

*YOUR NEXT
BREATH*

ALSO BY IRIS JOHANSEN

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IRIS JOHANSEN

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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CHAPTER

1

BOSKAR, RUSSIA

The woman's throat had been slashed.

She must have been killed at least twelve to fourteen hours ago. The expression frozen on her face was one of horror and bewilderment as she stared up at the ceiling of this little house that she'd worked so hard to make home.

There was a name scrawled in blood on the stone floor beside her body.

"I thought you would want to know, Hu Chang," Ivan Lagoff said to the man standing beside him, staring down at the corpse. "No one else has seen the body. I'll have to notify the police, but you're the one who helped Catherine Ling set up Olena Petrov in our village." He added hesitantly, "It could be troublesome for your friend, Catherine?"

"Yes. Very troublesome. You were right to call me." He reached down and touched the gold chain with Catherine Ling's name on the ID plaque shining against Olena Petrov's gray sweater. "The police might not understand and ask Catherine awkward questions. Neither of us would want that to happen." He gently took the chain from around the woman's neck. "So we will make sure that it will

not. You did not see this chain, Ivan. You found the body, and you assumed it was a burglary.”

Ivan’s eyes widened. “That would be a lie. I could get into trouble. I checked the house, and it appears nothing was taken.”

“Then it might be wise to cause a little disarray and not be sure that nothing was stolen.” He paused. “And when I leave, you should get soap and water and scrub out that name written in blood on the stones.”

“I cannot do that.” Ivan’s eyes were fixed on the gold chain. “And you should not take that chain. The police would say that it’s evidence.”

Hu Chang nodded. “But evidence of what? So often the obvious turns out to be false and causes only confusion. You did not see this chain.” He turned toward the door. “You did not see me. You do not mention Catherine Ling’s ever having had anything to do with Olena Petrov. Do you understand?”

Ivan nodded slowly. “I understand. But I’m the head of this village, the *Lurah*. I have a duty. You ask a lot of me, Hu Chang.”

“But I also gave a lot to you, Ivan,” Hu Chang said softly. “Do you remember night you promised me anything if I’d only keep your son on this Earth? I asked nothing at the time. I’m asking now. The life of your son surely has more worth than this simple favor?”

“It’s not simple.” But Ivan did remember that night. The local doctor had given up on his Niki, but there had been rumors about the powerful properties of the brews and medicines created by the physician, Hu Chang, who was visiting him. Hu Chang had only come to their village because of the rare herbs found in the nearby forest, but he had thought he might be a gift from God. He had gone to Hu Chang on his knees. And by morning, his Niki was on his way back to health. “Perhaps for you, not for me.”

“After you’ve done what I wish, it will seem much simpler. A small gift in exchange for a gift beyond price.”

For a moment, Ivan looked down at the dead woman. Then he went to the sink and got a bucket of water and a brush. "I'll do it." He knelt on the floor beside Olena's body. "I . . . liked her, Hu Chang. In the years she was here in our village, she was always cheerful, always helping with the neighbor children. She never talked about herself, but I thought she might have once been a teacher. Was I right?"

"No. You were wrong. She was a whore." Hu Chang shrugged as he saw Ivan's shocked expression. "But that was another life, and you should remember the life she chose, not the one that was chosen for her."

"I will try." He moistened his lips. "That chain with Catherine Ling's name must be some kind of gift or present. It's strange-looking, isn't it? Sort of like a military dog tag. I never saw Olena wear it." He avoided Hu Chang's eyes as he started to wash the name scrawled in blood off the stones. "And Olena could have been the one to write this name . . ."

Ling.

The name was already beginning to blur with the vigorous use of soap and water. He scrubbed harder, avoiding Hu Chang's eyes.

"I've heard Catherine Ling can be quite deadly. She would not have reason to be angry with Olena?"

"You see, you are asking questions." Hu Chang opened the door, his voice was none the less lethal for its softness. "Which causes me to be most unhappy. Make sure no one else has reason to question my friend, Catherine, Ivan."

SANTIAGO, CHILE

Pain!

It was a trap!

Robert Jantzen felt the blood pouring from the wound in his chest as he started to run.

Footsteps behind him. Not in a hurry. They knew he was going down.

The hell he was.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out his phone.

Venable. Get to Venable.

His hand was shaking as he dialed.

Venable picked up immediately. "Jantzen?"

"Trap. They were waiting for me. I'm at the dock. Chest wound—bleeding."

Venable cursed. "Try to find cover. I'll get someone there to help you. Don't hang up. We'll trace your location."

Cover?

Jantzen looked around, warehouses, boats at the piers, bars in the distance . . . He knew he'd never make it to any of them. He wasn't running any longer, he was barely staggering.

And those footsteps were getting closer.

But Venable knew where he was and wouldn't let him down. Venable never left an agent in jeopardy or considered him expendable. He still had his gun. Maybe he could manage to get behind some of those crates up ahead and hold out until Venable came through for him.

He forced himself to break into a run again, this time toward the crates.

He heard a laugh.

Three shots.

He pitched forward as the bullets tore into his upper back and lungs.

Dying. He was dying.

He was lying facedown but he saw the brown boots of the man who stopped beside him.

“Venable won’t help you. *She* won’t help you. You’re a dead man.”

His hand . . .

Something cold and metal was being wrapped around his hand.

Everything was blurring, but he forced himself to focus. He could see the gleam of the gold chain of the dog tag that had been forced into his hand.

Dog tag?

Yes, and the name . . .

Catherine Ling . . .

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

“I feel ridiculous.” Catherine Ling scowled at her reflection in the hall mirror. The small hat she was wearing was a confection of scarlet and black chiffon and was the closest she’d been able to come to flatter her long dark hair and golden complexion. But it was still the last thing she would have worn given a choice. “And you’re getting entirely too much enjoyment out of this, Luke.”

Her son Luke’s dark eyes were gleaming with mischief as he stood back and tilted his head critically. “You look beautiful, Catherine,” he said solemnly. “All fluffy and soft. Kind of like that photo I saw of Queen Elizabeth.”

“I’m going to get you for that.”

“And after all, it’s Kentucky Derby Day,” Luke’s tutor, Sam O’Neill said. “I’ve been trying to teach Luke all the cultural ramifications of the different American holiday events. Since this race occurs on our doorstep, he seemed particularly interested. So I went into detail about it.”

“Including these idiotic hats women wear to the race.” She glanced at Luke. “And he jumped on it.”

“You went along with him,” Sam murmured.

Because she was always glad to see Luke full of mischief instead of soberness. It had been a slow road back for both of them this last year. She and Eve Duncan had only recently been able to free Luke from the Rakovac, the Russian criminal, who had kidnapped him when he was only two and held him captive for nine long years. The violence and horrors Luke had gone through she could only imagine. She was just grateful that Rakovac had failed in his attempt to make Luke hate her and blame her for everything Rakovac had done to him. They were still on tentative ground, as demonstrated by the fact that Luke still called her Catherine, never Mother. But they were growing closer all the time. “I was trying to be a good sport. But I think this is a little too much.”

“On the contrary, no embellishment is ever too much for you, Catherine. You wear everything boldly and with superb style.”

Hu Chang!

She whirled to see him standing in the doorway of the library.

“Luke is right, that splendid confection is more a crown for a queen than a hat.” He smiled. “But it’s far more Kate Middleton than Queen Elizabeth.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” She glanced at Luke. “Did you have anything to do with this?” She wouldn’t have put it beyond him to arrange this surprise for her. Hu Chang had been Catherine’s best friend from the time they had first met in Hong Kong when Catherine was only fourteen. But during these last months, Luke and Hu Chang had become both great friends and master and pupil. At times, Catherine didn’t know if the envy she felt at the closeness of their relationship was over Luke or Hu Chang.

Perhaps it was both. Gazing at the two of them, young Luke with his shining dark hair and brown eyes that were sometimes wary, sometimes curious and full of vitality, and Hu Chang, who

was seemingly ageless and totally fascinating, it was difficult to know which one she loved the most. Or which one most exasperated her.

But Luke was grinning and shaking his head. "I only e-mailed him about your new hat. That's all. Hello, Hu Chang. I'm glad to see you. I thought you were still in Tibet."

"And I may go back. There's much work to do there. But I felt the need to see you and Catherine." He looked at Sam O'Neill. "I was able to get into the house with surprising ease, Sam. The library window was left unlocked. You are supposed to be Luke's security chief as well as his tutor. Have you not been doing your job?"

"And have you reason to check up on me, Hu Chang?" Sam asked. "I go around every night and make sure all locks are secure. I don't expect to have anyone trying to burgle the house in the middle of the day." He shrugged. "But then, you always do the unexpected. I'll go and put on a pot of tea to get out of the line of fire."

"That would be excellent." Hu Chang turned to Luke. "Why don't you go with him? I taught you how I like my tea while you were staying with me in Hong Kong. I've not had a suitable cup since your mother insisted on taking you to this place where horse races are more important than the cultures of a thousand years."

"Horse races are interesting." Luke's eyes were narrowed on his face. "And are you trying to get rid of me, Hu Chang?"

"Of course. I have private things to say to Catherine. We may share them with you later, but that will be her decision." His gaze went to the pouf of scarlet and black chiffon on Catherine's head. "But anyone who could talk Catherine into wearing that bit of beautiful nonsense has a tongue of silver. You may have no problem talking her into baring her soul to you."

"It made me smile." Luke was grinning again. "And it made

her smile. Catherine doesn't smile enough." He turned and moved down the hall after Sam. "You were with her a long time, Hu Chang. You should have taken care of that."

"So now the pupil is teaching the master?" Hu Chang said, amused.

"You taught me that everyone can learn," Luke said over his shoulder. "All this wisdom and mystic stuff is fine, but it's not everything . . ."

Hu Chang was smiling as he turned back to Catherine. "He is changing, growing. I find it exciting. I think you must give him back to me soon."

"And I think you're crazy. I did without him for nine years. I'm having enough trouble just making a friend of him, much less having a mother-son relationship." She made a face. "You manage to hypnotize him. You hypnotize us all, Hu Chang."

He bowed slightly. "Not you, Catherine."

He had in the beginning, when she was only fourteen, before she had been recruited by the CIA. It was a time when they had been fighting street gangs and crooked magistrates and all the wickedness of Hong Kong. Even his appearance was mesmerizing. He was wearing his usual black trousers and tunic that were cut with faultless elegance. His dark hair was shoulder length and shone from the sunlight streaming into the windows of the foyer. His cheekbones were high, his eyes night-dark, and he always appeared totally ageless. He had told her he was Russian and Mongolian but looked neither except for those dark eyes. He was a little above middle height but appeared taller, and she had seen him perform amazing feats of strength and skill. But it was his mind that had kept her intrigued all these years. He had traveled the world and studied dozens of philosophies and accepted parts of them. He had his own moral code, but he would not answer to anyone for

anything he did. And she never tried to judge him. He had saved her life. She had saved his. When you had a friend as remarkable as Hu Chang, you only accepted and were grateful.

Except when he tried to steal your son from you. “Keep your hands off Luke, dammit.”

“I said soon, not immediately.” He gestured to the library. “Come and sit down. I’ve found that Luke is not above eavesdropping. I’ve lectured him on the lack of honor involved, but he blames it on being raised by criminals and raiders. He said that eavesdropping could sometimes prevent punishment.”

“And that could be true. Rakovac put a gun in Luke’s hand when he was only a small child.”

“And Luke could be clinging to that excuse because of an insatiable curiosity and the desire to control his own life.” He shut the door. “Either way, it’s understandable. We must just cope with it. I do not want Luke involved at the moment.”

“Why not?” She tensed. “And why didn’t you come to the front door, Hu Chang.”

“I wanted to make sure that you and Luke were safe. Sam O’Neill is ex-CIA and usually more than adequate as a guard. I just didn’t want him to get too complacent. I regard you as a treasure and treasures must be kept polished and away from all harm.”

“Bullshit. Why did you put Sam on the spot? Sam’s not complacent. I wouldn’t have hired him as Luke’s tutor if I couldn’t trust him.”

“But I must trust him, too,” Hu Chang said quietly. “I thought I made that clear. I have both an emotional and scientific investment in Luke. And an overpowering emotional investment in you, Catherine.” He reached in his pocket and drew out his phone. “And I do not like what has been going on for the past week. I’ve been trying to keep it from you until I could find a solution. But the

problem is escalating, and it troubles me.” He dialed up his photos. “And it will do more than trouble you.” He added quietly. “Sorrow, Catherine.”

She took the phone. “What the hell are you talking about? I’ve not got any idea what—” She broke off as she looked down at the photo. “Olena?” she whispered. Blood. So much blood.

Shock. She couldn’t breathe. She felt as if she’d been kicked in the stomach. That look of frozen horror was unmistakable. Nightmare. This was a nightmare.

“Dead? She’s dead?”

“Throat cut. No sign of robbery. You can see your name written in blood on the floor beside her.”

She swallowed. None of it made sense. The only thing clear was that Olena had been murdered. “Was she trying to tell me something?”

“No. I believe her murderer was the one telling you something while making it as difficult as possible for you.”

“Olena.” She rubbed her temple. “I can’t quite take it in, Hu Chang. I thought she’d be happy now. She didn’t deserve this. All her life was pure hell until these last years. From the time she was a teenager, she was serving tricks on the boat docks in Hong Kong. She started on drugs just to keep from cutting her wrists. But she was good to my mother, she was good to me. She’d share food with us. And she kept the men away from me until I was old enough to take care of myself.”

“I know, you told me.”

“I did, didn’t I?” She shook her head to try to clear it. “I thought she’d be safe in that little village. After I went to work for Venable, I thought I’d cut the ties to that old life. But there was still Olena, and I didn’t want to leave her in that hell.”

“And you didn’t,” Hu Chang said gently. “We found a place for her, you got her off the drugs and gave her a chance.”

“And she still died with a cut throat,” Catherine said bitterly. “Just the way it might have happened on the docks in Hong Kong.”

“But she had those years you gave her, Catherine. And Ivan said they were happy years.”

“She should have had many more years. She wasn’t much more than fifty.” She drew a deep, shaky breath. “Who did this, Hu Chang? Why? How can we get him?”

“Three good questions. I have no answers.” He took the phone and dialed the photos down. “Not for Olena. Not for Jantzen.”

Her eyes widened. “Jantzen?” Shock on top of shock.

“He is also dead. I did not take these photos I’m going to show you. Venable sent them to me because you were involved, and he thought you should be advised. I take it you worked with Jantzen?”

She nodded. “We worked several drug busts together in Caracas and Quito. He’s a good guy. I liked him.”

“A good friend.” He nodded. “As good a friend as a loner like you permits herself.” He handed her the phone again. “With the exception of my humble self.”

She flinched as she saw the photos of Jantzen’s body torn by bullets. “He had a wife and a kid. He was always talking about how smart his little girl was. What happened to him?”

“A trap. He called Venable and told him that the meeting with the informant was bogus. They knew he was CIA.” He paused. “And they knew his connection with you.” He pulled out a small box and handed it to her. “This was wrapped around his hand when they found him.”

She opened the box and pulled out a fine gold chain. But it had a circular ID plaque hanging from the chain with her name engraved on the surface. “Dog tags? I don’t wear dog tags even when I’m in the jungle. Certainly not gold ones.” The metal felt oddly warm in her palm. This strange chain had been held by Jantzen,

and she had the feeling that some of his vitality lingered. God, his poor wife, Laura, what would she do now? It was easy to say that everyone survived, but how? "I need to call his wife."

"She hasn't been informed yet. Venable wanted to explore the reasons why he was targeted, so that he had something concrete to tell her."

She looked down at the dog tag. "What can he tell her about this stupid dog tag? It doesn't make sense."

"Neither does this." Hu Chang pull out another gold dog tag. "Olena was wearing it. Ivan said it looked like a gift. They're both eighteen-karat gold and very fine workmanship."

"No coincidence," she whispered. "Halfway across the world but no coincidence."

"That was my thought when I received word from Venable." He paused. "And I received another message from him right before I arrived here. There are no photos yet, but he's just heard that a Kirov Slantkey was shot in the head while riding his motorcycle in Moscow. Venable said you'd know."

"Yes. Slantkey was the informant who told me Rakovac was holding Luke in Russia after he was kidnapped. It narrowed down the search area. I was very grateful to him." She leaned back in her chair. She felt weak and confused and unbearably sad. Get it together. Something bad was going down, and she had to identify and stop it. "Three deaths. All connected to me?"

He inclined his head. "I would wager that Slantkey will have a gold piece of jewelry with your name on it."

"Which could have either incriminated me or sent a message."

"I believe it was the latter."

"Why? I did care about all those people, but it's not like they were family."

"Not like a son," Hu Chang said softly.

Luke.

Panic raced through her.

“That’s why you were checking security. You think he’s in danger?”

“I think someone does not appreciate you. Extreme bad taste, but it’s very evident. He’s spelling it out for us in gold.”

“Then why not go after me? I should be the target.”

“We won’t know that until we’re told. Or we discover for ourselves.” He was studying her expression. “You are as upset as I thought you’d be. I think I will allow you a few minutes to get over the first shock. I cannot give you more because I believe we have little time.”

“I’m fine,” she said jerkily. “As fine as I can be considering that good people are dying all around me.”

“Shh. Just take those few minutes.”

Perhaps he was right, she was terribly upset and sad and angry. And frightened because it was clear Hu Chang believed Luke might be next. Take those minutes and try to gather her strength and mind to find answers.

She leaned back and was immediately assaulted with memories of Olena. She had been too far gone on the drugs to furnish Catherine with affection during those early days on the dock. But she had shared food and what little protection she could. And when Catherine’s mother had died of an overdose, she knew Olena had shared her pain. So different from Jantzen, who was strong and kind and able to control his own life.

Until the night when that control had been shattered by those bullets.

“Okay.” She drew a deep breath. “What’s happening, Hu Chang? You’ve known about this for at least a few days. You’ve had time to think about it. Right now, I’m having trouble thinking at all.”

“Understandable. Pain tends to obscure.” Hu Chang tilted his

head thoughtfully. "It appears that you must be the primary target. But why these other kills thrown at your door? Yet I believe I see a pattern here. It's like a circle. On the far outer rim is Olena Petrov, who helped you when you were a child. Then Jantzen, who was part of your life after you became an agent with the CIA. Then Slantkey, who helped you to regain your child. The circle is narrowing, becoming more intimate."

And Luke was the center, the heart, of that intimacy, she thought with a chill.

And not only Luke.

"Whoever did this knows me very well. He'd know about you, Hu Chang."

"Without doubt. For I have made myself indispensable to you." He smiled. "But because I'm so essential, I will be one of the last to be chosen to bid adieu to you."

"You think it's going to go on." She moistened her lips. "So do I. It's crazy, but I can see that weird circle you're drawing, and it's scaring me."

"It's supposed to scare you. That's part of the plan. You're supposed to be afraid, to dread, to anticipate, to suffer with every death." He gazed at the gold chain in her hand. "It's a plan that has been well thought out, even to those expensive little trinkets he's using as a calling card. Do they have any significance for you?"

"No."

"Then we look at them as just that, a calling card. However I may be able to trace the purchaser if I use my contacts."

"Then do it," she said unevenly. "I want this over quickly."

"But your enemy does not. He's making a ceremony of it. Taking away your support and the people you care about one by one."

"There have only been three so far."

"I believe there will be more. We must try to mitigate or elim-

inate the harm.” He took out a notebook and pen from his pocket. “But I have to know who will be those targets, Catherine.”

“I’m supposed to make you a list? How can I do that?”

“I’m sure that the person who killed Olena Petrov has a list.” He added, “But the circle is narrowing, and you may not have to list everyone from your past. Just your present. The names that come easily to your mind.”

Catherine shook her head. It was positively macabre, choosing who you had to worry about dying because they were part of your life. Macabre and dark and wrong. She started to write quickly. A few minutes later she handed the notebook back to Hu Chang.

He glanced at the names. “The usual names I knew you would choose. Luke, O’Neill, myself, your young friend, Kelly Winters, our charming Chen Lu, Erin Sullivan, Eve Duncan. A few omitted that I would have guessed you would have included.”

“You said anyone from my present who comes easily to my mind. Those I omitted can either very well take care of themselves, or there would be no obvious connection.”

“Such as Richard Cameron?”

Cameron. Hu Chang’s mentioning his name jarred her. Probably because she tried not to think of him at all. Their only encounter had been months ago but it had traversed both Tibet and San Francisco. They had both been involved in trying to rescue journalist Erin Sullivan and been forced to work together. Cameron was the security chief of a powerful secret conglomerate whose actions were often at odds with Catherine’s job with the CIA. A situation that had made for strange bedfellows.

Strange, erotic, bedfellows that had made Catherine feel almost helpless to resist staying in that bed or following Cameron when they had parted. And that helplessness had only served to show her that she had been right to refuse to go with him.

“I haven’t seen Cameron since San Francisco, and he was never a part of my life,” she said.

“Debatable. But I agree he can take care of himself.” He closed the notebook. “And we have to hope that our list is the same as the killer who appears to be stalking you has.”

“That’s not good enough,” she said fiercely. “I won’t sit here waiting for him to pick off another person I care about. I have to find out who he is and go after him.”

“Absolutely.” He got to his feet and handed the notebook back to her. “So why don’t you make another list of all the people who hate you and have the resources and contacts to carry out a vendetta this elaborate. In the meantime, I will go and talk to Luke and Sam and tell them why we’ve been so rude as to ignore them.”

“You’re going to tell Luke about this?”

“Of course. Your instinct may be to protect him from knowing he’s a target, but that’s a mother’s instinct and has no basis in reality. He may be only twelve, but he’s led a life that has rid him of any hint of childhood. How can he protect himself if he doesn’t know that danger is out there?”

“I’ll protect him. Sam will protect him.” He was looking at her. “Okay, tell him. But he’ll only worry about me.”

“And so he should. It’s a son’s duty, and he must learn things of that nature.” The door closed behind him.

She leaned back in the chair.

Dammit, she was sad and shaken and didn’t want to have to handle this crisis that was looming over her.

And over Luke.

She looked down at the photo of Olena Petrov. You didn’t want to handle this either, did you, Olena? Such a terrible life, and we all thought it had turned around for you. It should have turned around. You shouldn’t have had someone come into your home

and take your life just because you helped me when I was a little girl. It's not right.

Jantzen. His little girl would never have him by her side again. Not right either.

All of this scenario was wrong and ugly and looked as if it would continue if she couldn't find a way to stop it.

So do what Hu Chang had told her to do. Look deep and find the name of the person who hated her enough to destroy everyone around her in order to hurt her before he took her life.

She flipped the notebook open.

Think.

Not as easy as the other list.

She was CIA, and she had made many enemies in her career. She had grown up on the streets of Hong Kong, and those years had not been free of conflict.

Weed through her life, which had been violent and brimful of people who might want her dead.

Give Hu Chang his list.

And then go after the vicious son of a bitch who had killed her friends.

“I think there are really only two possibles,” she said when Hu Chang walked into the library thirty minutes later. “One is Charles Corliss who was a gun runner in the Middle East. He also had a hand in smuggling chemical weapons out of Syria into Iran. Three years ago, I was instrumental in busting up his sweet little deal with Iran and in the process put a bullet in his kneecap that caused him permanent disability. Venable told me he'd put a price on my head.”

“And the other?”

“Tomas Santos. He was a kingpin drug dealer in Caracas and

had a network of criminal organizations that extended from Venezuela to Mexico.”

“Had?”

“We managed to find enough evidence and witnesses not too terrified to testify to put him away for twenty years. He’s in a maximum-security prison in Caracas.”

“Then why is he a candidate?”

“You said to find someone who hates me. Santos hates me.”

“For putting him away?”

She shook her head. “I was one of the force who went to his penthouse to arrest him. He had a helicopter standing by on the roof to whisk him away to Iran, where he couldn’t be extradited. He tried to get to it. We stopped him.”

Hu Chang’s eyes narrowed. “But that’s not all.”

“No, I shot and killed his wife, Delores Santos.”

“An innocent bystander?”

“Innocent? Delores Santos stopped being innocent when she left the cradle. She was an active partner with her husband in all his drug trafficking and reputed to be as vicious as he was. At that penthouse shoot-out, she’d already taken down one of the local police detectives before I got off a good shot.”

“And knowing your expertise, it was a very good shot.”

“She died in Santos’s arms. He looked up at me, and I’d never seen such hatred.”

“Threats?”

She shook her head. “But I saw him twice during his trial, and there didn’t have to be threats. The hatred was still there.”

“But he’s in prison?”

“That doesn’t mean he couldn’t manipulate things from inside. He had tremendous power and money stashed away all over the world. Dorgal, his second-in-command, was almost slavishly loyal and could have arranged the kills.”

“Corliss or Santos? What’s your choice?”

She shrugged. “It could be either.”

“Gut instinct.”

“Santos. Hatred. Plus I killed someone he cared about. Evidently, Delores Santos was his alter ego or something. Maybe he thinks this is a fitting way to punish me.”

“It seems that could be a reasonable assumption.”

“There’s nothing reasonable about this. It’s all ugly and crazy.” She looked down at the notebook. “What did you tell Luke?”

“Exactly what I told you I would tell him. O’Neill is in the process of bringing in extra security from his friends among the ex-CIA elite. All will be well.”

She prayed he was right.

“Those other names on that list,” she said brusquely. “We have to protect them. Until this is over, I’d like Erin to leave Tibet and go to Chen Lu’s golden palace in Hong Kong. Chen Lu has enough of a security force to make it fairly safe. Can you arrange it?”

“But of course I can. Erin Sullivan is very stubborn, but she has a great regard for my vast intellect.” He smiled. “Is this what they called in the Old West encircling the wagon train?”

“That sounds very strange coming from you. Yes, approximately. I’ll call Eve Duncan and give her a warning. If Joe’s at the lake house, that will be security enough for her.”

Hu Chang nodded. “Joe Quinn has a reputation for being very competent in that area.”

“Exceptionally. He’s an ex-SEAL and a police detective. That’s an effective combination.” She picked up her phone. “Get busy, Hu Chang. You forced me to mentally go over those scumbags who want to see me dead, and I’m tied up in knots. All these years, I’ve managed to block them out of my mind and forget them, but that’s gone now. I can’t have any other deaths.”

“You’re calling Eve?”

“No, not right now. I changed my mind. I’m calling Joe Quinn. He’s a police detective with Atlanta PD, and there’s no way he’ll let anything happen to Eve. If I called Eve direct, she’d want to come here and help. The only help I want is for her to keep safe. Right after I talk to Joe, I’m calling Venable. I want to check on the status of Corliss and Santos.”

“Wise.” He turned toward the door. “And I will go call Chen Lu and tell her to circle her particular wagons and prepare for visitors.”

“Good.” Joe Quinn’s phone was ringing, then he picked up. “Joe, Catherine Ling. Look, God, I’m sorry, but I have a problem, and you and Eve may become involved in it.” She filled him in quickly. “If you can protect Eve without letting her know what’s hanging over her, it might be a mercy.”

“Eve and I don’t play those games,” Joe said quietly. “She wouldn’t thank me.” He was silent. “You’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Just take care of Eve.”

“No one will touch her,” he said flatly. “She’ll probably call you back. You’re her friend.”

“I thought as much. I just wanted to be sure that you were on top of it.”

“I’ll contact Venable and see if I can do anything to help out.”

“If you do, it’ll be from behind a desk or at your lake cottage. I don’t want you more than a few yards from Eve.”

“Bossy female.” There was a hint of amusement beneath the grimness in Joe’s voice.

“You bet. Bye, Joe.” She hung up.