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Wind Dancer

EVE

IRIS JOHANSEN

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EVE

CHAPTER

1

Malua, Samoa

Present day

TWO MINUTES.

The explosive was in place beneath the back veranda of the house. The charge set.

Agent Art Benkman slid behind the garden wall that surrounded the pool and house and waited.

No mistakes this time. His superior wouldn't tolerate another near miss. It had been made clear that Black must be destroyed. He was a monster who knew too much.

No, he'd seen Paul Black go into the house an hour ago. It was the best time for the kill. Only one person in the house besides that son of a bitch. A housekeeper who occupied the end bedroom of the rambling bungalow. He'd seen her light go out two hours ago. She'd be asleep by now.

Good night.

And good-bye.

No one would survive this blast. He'd had to be sure.

One minute.

The flames from the blast would probably reach the top of those palm trees hovering over the roof.

"I've got you, Black," he murmured. "Burn in—"

Pain.

He was flipped over and was looking up at the man who had sent the needle-sharp stiletto deep into his back.

Black. But it couldn't be Paul Black. He was in the house.

No, he was here. That dark, devil's face . . .

"Who sent you?" Black asked. "Who told you I was here?" He was searching in Benkman's pockets, pulling out his wallet and the e-mail that he'd received two days ago. He glanced at it and smiled. "Very explicit. And you obeyed blindly like a good agent? Never mind. You don't have to answer. I don't need you now."

"Kill you . . ." Benkman whispered. "I have to—"

"Die," Black supplied as he picked up Benkman as if he were a child. "That's all you have to do." He was carrying him over to the house. "How do you feel about cremation?"

"No!" He started to struggle as panic overcame pain. "Don't leave me here. It's going to—"

"Blow?" Black dropped him on the floor of the great room. "In about forty seconds." He looked down at him. "Why don't you see if you can make it through the French doors and out onto the terrace? You might survive then." He turned and strolled out of the house.

Bastard.

Benkman rolled over and started to crawl toward the French doors.

Pain.

The blood was pouring out of the wound as he moved.

Weak.

The blood was slippery . . .

He was dying.

No, he'd be okay. He was always okay. He just had to get out of this damn house.

So slow. He was moving so slow.

He reached the French doors. Now crawl out onto the veranda. He was almost there . . .

And then he saw Black standing by the garden wall and watching him. He was smiling.

He tapped his watch.

Too late, Benkman realized frantically. He was too late. Time had run out.

"Don't leave me!" he howled. "Get me out of—"

The house exploded and became an inferno.

"HERE'S THE REPORT, SIR. Shall I call Atlanta and give it to her?"

Venable scowled as he looked down at the report that Agent David Harley had put in front of him. This inquiry was shaping up to be a king-size headache. Why had he become involved in this mess?

He knew the answer. He liked Joe Quinn and Eve Duncan, and they had helped the CIA on many occasions. When Catherine Ling had asked him to pull strings and get this report concerning the death of Eve's daughter, he'd thought it might be a way to pay back.

He wasn't sure that would be true any longer. Eve Duncan was very fragile where anything connected to her murdered daughter, Bonnie, was concerned.

“Is anything wrong?” Agent Harley asked. “I used three sources. It all checked out. And Catherine Ling is usually very accurate.”

And Harley would be careful, Venable thought. He was new, but he was eager and conscientious.

“No, I’m sure you verified it correctly.” He shrugged. “I can just see a blowup looming on the horizon.”

“But Catherine Ling’s e-mail said that—”

“I know.” Venable held up his hand to stop him. Harley had met Catherine Ling only once, but he had been dazzled by her. Most men had the same response to Catherine. She was not only a top CIA agent, but she was part Caucasian, part Asian, and was one of the most gorgeous and exotic women Venable had ever met. “Catherine may be accurate, but that doesn’t mean she might not trigger an explosion. She’s ramming her way through every source I have to get that information, and she’s not going to stop.”

“Eve Duncan,” Harley repeated tentatively, glancing at the report. “I’ve heard of her. I saw some photos. Skulls and stuff. She’s a forensic sculptor, isn’t she?”

“Have a little respect. She’s *the* forensic sculptor,” Venable said. “She’s probably the best forensic sculptor in the world. Every police department in the country is standing in line to get her to work on their cold cases involving skeletal remains. Totally dedicated.”

“Not totally.” Harley smiled. “I read that report. She’s been living with her lover police detective, Joe Quinn, for a number of years. In real life, she obviously prefers a warm body to those skeletons.”

“He’s a good guy,” Venable said. “And tough as hell. He’s an ex-SEAL. As I said, have a little respect, or you might regret it. He’s been with Eve since her daughter Bonnie was kidnapped by a serial killer years ago. The kid was only seven years old, and it nearly destroyed Eve.”

"I can see how it might be traumatic. Was she murdered?"

"Almost certainly. Though Bonnie's body was never recovered and the real killer never arrested. That's why Eve went back to school to become a forensic sculptor, to help bring other lost children home. But Eve's been on the hunt for Bonnie's killer all these years."

"My wife's pregnant and should be delivering my son any day," Harley said. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to him."

"Go on the hunt," Venable said. "As Eve Duncan is doing. As Joe Quinn is doing."

"What about you, Agent Venable? Do you have any children?"

Venable shook his head. "Divorced. No kids. I have a job. A family would get in the way." He tapped the report. "And Eve Duncan is a prime example of why I should stay that way. Finding her daughter's killer has become an obsession that's dominating everything and everyone around her. Including me." He swore beneath his breath. "Catherine Ling should have stayed out of it. But no, she thinks that she can straighten out the entire world if she puts her mind to it."

"She's very clever," Harley said. "It could happen, sir."

"Are we expecting any more info?"

Harley shook his head. "Those are the only sources you asked me to tap."

And the sources Catherine Ling had asked Venable to tap. She had known exactly what she'd wanted. He'd asked her to wait for these reports before she went to Eve Duncan with the information, but he couldn't be sure that she'd do it. Catherine marched to her own drummer and had been so on edge that she'd wanted to get the confrontation over. That was always Catherine's way. Bold, up-front, on the attack.

That had been Eve's method of handling problems, too. It was one reason why the two women had become close friends.

“I’ll be glad to call Agent Ling and give her the information on this report for you,” Harley offered.

“I bet you would,” Venable murmured. “But I think I’d better handle this myself. You can’t expect a straightforward response from Catherine on this particular matter.”

“It seems pretty cut-and-dried to me.”

“Does it?” He was tempted to let Harley contact Catherine and have her interrogate him. If he thought she would become his new best friend, he was going to be sadly disappointed. She was going to want every detail so that she could mull the pros and cons, and she would be firing questions like a machine gun. It wasn’t often that Catherine formed a friendship with anyone, but she genuinely liked Eve Duncan, and she wanted every detail to be absolutely correct. “No, I’ll talk to her.”

Harley looked disappointed, but he shrugged and left the office.

All right, Catherine. Venable took out his phone. Here’s your ammunition to blow Eve out of the water. You may mean well, but it could go either way. I hope to hell both you and Eve manage to survive it.

THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG WITH EVE.

Joe Quinn had glanced casually up to the porch from where he was standing at the barbecue grill near the lake. Eve had been sitting on the porch swing, but was now standing beside Catherine Ling, and Joe could tell that every muscle of her body was taut with tension.

What the hell?

Maybe he was mistaken. The sun was going down, and it was almost dark. Perhaps those nuances of unrest he thought he was see-

ing weren't really there. Catherine Ling had become a good friend to Eve, and there was no way that she would deliberately upset her.

Dammit, he *wasn't* mistaken.

He had lived with Eve so long that he knew every mood, every flex of her body as if it were his own. Whatever Catherine was saying to Eve, it was disturbing her. He'd better go up to the porch and—

His cell phone rang, and he glanced at the ID.

Venable. CIA.

Joe was tempted to let it go to voice mail and call back later. No, Catherine Ling was also CIA. Joe had an idea it might be a good idea to take the call before he barged up those stairs in protective mode.

"What do you want, Venable?" he asked as he pressed the button.

"Is Catherine Ling there? She's not answering her phone."

"She's here. She's been here all afternoon. Maybe she doesn't want to talk to you. The jobs you send Catherine on aren't always pleasant. It could be that she wants a vacation."

"Catherine?" He added testily, "I told her to take a vacation after Russia, but she dove right into this inquiry and pulled me in with her."

"What investigation?"

"Just an inquiry. Tell Catherine I need her to call me. I have the final report."

"Venable, what's this all about?"

"Ask Catherine. I'm supposed to be discreet. You'd think that she was *my* superior." He hung up.

Joe gazed up at the porch. It was fully dark, and they hadn't turned on the porch light. He could barely discern the two women standing by the rail. But what he couldn't see, he could feel. His instincts toward Eve had been honed to sharpness, and he could sense the emotional disturbance that was swirling about her.

Ask Catherine.

There was no doubt that he'd ask Catherine. He didn't like any of this. He felt closed out.

He started toward the porch, then stopped.

What could he do? His instinct was to join them, become part of whatever was going on between them. But Eve wouldn't appreciate his interfering. She was an independent woman. It wasn't as if Catherine was a threat. She was Eve's friend.

But even a friend could become a threat if circumstances warranted.

Not Catherine. He trusted Catherine.

He slowly turned and went back to the barbecue pit.

Keep cool. Eve would tell him what was going on eventually.

Ignore that uneasiness.

Until he couldn't stand it any longer.

EVE ASKED CATHERINE, "BUT why not leave in the morning?"

"... I don't want to inconvenience you any more than I have to. You've done enough for me, Eve." Catherine's gaze was on Joe standing below them at the barbecue pit. "We've done nothing but talk about my problems. Let's talk about you and Joe. Is everything all right between you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I just thought I caught some vibes from him today." Her gaze was still on Joe. "You're very lucky, you know. He's pretty fantastic."

"Yes, he is." Eve added, "And I know you think he's special. You've told me."

“Yes, I’ve always been honest with you.” She paused. “I always will be.” She turned to face her. “I’m no threat to you, Eve.”

“You could be if you wanted to be. You’re an incredibly magnetic woman, Catherine.” She gazed steadily at her. “But in the end, the threat would come only from Joe. He’s the only one who can hurt me.”

“I’d never hurt you.” Catherine’s voice was passionate. “I’ve never had a friend like you before. At first, I was only concerned about what you could do for me, but that changed. You changed my life. I felt . . . close to you.”

“And I feel close to you.” Eve smiled. “So stop agonizing about it, Catherine.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

Eve’s smile faded. “Are we still talking about Joe?”

“No. Yes. I guess in a way we are.”

“Speak up. It’s not like you to be inarticulate.”

Catherine turned back to look down at Joe. “Did you finish the reconstruction on Cindy?”

Cindy was the reconstruction that Eve had been working on weeks ago before she had gone to Russia at Catherine’s request. It had been very difficult, and Catherine had been a great help. “Of course, she was done a week after I came home from Russia. It wasn’t that difficult.” She smiled. “Not after I had a little help from my friends during the initial prep work.”

“Was she a pretty little girl?”

“Yes.”

“Like your Bonnie?”

A tiny disturbance rippled through Eve. She didn’t look at all like Bonnie. “Why are you talking about Bonnie, Catherine?”

“Because I think Joe is jealous of your obsession with Bonnie. Not of your daughter. Just of your feelings for her. He’d have to be a saint not to feel a little put in the shade by the way you feel. Isn’t that true?”

She didn’t speak for a moment. “Yes. But friend or not, I don’t want to discuss this with you, Catherine.”

“I have to discuss it with you. Do you think I want to do it? I was even thinking of walking away and forgetting about it. But I can’t do that, Eve.”

Eve frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“You and Joe have a giant problem, and I don’t want to make it any bigger.”

“How could you do that?”

“Easily.” Her lips twisted. “I’m good at what I do. I’m an expert. I just set my mind to it and cause the sky to fall.”

Eve slowly rose from the swing and went to stand beside Catherine. “Talk to me.”

Catherine looked away from her again. “I told you I’d pay you back, remember? I was so grateful I wanted to give you what you wanted most in the world.”

Eve gazed at her with exasperation. No matter how she tried, she couldn’t convince Catherine to accept what Eve had done as a gesture of friendship and let it go. Catherine had come to her to ask her to do an age progression on her son Luke, who had been kidnapped when he was two and had been missing for nine years. Eve had been inevitably drawn into the search for Luke that had culminated in a deadly race to save him from his kidnapper in Russia. “And I told you to forget it.”

“That’s not in my makeup.” She was silent for a minute. “What you want most in the world is to bring your Bonnie home. To do that

you have to find her killer. When I came home from Hong Kong, I had lots of time to concentrate on thinking about your problem. I tried to look at the crime from an objective and fresh point of view. Then I started to dig. I used every contact and information-gathering unit I had at my disposal and at Venable's disposal. We even tapped the NSA."

Eve could feel her chest tightening. Don't hope. The search had gone on too long for Catherine to just step in and perform a miracle. "Joe was FBI at the time Bonnie was taken. We didn't exactly stop at local law enforcement."

"But all the information wasn't available then."

"I know that. My friend, Montalvo, recently gave me a list of three new suspects. Two didn't pan out, but I still have the third one to investigate. Paul Black. Is that the name you ran across?"

"His name popped up."

Eve's gaze narrowed on Catherine's face. "But?"

"I was more interested in someone else."

"Who?"

"He had opportunity. He might have had motive." She was speaking quickly, tersely. "In this type of crime, there's ample precedent for this kind of perpetrator."

"Dammit. Why are you being so evasive?"

"Joe. I can see you have to walk very carefully where he's concerned. He's very emotional about your obsession with Bonnie. He's nuts about you." Her hands tightened on the porch rail. "And he doesn't need to come face-to-face with this for it to tear him apart. Hell, it might tear you both apart."

"Catherine."

"Okay." She drew a deep breath. "Joe has been thinking about you as being totally his own since the moment you met. It's been

the saving grace when he had to come to terms with your obsession with Bonnie. It would disturb the hell out of him to lose that security.”

“There’s no way he would lose it.”

“No? You’re very cool, very controlled, but it wasn’t like that always. There was a time when you lost your head and spun out of control over a man.”

Eve was beginning to see where Catherine was going. No, it couldn’t be. It was impossible. She asked hoarsely, “Catherine, who killed my Bonnie?”

“I didn’t say I was certain.”

Eve was shaking. “Tell me. Tell me the name.”

“You want a name?” Catherine drew a deep breath. “The name you didn’t even see fit to put on the birth certificate, Eve,” she said gently. “Bonnie’s father, John Gallo.”

EVE HAD BEEN EXPECTING IT, but the name struck her, stunned her. She couldn’t breathe. She could barely speak, “No . . . it’s not true. You don’t understand. It’s not true.”

But if Catherine thought it true, then somehow it might be.

No, it was impossible.

“Eve, I wouldn’t have just pulled his name—”

“No!” She had to get out of here. She had to be alone. She whirled and was across the porch, fumbling at the screen door. “You’re wrong, Catherine. You couldn’t be more wrong. It’s not—” She slammed the door behind her and leaned back against it, staring into the darkness.

Cool and controlled, Catherine had called her. Where was that coolness now? She felt as vulnerable and emotional as she had when

she was that sixteen-year-old kid who had given birth to Bonnie. So angry, so defiant, so passionate.

John Gallo.

Catherine's words had sent her spiraling back to that sixteen-year-old girl.

Back to John Gallo . . .