

# PROLOGUE

**SHE HAD TO STAY ALIVE** just a few minutes longer.

Elena Meyer crouched in the alleyway, fighting the dizziness. Keep it together, girl. *Breathe.*

She felt her side. Warm and sticky where blood was still oozing from the gunshot wound.

Fight the darkness. Fight the fog creeping over her forehead and descending over her eyes.

Gotta keep moving. Gotta make it count.

Elena stood and steadied herself against the brick building. Her legs wobbled. As she tried to walk, her feet suddenly felt as if they were encased in concrete.

One foot forward, then the other.

And again.

And again.

A sound. What was that?

She turned. A bottle rolled across the paved alleyway, the

high, hollow sound echoing off brick buildings. Someone was behind her.

*He was there, somewhere in the dark.*

How in the hell had he found her? She'd been so careful. But ever since she'd known him, he was always one step ahead.

"Always remember something," he'd said. "I know you better than you know yourself. You *do* know that, don't you?"

Only now, at the very end, did she truly believe him.

Her vision fogged and consciousness started slipping away.

*No . . .*

She still had a job to do. She patted her jacket pocket, making sure her precious cargo was still there.

She turned and threw herself forward, toward the lights and traffic of Fifth Street. If she could just make it there before . . .

*Click-clack.*

*Click-clack.*

Footsteps hit the pavement behind her, echoing off those buildings. She imagined he was wearing those expensive Berluti leather shoes he was always so damned proud of.

*Click-clack.*

*Click-clack.*

The steps moved faster.

*Click-clack-click-clack-click-clack.*

She couldn't let him catch her. Not now, not after all she'd been through.

*Click-clack-click-clack.*

Tough luck, you son of a bitch.

Summoning the last bit of strength she would ever have, Elena threw herself into Fifth Street's second lane of traffic.

Wham!

She felt herself flying before she even saw the car. She didn't feel the impact as she collapsed in a heap on the cool pavement.

Squealing brakes. Excited screams. A crowd, which included two police officers, surrounded her. Seconds after that, at least half a dozen cell phones were pointed in her direction, ensuring that her death would soon be online fodder.

She wanted to reach into her pocket and show them all what had led her to them, but she couldn't move.

The sights and sounds grew dimmer by the second, but she could still make out those Berluti leather shoes in the crowd.

He wouldn't dare show himself. Not in front of the police, not in front of all those camera phones.

She wanted to smile, but none of her muscles worked anymore.

*I beat you, you son of a bitch.*

The shoes backed into the alley, retreating into the darkness.

*I beat you . . .*

# CHAPTER

## 1

**"I WANT TO BREAK BOTH WRISTS,"** Kendra Michaels said. "Can you teach me that?"

Adam Lynch smiled. "Yours or mine?"

"Yours, of course. Show me how."

They stood on mats spread out over a grassy patch of Sunset Cliffs Park, overlooking a particularly stunning view of the Pacific Ocean. It was always windy there, but the breeze had kicked up considerably in the past few minutes.

Kendra tugged at her worn T-shirt as she crouched into a defensive stance. "I'm serious. I saw it on YouTube. An Israeli military guy demonstrated how to disarm an attacker and break both of his wrists."

Lynch laughed. "YouTube, huh? What do you need me for?"

"I'm beginning to ask myself just that question. You've shown me a few things, but now it's time to get serious. You said you'd teach me how to defend myself."

“Defend yourself, yes. I didn’t promise to turn you into a killing machine.”

Kendra half smiled. “Then what good are you?”

“I’ve been attempting to demonstrate that to you for a long time.” He flashed that movie-star smile. “Oh, you mean in the more deadly arts that aren’t nearly as much fun. Here’s the best advice I can give: Once you disarm your attacker, your best defense is to just get the hell away.”

“It’ll be easier to get away if my attacker is howling in pain and nursing a pair of broken wrists.”

“I can’t argue with that. But you need to walk before you can run, okay?” Lynch raised a small piece of wood. “Pretend this is a knife, and—”

“Pretty sorry excuse for a knife.”

“Pretend, okay? The first thing you need to do is—?”

In a lightning-fast motion, Kendra gripped his wrists, ducked, and spun around. She bent forward, using Lynch’s weight against him.

“Oww!” Lynch yelled.

“See?” She still gripped his wrists over her shoulders. “If I had just thrown myself a little more forward, your wrists would now be toast.”

From behind, he gently rested his chin on her right shoulder. “And that might have worked on some people.”

“You’re saying it wouldn’t have worked on you?”

“Afraid not.”

He quickly closed his right arm, snapping it across her throat. “I could have broken your neck before you even finished turning around. Or, if I wanted, I could now be cutting off your oxygen in a nasty choke hold.” He leaned close and whispered into her ear. “Today’s lesson—don’t trust your life to YouTube.”

She fought to free herself, but he held firm.

He chuckled. "Don't get discouraged. Your move probably would have worked on a common street thug."

"You're a pretty common thug yourself."

He laughed, his breath feeling warm in her ear.

"Are you quite finished?" she asked.

"Not in the slightest." He slid his other arm across her torso. "You're the one who put us into this rather pleasurable position."

"And now I'm trying to get out of it."

"You're not trying very hard."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"I've missed you, Kendra. I'm glad you called."

She found herself relaxing against him. Not a good idea. She could feel his hardness, his warmth, could breathe in the scent of him. She forced herself to stiffen again. "Yeah?"

"How very noncommittal of you."

"I called because you've been promising to show me a few things."

"Oh, I will." He pulled her even closer. "If only you'll let me."

She snorted. "I walked right into that one."

He released his hold and gently turned her around. "You don't think it would be amazing?"

She was about to make another crack, but she stopped herself. It *would* be amazing. She'd known Adam Lynch for over two years, and they'd faced scores of life-and-death situations together, seen each other at their best and worst. But in the past few months, she found herself thinking about him more and more in *that* way. There had been moments that had verged on explosive when she had wanted only one thing from him. She had been so close . . . What was stopping her?

“What’s holding you back?” he whispered, as if reading her mind.

She looked away. “You’re . . . complicated.”

“In some ways. And so are you. But there’s nothing complicated about the way I feel about you. That’s extremely simple.”

“Ha. There’s nothing simple about you.”

“Stop pretending that’s a minus and not a plus.”

She moistened her lips. “Look, you promised to show me some self-defense techniques and I just took you up on it.”

“Liar. Metcalf or any of your other FBI buddies would have been happy to teach you whatever you wanted to know. And yet you called me.”

“I thought I’d feel more comfortable with you. I’m now starting to seriously doubt my judgment on that count.”

“I think you were bored. Maybe you thought that it was time to forget about comfort.” He chuckled as he strolled over to her backpack and got them each a bottle of water. “Because you knew exactly what you were going to get from me, Kendra. I’ve been more patient than you’ve ever known me to be. Both of us had some healing to do after that last case we worked together. But I regard this summons as very promising. You must have missed me.” He took a swallow of water. “Think about it.”

“I’m thinking that I haven’t missed either your arrogance or your ego,” she said dryly.

He threw back his head and laughed. “Okay, maybe it wasn’t an excuse. So why the sudden interest in breaking men’s bones?” His smile faded. “Has something made you particularly afraid?”

Lord, now he was getting protective. “No. And for the record, it’s not just men’s bones. I’m entirely open to breaking women’s bones if the occasion demands it.”

“I stand corrected. Why?”

Kendra took a swallow from her bottle and turned toward the ocean where whitecaps collided with the rocky coastline. “By my best estimate, I’ve come close to being murdered twenty-six times in the last few years.”

“Hmm. Interesting. Twenty-six times.”

“Yes. That may be a typical Tuesday for you, but I’m a music therapist. I didn’t sign up for this.”

“You *are* having a bad day, aren’t you? You’re more than a music therapist. You catch killers on a fairly routine basis. That puts you in a special category.”

She grimaced. “Lunatic?”

He shook his head. “No, someone who can’t just stand by and watch while people are being hurt. And you have as much a gift for it as you do for music therapy. Maybe more. So suck it up and accept it.”

“Your sympathy is incredibly touching.”

He grinned. “You don’t want my sympathy. You’d punish me if you thought I was offering it. But we’ve known each other long enough for you to admit that I do understand you.” He shrugged. “Look, you were born blind and spent the first twenty years of your life in the dark before you got your sight. That’s amazing. But you know what? If you’d never gotten that surgical procedure, you’d still be an amazing person. You made the best of what you had. You adapted. You used your other senses—your hearing, touch, sense of smell, all of them—to pick up things the rest of us ignore.”

“All blind people do that.”

“True. But now that you have your sight, you also apply that same level of concentration on things you see.”

“Like I’ve told you, after being in the dark for so long, I can’t take things I see for granted. I don’t see how anyone can.”

“Well, all these things combine to make you an incredible investigator. You walk onto a crime scene and detect things no other cop could dream of picking up. It’s no wonder the police and FBI are always fighting over you.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Not really. And as much as you claim to be bothered by these cases, the intrusion on your life and your practice, you could always say no.”

“I have, many times.”

“But there have also been many times when you’ve said yes.”

“Hence the twenty-six attempts on my life.”

Lynch shrugged. “You do it because innocent people will die if you don’t. That makes you a very special person.”

“*You* do it.”

“I used to do it. These days I’m well paid to do a variety of things, and a scant few of my activities involve saving lives.”

Kendra turned to look at him. “Probably because those variety of things fall into an entirely different and lethal category.” Lynch had been an FBI agent, but he now worked freelance for whatever government agency was willing to pay for his services. He rarely talked specifics about his assignments, and she knew better than to try and press him for details.

Lynch flashed his high-wattage smile at her again. “This is a long way of saying that I’m glad you’re thinking more about defending yourself. For one thing, I want you to be safe. But it also means that you’ve reached some measure of peace about helping in these investigations. You’re obviously thinking about doing more in the future?”

“Not necessarily. Maybe. But when I do, I want to be better prepared for whatever comes my way.”

“Have you thought about carrying a gun?” he asked quietly.  
“I have an excellent supplier who—”

“I’m sure you do, but I don’t want a gun.”

“You just want to crunch bones.”

“For now.”

His blue eyes were suddenly glinting with mischief. “Okay, I can help you with that. Crunching bones is one of my specialties.”

She had no intention of asking about any of his other “specialties.” “Thanks.”

Lynch nodded. “Have you ever thought about a more formal arrangement with the FBI?”

She smiled. “Like being on retainer?”

“Not exactly.”

Her eyes narrowed on him. “Surely you don’t mean actually joining up?”

“They’d love to have you.”

She couldn’t believe it. “Quantico, a cubicle at the regional office, the whole bit?”

“Yep.” His lips were turning up at the corners. “FBI Special Agent Kendra Michaels. It has a certain ring to it, doesn’t it? I knew you’d particularly like the idea of the cubicle. Griffin asked if I’d float it out to you. I told him he was crazy.”

“He should have listened. Why didn’t he talk to me about this himself?”

He said, deadpan, “For some reason, he thought I might want to flex my considerable powers of persuasion over you.”

She burst out laughing.

Lynch nodded. “Exactly the reaction I thought you’d have. First of all, despite my reputation for bending people to my will—”

“They don’t call you The Puppetmaster for nothing.”

“I still hate that nickname.”

“Too bad. Please continue.”

“Griffin should know you’re fairly unpersuadable by me or anyone else. And even if I could talk you into such a thing, why would I, when I couldn’t wait to get free of the FBI’s clutches myself?”

“I already have a career.”

“I told him that. He thought maybe you could continue doing it on the side.”

“Like a hobby?” Kendra cursed under her breath. “Music therapy may not seem like a real job to some people, but I’m a scientist. Research studies, control groups, double-blind experiments . . . I get results and I can prove it.”

“I know that, Kendra. And so does Griffin.”

“And I *help* people.”

“Again, you’re preaching to the converted. I’ve seen what you’re able to do for your clients.”

She took a few deep breaths. She was attacking the wrong person. She knew she had Lynch’s respect. But her anger had just overflowed. Just relax. “If this subject comes up again, tell Griffin I said to go to hell.”

“Not necessary.” Lynch was gazing beyond her shoulder and he nodded behind her. “Tell him yourself.”

Kendra turned to see FBI Agent in Charge Michael Griffin walking toward them on the path from Ladera Street. He was with another agent, Roland Metcalf.

She turned back to Lynch. “You’ve got to be kidding. You told him we were coming up here?”

“No.” Lynch looked totally mystified. “*You* didn’t tell him?”

Kendra turned back to watch the two FBI agents, dressed

in their dark suits. They looked ridiculously out of place at this oceanside recreation spot.

She called out as soon as they were within earshot. "Not interested in your job, Griffin. May as well go home."

Michael Griffin wrinkled his brow. He was a slender man with hair that was now almost entirely silver. He headed the FBI San Diego regional office and he seemed to earn the respect of his colleagues even as he annoyed the hell out of Kendra.

Griffin glanced at Lynch, then back to her. "Oh. Guess you won't be getting fitted for that windbreaker."

"Afraid not. Pity."

"But that's not why I'm here. There's something else I need to talk to you about."

"A case?" She stiffened. "No way. I'm extremely busy right now. I have a heavy client list, I have to present a paper in Denmark next month, and—"

"This isn't just any case, Kendra," Roland Metcalf said. He was a tall, attractive agent in his late twenties. Lynch insisted he had a crush on Kendra, and she'd only recently admitted it was probably true. "You'll want to see this."

She shook her head. "I seriously doubt that."

Lynch broke in. "Before you say one more word, I'd like to know how you knew you'd find her here. You didn't, by any chance, pull a warrantless trace on her mobile phone, did you?"

Griffin glared at him. "No. But interesting that was your immediate go-to. Maybe because it's what you would have done?"

Lynch didn't reply.

Kendra glanced impatiently from one to the other. "Never mind Lynch. We all know what intrusive and appalling things he's capable of."

"Thanks for the support," Lynch said dryly.

“So out with it,” Kendra said. She didn’t like the possibility Lynch had brought up. “How did you know?”

“We tried to call first,” Metcalf said. “I guess that’s your phone over there by the mat?”

“The one that’s powered off? Yeah, that’s mine.”

“Then we went to your condo and you weren’t there. But I just happen to know that your best friend lives one floor down from you, so I paid her a visit.”

Kendra mock-slapped her forehead. “Olivia . . . I told her I was coming here.”

“And she told me.” Metcalf grinned. “None of that fancy electronic snoop stuff for me. Hey, I’m a Federal agent. I know how to do things.”

“Yeah, I guess you do,” Kendra said absently. She was looking Metcalf and Griffin up and down. “So who was she?”

“Who?” Griffin said.

“Well, I’m not talking about Olivia. The murder victim in the case you’re investigating. It *was* a woman, wasn’t it?”

The two men nodded.

“Then let’s get this over with, Griffin. You got a call in the middle of the night, probably from San Diego PD. Fortunately, your wife wasn’t disturbed because she wasn’t with you. Not having trouble again at home, I hope?”

Griffin’s forehead creased in annoyance. “Were you this big a pain in the ass when you were blind?”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

“Wrong. I have a very good idea. For the record, there’s no trouble at home,” Griffin said. “My wife has been up in Portland for the past couple of weeks caring for her mother. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Let her continue.” Lynch was smiling slyly at both Kendra’s demonstration and Griffin’s unease. “I love this part.”

“I’m not here to entertain you, Lynch.” She continued to study Griffin and Metcalf. “After you got the call, Griffin, you could have tasked it out to Metcalf or dozens of other agents at your disposal. But something about this case made you get out of bed and go to the scene yourself. You don’t generally subject yourself to that kind of punishment. One of the perks of being boss.”

“Sometimes being boss isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“This was obviously one of those times,” Kendra replied. “The murder was in the city. The body was outdoors on the street. The police left her out there for quite a while longer than usual. Maybe waiting for you? But not only for you. You decided to call Metcalf to join you. He arrived not long after you did and spent even more time inspecting the corpse than you did.”

Metcalf smiled. He was obviously enjoying her riff, but Griffin still seemed mildly annoyed.

Kendra studied Metcalf for a moment longer. “So you had to get up in the middle of the night, too. But you weren’t alone. Overnight female companionship obviously isn’t a problem for you, is it, Metcalf?”

“Shit.” He grimaced. “Now *I’m* in for it?”

“I don’t see why not. I hope you know her well, ’cause it’s kind of awkward to leave a stranger alone in your house.”

Metcalf smiled sheepishly. “I know her . . . pretty well.”

“I think you’re safe. I’d say she makes more than you do.”

“Right again. She’s a software engineer.”

Lynch patted him on the shoulder. “As long as it’s not another FBI agent. That didn’t work out too well for you last time, did it?”

The smile instantly disappeared from Metcalf's face. "Uh, can we move on? Please?"

Kendra smiled. "Sure, Metcalf. But there's one thing I can't figure out . . . Why are you coming to me with this case? You usually wait days or even weeks before you decide you want my help. It's only been hours."

"It wasn't our idea," Griffin said sourly.

Kendra frowned. "Then whose idea was it?"

"The corpse's."

Kendra stared at Griffin. "Is this some kind of sick joke?"

Metcalf spoke gently. "Do you know someone named Elena Meyer of Fairfield, Connecticut?"

Kendra thought for a moment. "No."

Griffin pulled out his camera phone and held it up. "Are you sure? She knew you."

Kendra swallowed hard as she stared at the image on the phone. It was the face of a dead young woman, maybe thirty, lying on the street. Her cheeks were pale, her lipstick smeared, and brown curly hair fell over her forehead. She looked so young, with her whole life to live . . .

"No," Kendra said quietly. "I've never seen her."

"This woman bolted out onto Fifth Street and was struck by a car," Griffin said.

Lynch looked at the photo. "Hit and run?"

"No. It wasn't the car that killed her. She ran out of an alley with a gunshot wound in her torso."

"Any leads?" Lynch asked.

"Not so far. Her family didn't even know she was out here."

Kendra was still staring at the photo. "What did you mean by . . . it was her idea to bring me into this?"

Griffin swiped his finger across the phone screen as he spoke.

“She was carrying an envelope in her jacket pocket. There was a name and address printed on it.” He angled the phone back toward Kendra.

“Mine,” she said.

“It looks like she was trying to get to you when she was killed,” Metcalf said. “She was on Fifth Street, just a few blocks from your condo. You’re positive you don’t even recognize the name . . . Elena Meyer?”

Kendra shook her head. “Not at all. Do you know her occupation?”

“She worked for a law firm in Connecticut. She was a paralegal.”

Again, Kendra shook her head. “What was in the envelope?”

“A flash drive,” Griffin said. “Nothing else. And there was only one file on it, a video.”

“Have you watched it?”

“We both have. Pretty much everyone at the office has seen it by now. We . . . don’t know what to make of it.”

Kendra tried to read their expressions and all she saw was puzzlement. “Show me.”

“We have a copy plugged into the A/V system of our van.” Griffin gestured toward the street. “We can show it to you there.”

“Good.” She picked up her phone and keys while Lynch rolled up the two mats they had spread out. As they walked down toward Ladera Street, Metcalf turned toward Kendra. “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“All that stuff about us. You can’t leave us hanging.”

“Would I do that to you, Metcalf?”

“You’ve done it before,” Griffin growled. “I think you just like to show us how vulnerable we are to you.”

“Maybe sometimes. It depends on how vulnerable *I’m* feeling at a given moment. Most of the time it just saves time and prevents lies.”

“And sticks your nose where it doesn’t belong. How in the hell did you know my wife wasn’t with me?”

“Because you don’t seem to know how to take your shirts to the dry cleaner. The only times your shirts haven’t been pressed and starched in the years I’ve known you is the two times you and your wife were separated. Instead, you launder them yourself with an overabundance of scented Bounce dryer sheets.”

Griffin gripped his collar between this thumb and forefinger and sniffed it. “Too much?”

“Too much. One is really all you need.”

“You could have told me that years ago.”

“Oh, but that wouldn’t have been nearly as much fun for me.”

“Nice. So how did you know about me being roused in the middle of the night?”

“That’s an easy one. You’re wearing glasses. The only time you wear those instead of your contact lenses is when you’re called to a scene in the middle of the night. Those particular glasses have an antireflective coating that’s starting to break down, giving the lenses some annoying streaks you probably wouldn’t tolerate if you wore them more often.”

Griffin took off the glasses and looked at the lenses. “Is that what that is? They’ve been driving me nuts all morning. I keep wiping them, but it doesn’t help.”

“Could be time for new specs.”

“Could be.” He put the glasses back on. “Tell us how you know about Metcalf’s lady friend.”

“Actually, his shirt tipped me off. He obviously left in a hurry, and I’m guessing it’s the same shirt he wore yesterday.”

Metcalf glanced down at his blue, button-down collar shirt. "I thought it looked pretty good."

"It does. Most people would never guess that an attractive young woman was prancing around your home in it just a few hours ago."

"I don't know if she was *prancing* . . ." Metcalf slipped his fingers between the top two buttons and made a show of airing the shirt out. "Am I radiating a womanly smell? Perfume?"

"Body wash. And the smell is very faint. The cops at the crime scene probably weren't making fun of you behind your back. At least not because of the way you smell."

"Good to know."

"But tell me something, what's the special appeal of seeing a half-naked woman wearing your shirt?"

"Depends on the woman."

Lynch nodded. "Depends on the shirt."

"Unbelievable."

Metcalf thought of something. "How do you know she makes more money than I do? Other than your awareness of my pathetic government salary?"

"Her body wash is Frederic Malle Carnal Flower. That implies a level of income you and I can only aspire to."

"Hmm. Guess I should let her pay for dinner next time. So how did you know I was examining the corpse on a city street?"

"Whenever you put on evidence gloves, you roll up your sleeves and take off your watch. I noticed that you're not wearing your watch and your sleeves are unbuttoned. The knees of your pants show a bit of street grime and that polyester blend is surprisingly good for picking up fine impressions. The imprint on your knees was surely made by a rock, sand, and asphalt slurry seal, which coats most San Diego streets."

Griffin looked at her skeptically. “Slurry seal and not perpetual pavement?”

“No. Two very different impressions. Metcalf was clearly on his knees on a city street, not a parking lot, evidence gloves on, inspecting a corpse.” She looked up at the two men. “And before you ask how I knew it was a corpse, you’ve never asked me to consult on an investigation where a dead body wasn’t involved.”

Metcalf gave her a rueful nod. “If you want us to stop bothering you, you should try being wrong a little more often.”

“Is that what it would take?” She sighed. “I’ll see what I can do.”

They reached the path’s end on Ladera Street and Griffin led them to a white-paneled van parked near the park entrance. He slid open the side door and ushered Kendra and Lynch inside. “Climb in. The next show starts in two minutes.”

Kendra and Lynch slid into the second row of seats while Griffin and Metcalf took their places up front. Griffin turned a knob on the console and a ceiling-mounted monitor flickered on.

Kendra nodded toward it. “Looks like the same setup my friends use to babysit their kids on road trips.”

“Not this particular one unless they want to give their kids nightmares,” Griffin said. “We’ve reviewed some of the goriest crime scenes imaginable on that screen.”

“What exactly are you about to show me?” Kendra said.

“We’re trying to figure that out ourselves. It’s what Elena Meyer died trying to deliver to you. I hope to hell you can give us some idea why.”

Griffin pushed a button on the front console and the video started playing on the screen.

Kendra didn't know what she was expecting, but it wasn't Kool and the Gang's "Celebration." The song played over a video of tables of well-dressed, happy people eating, drinking, laughing, and snapping pictures.

The video appeared to be the work of an amateur, perhaps shot with a mobile phone. The continuous shot swept through the large room, which was decorated with helium balloons and multicolored streamers. A DJ lorded over the small dance floor, where half a dozen rhythmically challenged couples moved to the beat.

"It's a wedding reception," Kendra murmured. "What the hell?"

"Kind of the reaction of everyone who's seen it," Metcalf said.

The shot moved past the dance floor to a long table where the wedding party was seated. The bride and groom greeted well-wishers at the center.

The video continued for almost twenty minutes, ticking off the boxes for a typical wedding. The cake-cutting. The teary-eyed toasts. The bouquet toss.

Then it was over.

Kendra stared at the blank screen for a long moment. "Show it to me again."

Metcalf punched a button on the console, and the wedding video restarted.

Kendra watched the video again, this time concentrating on the faces, the voices, the clothing, the fine details she may have missed the first time. Very little had escaped her, she realized.

"Well?" Griffin said after it ended. "Do you recognize any of those people?"

"No. Not one."

"Any idea why our victim would have wanted you to see it?"

Kendra leaned back. “No idea at all. And I don’t believe the victim was even at this reception. I didn’t see her anywhere.”

“We didn’t either,” Griffin said. “We’re thinking maybe she’s the one who took the video.”

“She wasn’t.”

Lynch turned toward her. “What makes you so sure?”

“Assuming the videographer was holding the lens at about eye level, it was a tall man, probably around six-foot-two. Crime scene markers in the photos Griffin showed us indicate that the victim was about five-foot-four. For a second, you can see a shoulders-down reflection in a decorative brass wall ornament. Whoever took the video was wearing a tux.”

Metcalf jotted this down into a worn leather notebook. “We’re checking with the major hotel chains to see if they recognize the venue, but it could also be a reception hall or events facility. Since the victim lived in Connecticut, we’re starting there.”

“Don’t. Start here in southern California. And this is in a large country club, one with a golf course.”

Metcalf looked up from his notebook. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Next time you watch the video, look at the pillars. They’re mahogany. It’s dark, but you can still see that the top of each one is carved with golf symbols: tees, clubs, flags.”

“We missed that,” Griffin said. “How do you know it’s here in California?”

“Dialects. The groom and his family are from the northeast, but the bride, her parents, and most of her friends are from here. The bride’s father was definitely playing host, talking to the DJ, bartender, and servers at various times during the video. I’d say he was a member of the country club, wherever it is.”

“Anything else?”

Kendra shook her head. “No. It looks like every boring wedding video ever made. Why would a woman die trying to get this to me?”

“We were hoping you’d tell us,” Metcalf said.

“I can’t. At least not yet.” She glanced at Lynch, and he reached out and gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. He could see this was already getting under her skin. She turned back to Griffin and Metcalf. “I want a copy of this video.”

Griffin ejected the flash drive and offered it to her. “This one’s yours. We’d appreciate anything else you can tell us.”

She stared at the stick. She’d wanted to tell Griffin to go to hell, and now here she was up to her eyeballs in this case.

But this poor woman, for some reason, had spent her last moments on Earth trying to get this video to *her*. It gave Kendra a strange sense of bonding.

Okay, this one’s for you, Elena Meyer of Fairfield, Connecticut.

Kendra grabbed the flash drive and climbed out of the van.

**SHE WAS ALMOST TO HER CAR** when Lynch caught up to her. “Wait up.”

She turned. “You had no idea they were coming for me today?”

“Of course not.”

She gave him a doubtful look. “Really?”

“Yes. You think I was here on a recruiting mission? I left the FBI a long time ago. *You* called *me*, remember?”

He was right. She was being paranoid. But she was aware of what machinations Lynch was capable. Governments and

companies paid him enormous amounts of money to go into seemingly impossible situations and change the outcome to suit themselves. It was difficult to trust a man with those kinds of abilities. Yet she did trust him . . . most of the time. “I know. I’m sorry. I’m sure it happened just like Metcalf said. Olivia would have no reason not to tell them where to find me.” She looked at the flash drive in her hand. “Anyway . . . this one is personal. This is one I need to do.”

“I know you do.”

“I just wish I knew why she chose me.”

Lynch put his hands on her forearms. “I’ll contact some of my NSA sources. I’ll see if there’s any common ground between you and her as far as work or educational background, associates, whatever. She may have just read about one of your cases sometime. Your energy is best spent figuring out what she was trying to tell you with that video.”

“I’m already working on it. It’ll be hard for me to work on anything else.”

“I know,” he said lightly. “It’s that obsessive streak I find so endearing. I’m always plotting how to get you to focus it on me.” His smile faded. “But you can’t let it take over your life. Let me take you to lunch at Mister A’s. I guarantee their Maine lobster strudel will take your mind off everything else.”

“Can’t. It’s a work day. I have three clients this afternoon.”

“Then dinner.”

She held up the flash drive. “I’ll be eating leftover pasta while I watch this ridiculous wedding video over and over again.”

He raised his hands in surrender. “I thought I’d try. If you feel like getting away from it for a while, we can always work on those wrist-breaking techniques.” His voice lowered to teasing

sensuality as he turned and strolled away. “Or any other holds that interest you. I live to serve . . .”

La Jolla Shores  
La Jolla, California

Gil Corkle hated the beach.

Nothing about it was the least bit appealing to him. Not the coarse sand. Not the cold and dirty water. Not the incessant roar of the pounding surf. He wanted to be anyplace but here.

But Vivianne Kerstine had insisted.

Corkle stopped at the edge of the parking lot to take off his shoes. Damned if he was going to ruin a two-thousand-dollar pair of Berluti loafers to accommodate his boss’s foolishness.

He carried his shoes as he trudged barefoot through the sand. It was hot. Another thing he hated about the damned beach.

He could see Vivianne in the distance, ankle deep in water.

She didn’t face him as he approached. “You told me Elena Meyer wouldn’t be a problem.”

He stopped just short of the surf. “She was smarter than any of us gave her credit for. It would have been better if you’d realized that from the beginning.”

Vivianne turned and glared at him. In almost any other context, she would be considered beautiful, with high cheekbones, full lips, and long dark hair. Now she was absolutely terrifying. “So this is my fault?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Sounded like it to me.”

Corkle swallowed hard. It wasn't wise to piss off Vivianne, especially since he was already on thin ice with her. Damage control. "I'm just saying . . . she surprised us all."

"But once that happened, it was your job to stop her."

"I know. I know. I'm sorry. She made it to a crowded street before I could get to her."

"Unfortunate."

Corkle didn't like the way she said that. He'd seen what happened to people who disappointed Vivianne. He stepped closer to her, ignoring the water lapping around his trouser cuffs. "That video is meaningless without Elena to explain it to them. The police won't have anything to go on."

"It's not the police that concerns me."

"Then what does?"

"Kendra Michaels."

"I don't see a problem. Surely without Elena to—"

"Don't underestimate Michaels, Corkle. I've researched her, and she produces when no one else is able to do it. That means we're now all at risk. Elena was trying to get to Kendra Michaels for a reason."

Corkle said softly, "I can do something about that."

"Like you did last night? I don't know if we can withstand any more of your ham-fisted problem solving."

He didn't like the coldness of her voice. "I'm better than that," he said quickly. "You know it."

"Just cool your jets, Corkle." Vivianne once again turned to face the ocean breeze. "Before you do something rash that will make everything more of a disaster than it is already. I've been thinking about it. Kendra Michaels may be of some use to us . . ."

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

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