never learn."

"Right. So how would you do away with me this time?" he asked, flexing his left arm.

Emma took another bite of melon, wondering how long he could stand it before he scratched. "This time I'd probably sink you up to your thick skull in lawyers. What about you? How would you do it differently?"

"This time I'd bribe the entire building inspector's office so they couldn't tip you off."

Emma laughed. "That was your own fault, you know. Should have done your homework. The guy who told me someone must

have faked the asbestos samples was my father's best friend."

"Live and learn," Anthony said. "Almost pulled it off, though. My people were all set to come in and look busy doing nothing. You never would have known I'd set the whole thing up if you hadn't replied to their noncompliance letter with a huge temper tantrum."

"Humph. I can't believe you thought you'd get away with it. I would've gone nuts being shut down for months. And even though you said you'd pay for everything, I never would have given you controlling interest," Emma said.

He laughed and Emma's throat tightened at the sight. She'd forgotten how utterly gorgeous he could be when he laughed. Smiling was bad enough.

Emma jumped when the phone rang. She stared at it a moment, debating whether to ignore it. This conversation was far too interesting to let drop, but no one ever called during lunch unless it was urgent.

"Hang on a minute," she said, fighting the impulse to scratch his shoulder as she passed.

Anthony's shoulder was on fire but he refused to contort himself into scratch position. It would remind her of the scar, and he didn't want to erase this last half hour's progress. They'd somehow managed to joke about the past in a way he never had, not even with Geoff, his stepfather, whose sense of humor had been Anthony's saving grace during the last two years.

But then it had always been easy to talk around touchy subjects

with Emma, because she was always quick to smooth over unwanted topics herself.

Eavesdropping shamelessly as she picked up the phone, he heard her say, “Hey Brady.”

With her back to him, Anthony felt free to scowl. But it melted from his face as Emma’s voice turned sharp. “What? You’ve got to be kidding me! Put him through.”

There was a pause and the scar began to itch again in earnest as Emma said, “Hi, Peter.”

Peter was Peter Carlson, Emma’s insurer, and a huge danger to Anthony and Charles. They’d made absolutely certain the New York auction house would keep their mouths shut about enhancing Emma’s bid, but Peter’s appraised value of the stones and metals would be way more than she’d paid.

Charles had been soothing Peter for a couple months now, telling him these things sometimes happened. But Peter wasn’t on the phone with Charles this time. He was talking to Emma. And she wasn’t known for being careless.

If either one of those two got nervous enough to dig deeper into that appraisal discrepancy, Anthony and Charles were toast.

“What do you mean we won’t have them today?” Her voice was level but he could see her back tighten with tension.

Anthony, on the other hand, blew out a quiet sigh of relief. With Emma in no-excuse mode, Peter wouldn’t dare hint at another delay.

“Yes, well that’s what you said last week. I don’t care how

many stones there are. There's no way it takes three months to appraise one auction lot. With what I'm paying you… Well, are you sure your people aren't overvaluing the uncut stones? It's happened before, and our bid couldn't be that far off the value."

Oops. Holding his breath, Anthony watched as she put a hand on her hip and stretched sideways. He almost felt sorry for her.

But he could imagine how she would react if he told her the stomach problem and knotted muscles would disappear as soon as she stopped letting her career run her life.

She'd get mad if he called her on it, and that did not appeal, although he couldn't help recalling how spectacular she looked when angry. Full bottom lip red and glistening from the abuse, green eyes flashing, and that telltale blush of a steaming temper. She'd looked that way the night she'd tricked him into believing he was about to get a whole lot more than her businesses. Ravishing. A wild thing that could never be tamed.

Anthony dropped his sandwich. If she turned around looking that sexy he wouldn't be held responsible for what happened next. Taking no chances that his already battered rules wouldn't survive the next ten minutes, he cleared away his lunch mess as Emma listened to Carlson.

Since she hadn't turned around to bonk him over the head with the phone, he assumed Peter was doing some major kissing up. Good man. Emma needed it. And the sooner those stones were released, the better they'd all feel.

Maybe this afternoon he'd place a discreet call and persuade

Carlson to speed things up.

The idea was quickly retracted when Emma said, "You know what, Peter? I have seven other insurance companies begging for my money, and right now you're costing me more than premiums. So let's do this. If that lot isn't in my vault by noon on Thursday, consider our contracts terminated."

So much for discreet, Anthony thought, as Emma said a quiet goodbye and hung up. He couldn't have done it better himself.

"Problems?" he asked.

"Nothing important. Not to you, anyway. Do you want help with the dishes or can I go downstairs now?"

"After you've kept your end of the bargain, you can," Anthony said, his shoulder screaming for attention.

"What bargain?" she asked. Then she brightened and said, "Oh. Is it bad?"

"Believe me, I wouldn't ask if it wasn't. I do still have some ego left, and my shoulder's kind of hard to reach without contorting myself."

"Then you should have said something instead of trying to be all macho," she scolded.

Emma stepped up behind him at the sink, and the second her fingernails came in contact with his back, Anthony's entire body screamed for that attention. This was a bad idea, he realized, as she laid her free hand on his ribs for leverage.

Mind-numbing relief and arousal dragged a guttural moan all the way from his toes, and he could feel her smiling tolerantly

behind him.

"It's not funny," he groused.

"No, it's not," she replied with heartening sympathy. "But if I'd known it was this easy to shut you up I'd have started scratching the second we got up here."

He sneered over his shoulder at her and she smiled.

"Okay," she said, clapping him on the back. The impact of the playful smack was like flint on metal as she added, "I'm going downstairs and you don't have to spy anymore. I've got enough work to keep me busy for weeks. Couldn't take off even if I wanted to."

Anthony tightened his grip on the counter and nodded weakly. As soon as she was gone, he leaned his back against the nearest wall and slid to a crouch with his hands dug into his hair.

This was impossible. His rules had been hard enough to follow before, but now Emma had blown number three sky-high. Not only was he thinking about her, but he'd begun to want something he could never have.

He couldn't handle her. Not yet. She'd laugh in his face if he told her how he felt. Then he'd run. It was as inevitable as the sunrise.

Angry with himself for letting her affect him, Anthony stayed where he was for a while, telling himself this couldn't possibly go on much longer. Layne had a crew scouring the employee files of the companies he'd raided, and something was bound to turn up. Either that or Dop would finally make Jim's promised mistake.

Anthony's cellphone went off in his pocket and he dropped his head forward in frustration.

"What fresh hell is this?" he muttered.

But it was only Geoff, on a break between surgeries, calling to make sure he'd survived the reunion.

Emma only managed twenty minutes downstairs before the reality of the FBI hit home. She'd counted to ten at least sixty times while Hornsby personally opened and examined the day's shipments. Every one of the packages had been expected, but the man just wouldn't listen to reason.

And then Layne had strolled by the office, peering in as though Emma were on display.

Sighing and shaking her head, she toyed with the idea of writing "only doing their job" on a thousand sticky-notes and tacking them all over the place. Maybe with the added reminder, she and the FBI wouldn't be at war by dinnertime.

Dinner. What would that be like? Emma was still trying to put lunch in perspective. Yes, she'd forgotten how annoying Anthony could be, but she'd also forgotten how he could claim her total attention for as long as he darn well pleased.

Deep breaths. Many, many deep breaths. She could do this. She could handle Anthony. She could handle the FBI. It was just difficult because she wasn't used to having so many people in her space.

Her cooperative spirit faltered a bit as Jim stuck his head in the door, waving her mail in his hand. "Gotta have a look

through this before you can have it. Oh, and we've got ears on your computers, phones and your cell. We're required to hang up on calls that aren't relevant, but we gotta listen long enough to make a determination. So you might want to keep the personal stuff down to a minimum."

"Subpoena?" Emma prompted.

Jim patted the envelope sticking out of his shirt pocket. "Don't mean to be rude, Emma, but I'm a cautious guy. The courts make it harder to convict than to investigate. Relax. My bases are covered."

Emma stared after him, wide-eyed. She couldn't give a hoot if the bases were covered for court. She didn't want anyone listening to her phone calls, personal or not.

And they'd darned well better hang up if it wasn't relevant. She and her therapist could never manage office visits so they'd arranged phone sessions instead, and these days he was number one on her speed dial.

Dr. Dillon. She didn't know how she'd managed before he came along. He deserved full credit for the fact that she hadn't screamed at anyone yet.

The man was a blessing. She'd almost given up finding a replacement for her last therapist, then finally threw herself on the mercy of an Internet referral site. She'd entered all her information and the next day she got a phone call from Dillon. Simple as pie. And she thought she'd died and gone to heaven when Dillon said he'd visit her at work if it was more convenient,

since he'd just moved here from California and wasn't booked to oblivion yet.

And from the moment she laid eyes on the man, she'd known he was the right one.

Dillon was about forty or so, with animated hazel eyes that made actual contact. He was totally laid-back and equipped with a smooth, soothing voice—perfect for when she was ridiculously angry over something stupid.

She'd have to call him and warn him about the eavesdropping. And Anthony, of course. Talk about kamikaze therapy. But Dillon said forgiving Anthony was a baby step forward on her journey to get rid of her temper and she knew he was right, much as she hated to admit it.

She'd be nervous, though, wondering if someone was listening in. Would she be able to tell if they'd hung up?

Why does everything have to be so damned dramatic? Would one normal week be too much to ask?

With a cynical laugh, Emma picked up her cell phone and called, catching Dillon on his way to a conference in Wisconsin.

And she heard it. A soft buzz, then a click. Hoping those sounds meant they'd hung up, Emma started talking.

Forty-five minutes later she felt considerably better. Able to cope at least. The doctor was, naturally, concerned about her being in danger but pleasantly surprised at how she'd conducted herself.

Well, mostly. She'd been given a stern dressing-down on her

attitude toward the FBI, and she hadn't missed Dillon's quiet chuckle when she finally admitted to sympathetic feelings toward Anthony.

A big fat "I told you so" was probably in order, but Dillon didn't say it. What he did say was she shouldn't confuse lust for emotions.

Reliving that comment, Emma grimaced. It was something they'd talked about before, always concerning Anthony, and no doubt they'd talk about it again as soon as she'd calmed down. Hopefully Anthony would be gone before the next therapy session.

Dillon promised to be available at any hour until Dop was caught, and rang off with a gentle reminder not to dump on Charles if things got ugly—a mistake she often made when the pressure got too high for her to handle. She and her goldsmith as were close as father and daughter, and while Dillon thought it was good she had someone to talk to, Charles shouldn't be subjected to her tirades when she lost it.

The desire to unload the entire, insane Dop and Anthony story on Charles right then was very strong, but Emma forced herself to dive into a pile of purchase orders instead. They kept most of her brain occupied, yet one small corner continued to think about all the things she and Dr. Dillon hadn't talked about. For once. Like her father.

Marshall Toliver had refused treatment for his depression from the moment he was diagnosed, and Emma had spent most

of her life dodging his mood swings. She'd also spent most of her life compensating for his problems.

Every therapist loved this subject, but Emma was tired of talking about it. Dad was gone now, so in her opinion there was nothing to discuss. Dillon didn't agree but he never forced the issue.

He didn't have to. Emma lived it every day. A majority of the employees at Toliver's Treasures had been manning their posts since before she was born, and Emma wasn't blind. There'd been times when her father's out-of-control behavior had scared them, none of them knowing whether they'd have a job the next day.

Things had gotten better for them once Dad handed the store over to her. She loved the store. It was her entire life. But she'd only been sixteen at the time. Juggling school, boyfriends and a thriving business sometimes drove her straight over the edge.

So the employees were no stranger to the temper. They didn't deserve it, but they'd been putting up with it for years. For all intents and purposes, she'd been raised by these people, and they were the true heart and soul of this place. She owed them far more than job security, and if she didn't start managing her emotions better, one of them would leave, taking part of that heart and soul—her heart and soul—with them.

She'd already learned how devastating a loss like that could be. Brady's father, Edgar. The temper hadn't claimed him. Old age had, but he'd been more of a father to her than her own. He was the one who'd urged her to stop treating design sketches as

a “someday” hobby. Beautiful Things had been a huge risk, but she couldn’t imagine her life without that precious escape.

However, that escape was often a colossal pain in the butt. Material shortages, the capital she’d had to pour into it and the demands on her time were beginning to catch up with her.

“Why couldn’t you have had more kids?” Emma asked aloud, then felt silly. Dad couldn’t hear her any better now than he had when he was alive.

A little help would be nice, though. Here she was, up to her hairline in paperwork, stalkers, Anthony and the FBI, and on Thursday night she’d be meeting with the most influential jewelry merchandiser in the country.

No worries. Oh, but let’s not forget we’re twenty-six and have no social life, she complained to herself. Could it be any harder to find the perfect man, settle down and start a family so there’s someone to take over this place when you’re gone?

Emma rolled her eyes, then jumped when Jim trotted down the stairs wearing an impatient, vaguely excited look. “Come upstairs. We need to try something.”

“What?”

“We’re gonna send Dop a reply to this morning’s picture.”

“Excuse me?”

“Just come on,” he urged.

Reluctantly climbing the stairs, she donned a cynical expression as he added, “You never know. We might get a response, and bam, it’s over.”

They stopped at the top of the stairs, greeted by Anthony, who radiated disapproval.

"Don't even say it, Brac," Jim warned. "We've got to reopen our line of communication somehow."

"Why? Do you miss him? No juicy whacko to dissect all week?"

"Yeah. Thank God you were here to fill in," Jim replied.

Emma bit her cheek, trying not to laugh, then blinked innocently when Anthony asked, "What are you laughing at?"

"Not a thing," she told him as Jim pulled another chair behind one of several computer desks.

"All right, here's the deal," Jim began, leaning back in his chair until Emma was convinced he'd fall over. "I'm torn as to how we play this. My gut says we go for the throat. My head says we play it safe."

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