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Author: Ed Howdershelt

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## AN ENCOUNTER IN ATLANTA

A Mandi Steele Novel

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### Prologue:

Ahmed Musaffi combined three prayers on Friday afternoon; one for his family, one for himself, and one for success in his holy mission. He then got into the yellow Crown Victoria that had been provided for the occasion and drove the few miles from Cascade Heights into downtown Atlanta through a drizzling rain.

The Crown Vic had been 'heavily customized' -- a choice of words that had been a source of great amusement among those who had labored for a week to pack the trunk and every concealable cubic inch of the car with plastic explosive.

Every little bump in the road bottomed-out the shocks and springs, and despite what he'd been told about his load being detonated only by radio, Ahmed flinched hard at every jolt and swore viciously at the other cars around him.

A red, hard plastic suitcase shifted slightly on the seat next to him. Ahmed reached to push it back in place and briefly cursed the fool who'd perched it there, although no wires showed and there was no chance the case would fall.

At a red light one block from his goal, Ahmed wiped his face on his sleeves and repeated part of his last prayer -- the part for himself -- one more time as he twisted his grip on the steering wheel.

Clusters of people hurried across the street, some in various costumes he recognized. Spiderman led Wonder Woman at a laughing dash to the shelter of an awning, where they were joined by Lara Croft, a tall, furry creature, and a couple of white-armored stormtroopers.

Ridiculous fantasies of the unfaithful, thought Ahmed. There was only one true book under heaven and no man had ever been so foolish as to try to make a movie of it.

Ahmed's little group had been instructed to strike on the second day of the science fiction convention. No reasons had been given for choosing this particular event as a target and -- as far as Ahmed was concerned -- none were required. Their leader had spoken, and his words were the words of Allah in matters of their holy cause.

When the light turned green, Ahmed's jangling nerves caused him to goose the gas pedal. The back tires spun uselessly on the wet pavement until he rather shakily let up on the gas a bit.

Continuing up the street, he turned left into the covered driveway of the Rivage Hotel's reception area and joined a line of cars waiting their turns to load or offload passengers and luggage at the big glass doors at the top of the driveway.

Ahmed's was the fifth car in line when a family of five came through those doors and walked past him, evidently on their way to some part of the science fiction convention.

The three children all wore costumes; the two boys were waving their hollow plastic lightsabers at each other and the blonde girl -- perhaps as old as twelve -- was wearing a Batgirl costume and slinging her cape dramatically as she walked.

A pang of pity lanced through Ahmed, but then he remembered his teachings, hardened his heart, and severely chastised himself for his momentary weakness.

They were just infidels. Untaught, unholy, and therefore unfit to live. He moved forward another carlength, and again watched the family in his rearview mirror as they stood waiting to cross the street.

The blonde girl grinningly faced into the gusting wind to make her cape billow behind her. Too bad, Ahmed thought appraisingly. The girl might possibly have been found worthy of conversion to Islam.

Or not, he appended, remembering the dancers at the strip club the night before. After all, even infidel females were good for purposes of pleasure and labor. In the pure world that he and other holy martyrs would bring into being, their children would be raised according to the teachings of the Prophet and the women would be allowed to live only so long as they dutifully served the righteous and faithful.

The car by the doors moved away as people got into the car behind it. It then moved away, as well, and Ahmed was only one carlength away from where he could aim his fake taxi up the ramp at the doors.

He eyed the walkway ramp -- easily five meters wide, with no posts or other impediments -- and the doors above. In the center was a revolving door, flanked on either side by doors that swung open. They would prove no barrier. All he had to do was ram through and get the car into the lobby, then press the button on the transmitter in his raincoat pocket.

Motion in his side-rearview mirror and the sound of something hollow clattering on the ground caused him to look away from the doors.

A truly beautiful blonde woman in what appeared to be little more than a bathing suit and boots stood just behind his car. She seemed to be looking for something, probably some sort of accessory to her scandalously inadequate costume.

Thinking that she must also be a visitor to the science fiction convention, Ahmed's eyes locked on her marvelous bare legs and ample bosom for

some moments as she crouched and knelt to try to reach whatever had fallen beneath the taxi.

Her eyes met his in the mirror and she smiled coyly as she walked up the driveway. Allah be praised for letting such a magnificent woman be his last sight on Earth! And her glorious breasts were nearly leaping out of her costume!

Concentrating on her approaching breasts, Ahmed never saw -- and was conscious only long enough to barely feel -- her fist slam into the side of his head. The blow sent him sprawling against the luggage on the seat and into oblivion.

The woman quickly shifted the car into neutral, went behind it to grab the bumper, and began pulling the Crown Vic backward down the ramp to the street, where she jumped to the front of the car, lifted it by the bumper and reached under it to grip the frame, and launched upward with the Crown Vic dangling from her grasp.

From the indoor cafe across the street, Mohammed Jamal took his eyes off the policeman and another man who were having a light lunch at a nearby table and stared with incredulous awe as a half-naked blonde woman lifted the Crown Victoria and seemed to leap into the sky with it.

He'd frozen in mid-sip of his coffee with as much complete, mind-boggling shock as anyone else witnessing the event, but he recovered fairly quickly as he realized that there was still a slim chance to set off the bomb in or near the canyon-like confines of the streets.

Hurriedly putting down his coffee cup, he reached for the transmitter in his left coat pocket, but the chair arm got in his way. He stood up, wasting precious seconds and knocking his chair over as he continued to stare upward through the window at the Crown Vic. He'd finally managed to get his left hand into his pocket as the two men he'd been watching also stood up and began coming at him.

The one in a police uniform pointed at Jamal and said, "*Freeze!*" as he reached for his sidearm. Jamal -- his radio transmitter momentarily forgotten -- made a grab for his Beretta 9mm pistol in his right coat pocket.

Jamal had thought the cop was the greater danger. He was wrong; before Jamal could even finish bringing his own gun into line with the two men, the other man yanked a pistol from a shoulder holster, leveled it at Jamal, and fired twice.

Mohammed Jamal felt the hot slugs plunge completely through his chest as their impact slammed him back against the window facing the street. He was barely aware that he fired his Beretta as he toppled; for a moment he actually wondered why the light fixture by the coffee bar exploded.

The bullets that had passed through Jamal hit the window behind him a split-second before Jamal did, turning it into a ten-foot-tall spiderweb of shattered safety glass that collapsed around Jamal's body in a glittering cloud as he fell to the sidewalk below.

The bushes below the window snagged Jamal's coat and violently twisted him in mid-air, then he fell to the sidewalk on his left side, hearing and feeling the bones of his arm snap as his head slammed against the concrete. Momentarily stunned, Mohammed Jamal fought to remain conscious and stared upward, trying to locate the Crown Victoria.

There! Almost directly overhead, an odd-shaped dark dot against the sky! Jamal waveringly aimed his pistol at the men who leaned out of the window frame above him and prayed to Allah that his transmitter hadn't been broken.

Forcing the unfeeling thumb and fingers of his shattered left arm to squeeze the small transmitter took a supreme effort. Jamal cast the pistol aside in frustration and dropped his right hand over his left to help it close on the transmitter even as more bullets tore through his chest and skull.

## Chapter One

Looking down from the cafe window at the man he'd just shot, Ed Cade saw the brilliant overhead flash reflected in the windows of the hotel across the street and realized that something -- likely the car -- had exploded above the city.

Some guy dressed as a knight was standing smack in the middle of the street, aiming a camera of some sort straight up at the sky. The light turned green at the intersection and the guy almost tripped over his sword trying to scramble out of the street.

Cade stepped back from the window and looked to his left and right. There was only the Atlanta cop -- Avery -- standing next to him on the right. On his left, one person still sat by the windows, apparently frozen in stark, staring terror.

"Get away from the windows," said Cade.

Avery stepped back as Cade grabbed the frozen guy's coat to pull him to his feet and insistently repeated, "Get away from the window, dammit!"

The man's eyes fixed on Cade's Glock and he said nothing, but as bits of debris pelted down on the street outside the window, he stood quickly on shaky legs and tried to comply.

His knees failed and he wound up kneeling, then sitting on the floor. Avery came over to get a grip on the guy's other shoulder and they dragged him away from the windows.

The rain of unidentifiable debris slackened quickly and seemed to end, and Avery started back toward the window to look up between the buildings.

"Avery!" said Cade. "Not yet. Count to thirty before you go near that window."

Cade put his Glock back in its shoulder holster under his field jacket and looked around again. Nine people. Five men, four women. Two had apparently left the cafe.

He heard more debris-rain hit the street and buildings outside and saw Avery cast a wondering glance at him.

"Some of it had farther to fall," said Cade.

As if to punctuate his words, a car bumper slammed into the street, narrowly missing a black Lexus, and spinningly bounced out of view toward the intersection.

Glancing past the group clustered by the cafe entrance, Cade saw the two missing women hurrying past the reception desk and he took off after them at a trot.

He caught up with them by the elevators and didn't bother with introductions; they'd likely remember him.

Stepping in front of them, he said, "Ladies, get back to the cafe. You're witnesses to a shooting."

"I'm not going back in there!" the one on the right said in a near-hysterical tone. "I'm *not!* You can't make me!"

Snatching her purse off her shoulder, Cade said, "I won't have to. The cops'll find you with whatever's in this."

Turning to the other woman, he asked, "Are you going to give me a hard time, too?"

Shaking her head slightly, she said, "No. I didn't think we should leave, but Judy..."

Interrupting her, Cade said, "Cool. Let's go, then."

Putting his arm through hers, he led the way back to the restaurant. After a moment, Judy followed. Cade turned the ladies and Judy's purse over to Avery, then stepped away from the group to have a look at the street below the window.

The street was empty of people. Between the blonde hauling the car upstairs, the gunshots, and the blast in the sky, most of them had at least had sense enough to get off the sidewalks and under the cover of the Rivage's drive-through.

The rent-a-cop who'd been directing foot traffic across the street between the hotels was one of those under cover. Cade whistled to get his attention and pointed to the body on the sidewalk, then yelled that he should keep people away from it. The guy nodded and headed toward the body. Cade went back to Avery, who was talking to someone on his radio.

Avery finished his immediate conversation, then turned to Cade and said, "Teams five and nine got lucky, too. Two dead and one in custody. The guys on the roof are coming down, so we'll have some help here in a few minutes."

Nodding, Cade said, "I'll go out and keep the tourists away from the one on the sidewalk."

Extending a hand, Avery said, "Okay. Hey, if I don't see you again, it's been good working with you. Why won't they tell us where you extra guys came from?"

Shaking Avery's hand, Cade said, "Damned if I know. I'm from Florida, if it helps any."

"Oh, yeah," laughed Avery. "That helps a bunch."

"Great. Later, then."

Moving past the coffee bar, Cade stopped and looked around for the attendant, then knocked on the counter. A man in a suit separated himself from the crowd by the door and came to say that the coffee bar was closed.

"You're management?" asked Cade.

"Yes, sir. Look, we're rather busy at the moment..."

"I'm the guy who shot out your window and I have to go guard a body on the sidewalk. How much is a coffee to go?"

The man seemed to have to find a way to attach the two concepts in his mind before he said, "Uh, just take one, sir."

"Thanks. Why not offer all those spooked people a cup, too? It'll look great on your record if you take charge and keep them quiet and happy until all the note-taking is finished."

The guy glanced at the group and seemed to realize that this was his middle-management chance to achieve some favorable and potentially useful self-publicity. He nodded and stepped behind the counter to draw Cade a coffee as he called the attendant over.

"Yes, Mr. D'Angelo?" asked the attendant.

Handing the coffee to Cade, D'Angelo said, "Go ahead and open back up, Manuel. Free coffee for anybody who's supposed to be in here until the cops are gone."

"Yes, sir," said Manuel.

"Could I have an extra coffee?" asked Cade.

Manuel drew another coffee and handed it to him. Cade thanked him and headed for the stairs to the street. The rent-a-cop was standing by the body, as requested.

He said, "You're the guy who told me to watch the body."

Cade handed him the extra coffee and said, "Yup, sure am. Here, I brought you a coffee."

Someone aimed a camera toward them and Cade turned to face the cop -- Davies, by his nametag -- as the camera flashed. He kicked the gun that had fallen into the bushes over by the body and toed it under a fold in the coat.

"Should you be moving the evidence around like that?" asked Davies.

"So tell 'em I kicked it. I just came down here to get your name and badge number for the record and secure the scene."

Shrugging as he looked around, Cade said, "Now the scene is secure, I have my info, and you have your coffee. Just stay put until the cops get here."

Davies almost choked on his first sip of coffee.

He glanced down at the body, then stared at Cade as he asked, "But... You mean you aren't a cop?!"

"Never said I was," said Cade. "I've just been working with them today. See you later."

As Cade turned to go, the guard said, "Hey, wait. Is there any word about the blonde? The woman who, uh... who flew off... with the car?"

"I haven't heard anything."

Glancing up at the sky, Davies said, "God, I hope she wasn't still hanging onto that car when it blew. I was looking right at it, but it was too far up... Do you think she...?"

"No idea," said Cade. "Later."

With that, he headed back up the steps and into the hotel, where he gave Davies' info to Avery and refilled his coffee cup, then sat down in a corner of the cafe with an incident report form to wait for Lieutenant Bain.

## Chapter Two

Mandi Steele had landed behind a support column in the drive-through of the Rivage Hotel, then stepped out to briefly join a group of costumed conventioners on their way up the walkway ramp.

As she neared the taxi at the front of the line, she spun the two-foot piece of pvc tubing she'd found behind the column like a baton. Letting it escape her grasp in the direction of the taxi gave her a pretext for going through the motions of pretending to look for it as she studied the car.

The paint was new, but the car wasn't. It was full of luggage and rode so low that it must have had a ton of extra weight aboard. No normal luggage would weigh that much.

Mandi pretended to search for her missing baton beneath the taxi's rear. She discovered that the inner side of the fender was solid, not hollow. A pinch of the clay-like plastique came away between her fingers and she let it fall under the car before retrieving the bit of pipe and standing up.

In the rearview mirror, the driver's eyes were focused on her legs. Mandi saw that he was none other than Ahmed Mussafi, a 'suspected' terrorist whose face had graced several of the wanted posters she'd studied before she'd left Las Vegas.

The anonymous tip to Gary's office about a suicide attack had been gospel, after all. Now; how to neutralize this situation? How to handle the driver, who likely had some kind of a detonator close at hand?

To a typical Middle-Eastern man, just about any visible female flesh would hold his eyes like a magnet. Pretending to adjust her uniform, Mandi tugged her skirt and brushed imaginary dirt from her breasts. Her motions guided his eyes over her body as she pretended to continue past the car on her way up the ramp.

As she came even with his window, Mandi took advantage of the fact that his eyes were firmly locked on her breasts, snapping a punch at the side of his head that knocked him cold as it sent him across the seat.

She let the punch become a grab for the gearshift, took the car out of 'drive' and into 'neutral', then she went to the rear of the car, grabbed the bumper, and began hauling the car down the ramp to the street.

The first order of business was to get the car a safe distance away from everything and everyone. In the heart of downtown Atlanta, that could only mean going up.

At the bottom of the ramp, traffic prevented her from dragging the car into the street, so Mandi pulled it onto the broad sidewalk. She jumped over the car to the front of it, lifted the front of the car, got a firm grip on the strongest part of the frame, and powered upward.

Remembering what Gary had said about possible watchers who might set off any explosives, Mandi nonetheless kept her speed barely subsonic to avoid damage to nearby buildings.

Almost exactly twelve seconds into Mandi's upward dash, Mohammed Jamal's dying efforts succeeded. In a split-second, nearly eighteen hundred pounds of plastique converted to energy, essentially vaporizing much of the Crown Victoria and shredding the rest of it.

Even for someone like Mandi, it was a bit much. While the blast couldn't destroy her, it hit her like a huge fist, knocking her spinning for several miles before she could clear her head enough to regain control of herself.

She had no idea where she was until she looked around and saw the cloud of smoke from the explosion hovering above downtown Atlanta. Distance made the smoke cloud appear no bigger than the head of a thumbtack, and Mandi began to realize just how powerful the explosion had been as she guesstimated that it had thrown her five or six miles.

Flying back toward downtown, Mandi realized with a mental sigh that there was no way that she'd be able to remain a mysterious semi-myth after today.

Someone might even have had the presence of mind to take her picture while she was in the hotel's drive-through. Damn. It would probably be a shot of her reaching under the car for the pvc tube. Wouldn't a close-up of her butt look great on the six o'clock news?

Glancing around as she landed in the stairwell alcove where she'd left her mundane clothes, she saw that some of the nearby buildings were missing some of their windows.

Any damage would have been from debris, thought Mandi. The blast had occurred almost two miles up, so the shockwave wouldn't have done it.

Retrieving a cell phone from her purse, Mandi tapped in an Atlanta number given to her for the mission.

A woman answered with, "Zero-eight-two-six."

"Angel here."

"Go, Angel."

"Do you have anything else for me?"

"Not a thing. John says 'good job' and you're on standby."

"Thank you."

The woman said, "You're welcome. Enjoy your stay in Atlanta," then she disconnected.

With water from a small puddle near the entrance, Mandi managed to clean most of the explosion's residue from her arms and legs. Using her makeup mirror, she cleaned her face and applied a bit of makeup, then she changed clothes and rechecked herself.

Judging her appearance normal enough, Mandi removed the flattened soft drink can that had kept the roof door from latching and headed down to the forty-second floor.

She cracked the stairwell door slightly and saw that a few people were waiting for the elevator across the hall. Two minutes later, they were gone and the hall was empty. Mandi stepped out, took the elevator to the fourth floor, and headed for the room that had been issued to her for the mission.

Frank Stearns of the NIA stepped out of room 423 and a big grin formed on his face when he saw Mandi. Mandi, on the other hand, sighed and thought, 'Oh, damn.'

Stearns wasn't as bad as some men. He genuinely didn't seem have any reservations about working with women, for instance. He did, however, have an overbearing personality and seemed to view himself as every woman's dream come true.

He also seemed to have an unyielding curiosity about Mandi, which was actually quite understandable. When Gary had added her to the operation roster, he'd waited until the last possible minute to do so, dropping her in as a standalone with little or no explanation to anyone.

Mandi didn't 'liaison' with the teams or team leaders. She hadn't attended even one of the briefings and her introduction had been so brief and uninformative that some of the team honchos -- leery of working with unknowns -- had been more than a little pissed at the time.

While she was pleasant enough when someone happened to encounter her, she didn't work or socialize with people from any of the teams. For the most part -- even if they weren't exactly accepting of the terms -- everybody seemed to get used to the arrangement, but not Frank Stearns.

His inability to find out anything at all about Mandi through channels seemed to bug the hell out of him. When official queries failed, he'd resorted to overt friendliness, inviting her to lunches, dinners, and even a party, and he seemed to take her continuous refusals as some sort of personal challenge.

"Well, hi, there, gorgeous!" said Stearns. "I'm about to go get a late lunch. Care to join me?"

Returning his grin with a small, polite smile, Mandi said, "Thanks anyway."

"It's just a lunch, Mandi. I don't like to eat alone."

"Sorry, Frank. Get somebody else."

Turning to watch her walk past, Stearns asked, "Well, how about dinner later?"

Without turning around, she said, "You're a coworker, Frank. It won't happen."

He sighed, "Hey, I don't agree with that policy, y'know?"

With a slight nod, Mandi said, "Yeah, I know. Bye."

He must really have been hungry; for once, he didn't persist. Even if she were interested in playing, it wouldn't happen with Frank Stearns. The guy was a good team leader, but Mandi had overheard him talking to John Hartmann about one of his dates.

He'd made it sound as if he'd conquered Mount Everest and had given a blow-by-blow description of events -- as he remembered them, of course -- including their bedroom activities, some of which had sounded greatly embellished.

No, there'd be no playing with Frank. Never with Frank.

Mandi let herself into room 426 and tossed her purse on the bed, then she began taking off her clothes as she ran hot water in the bathtub and added some bubblebath.

She wasn't tired and didn't have any aches or pains or frustrations to soak away. Mandi just liked bubblebaths and the private, quiet time they provided.

It was also an opportunity to see what all had been issued with her DragonCon badge, which was clipped to a plastic bag someone had delivered and placed on the bed.

Mandi picked the goodie-bag up and peeked inside, then took it into the bathroom. After getting comfortable in the tub, she spent the next half hour reviewing convention literature.

The big, glossy-covered guide said there'd be several stars from TV shows and movies signing autographs, as well as a host of artists and authors.

It also listed a costume contest, three dances, discussion panels, and several movies to be shown in the ballrooms. The dealer's room vendor list made it seem likely that she'd find some unique jewelry or clothing.

A smaller, pocket-sized booklet contained a simpler scheduling chart of all events, panels, appearances, and other doings of interest during the four days of the convention.

Mandi used a yellow highlighter on some of the chart's info blocks, then rooted through the rest of the stuff in the bag; buttons, pins, party notices, and ads and brochures for upcoming science fiction movies and books.

By the time the bath water had cooled Mandi had less than an hour to find and get to a writer's panel titled 'Women of Science Fiction'. She got out of the tub and chose a fresh outfit from her limited travel wardrobe.

Everyone else at the convention seemed to either be dressed for a camping trip -- backpack included, in many cases -- or wearing some kind of costume, so Mandi decided to make a fashion statement of sorts.

She chose an electric blue, mid-thigh, sleeveless sheath dress that had a white stripe down each side-seam and fit her rather closely. The blue shoes in her shoe bag were a shade off, but in the crowd she was likely to encounter, a shade -- or even a few shades -- probably wouldn't matter much.

Choosing a small silver necklace from her travel kit, she put it on and thought about wearing earrings, then passed on them as being unnecessary.

Not for the first time, the thought occurred to her that if her ears could be pierced, she wouldn't have to wear those damned clip-ons that never seemed to stay clipped on.

Stockings? No, she decided. Bare legs also make a kind of statement and they usually got more looks. After adding a touch of lip gloss, she scooped up her purse and key card and headed for the elevators.

## Chapter Three

The extra cops from the roof arrived. Avery sent two down to the sidewalk and had the other two continue gathering info from the people in the cafe.

One started to approach Cade, so he opened his field jacket to show the Glock in its holster. The cop conferred with Avery for a moment, then headed toward someone else as Cade got a coffee refill and returned to his table.

The image of the leggy blonde hopping over the taxi and launching into the sky with it replayed in Cade's mind.

Everything he had ever read about flying blondes had appeared either in comic books or the same tabloids that reported things like Elvis and Jesus sightings, and not one of those rags had ever printed a picture of a flying blonde that hadn't been fairly obviously altered.

In one case the original picture had been from a fashion shoot in the late fifties and the model -- now in her eighties -- had sued and won a few thousand bucks in court.

Cade decided that he now found the subject of flying blondes considerably more interesting and resolved to look into the matter as time permitted.

Lt. Bain arrived, checked in with Avery, and headed for Cade's table. Cade stood up as she approached and waved at Manuel as he asked Bain how she liked her coffee.

Smoothing her skirt and hitching the back of her jacket clear as she sat down, she responded instantly, "Two sugars, please. How do you feel about what happened, Mr. Cade? About... about what you had to do, I mean?"

'About what he'd had to do'? Couldn't she say the words 'about shooting people'?

"Next question, please," said Cade. "Manuel, put two sugars in hers, okay?" Manuel nodded.

"Mr. Cade," said Bain, "I have no doubt the shooting was justified, if that's your concern. I'm asking because..."

Interrupting her, Cade said, "I'm just an inter-agency loaner. You don't have to be concerned about my feelings."

Her gaze narrowed as she set her purse on the table and firmly said, "But it happened while you were on loan to us, Mr. Cade, so if you should feel a need for counseling, we have several good people available."

Counseling, huh? That would be a first. Cade kept a straight face to avoid offending her as he glanced up to see how far along Manuel was with her coffee.

Getting up to save Manuel a trip, Cade served Bain her coffee and said, "Like I said, milady; next question."

Bain said nothing until Cade had handed her the coffee and sat back down. She sipped for a moment, then set the coffee down on the table and regarded Cade quietly for a time.

"Okay, then," she said, "The next question is, how many rounds did you fire?"

"Four. Avery fired twice."

"You're sure about that?"

"I'm sure. I hit him twice up here and twice on the sidewalk when he aimed up at us. Avery fired at him on the sidewalk."

She nodded and said, "If any rounds went astray, we'll have to account for them. May I see your weapon?"

Cade unholstered his Glock, dropped the clip and handed it to her, then turned the gun slightly to the left and jacked the slide to eject the round in the chamber, which he caught with his left hand and set upright on the table.

Leaving the Glock's slide open, he set the gun on the table, as well, and picked up his coffee. Bain had watched the casual emptying of the gun with one eyebrow raised, then she gave Cade a wry look.

"I'll bet that trick impresses the hell out of some women."

Shrugging, Cade said, "The only women who've ever seen me do that could probably do it, too, LT, so I kind of doubt it. Are you through counting my bullets?"

Nodding, she handed him the magazine and asked, "Did you have one in the chamber as well as a full magazine?"

As he thumbed the loose round into the top of the magazine, Cade said, "Yup. One up the spout."

He put the magazine back in the Glock and thumbed the slide release to close it, then put the gun back in its holster.

Bain said, "Thank you," and sipped her coffee again before sighingly saying, "I'm sorry, Mr. Cade, but you and your people were dropped on us from out of the blue. I simply don't know you well enough to just take your word for some things."

Shrugging again, Cade said, "No problem. Someone once said, '*Trust, but verify*'. It's a good policy. Now answer a question for me, please."

"If I can."

"Who was the woman who flew off with the car?"

"I can't tell you that." Heading off his next question, she quickly added, "I don't know who she is. Or was, I'm afraid. She was apparently dropped on us, too."

"Apparently?"

With a curt nod, she said, "I hate to admit it, but she was a complete surprise to the Atlanta PD."

Cade met her gaze for a moment, decided that if she wasn't telling him the truth, it wasn't worth pushing, and said, "I've seen tabloid reports of two superwomen and didn't really believe in either one of them until today. One is supposed to hang out in or around California and the other has been reported mostly around Las Vegas."

"That's what I've heard, too. I made a request for info as soon as I heard what happened. Before I got out of the comm center, word had come down that I was not to ask again."

Avery came to the table and said, "Lieutenant Bain, we're going to need you in a few minutes."

"Okay, I'll be right there," she said, then as Avery nodded and walked away, she said, "Mr. Cade, my office doesn't seem to have your contact info."

"My boss knows where to find me."

Bain gazed at Cade thoughtfully for a moment, then stood up and picked up her purse as she said, "In that case, I'll go see what Avery and Dolman have for me."

Her eyes flicked to the unfinished report on the table.

"I'll give that to Avery," said Cade.

He sat back down as she walked away, but he didn't take his eyes off her. Great legs. Tall, brunette, and generally a fine example of womanhood. As she passed the coffee bar her head turned slightly and Cade saw her looking back at him in the mirror-finish of the coffee machine.

He gave her a nod that said, 'Yeah, lady. I'm looking.'

Bain held his reflected gaze for a moment, then moved on to join the other cops. Cade returned to finishing the police report and -- after rereading it twice -- judged it finished about fifteen minutes later.

Cade signed it and presented it to Avery, then pulled his DragonCon 'registered guest' badge out of his jacket pocket, clipped it to his collar, and headed into the hotel to see if this year's convention was still underway after all the excitement.

In the second-floor con suite, it seemed that a number of other people were wondering the same thing. They filled the con suite practically wall-to-wall as Cade squeezed in and looked around.

No answers there; Cade left the con suite and headed for the registration ballroom on the first floor, taking the cell phone he'd been issued out of his pocket and dialing the Atlanta number he'd been given for the mission.

A woman answered with, "Zero-eight-two-six."

"Dragonfly here."

"Go, Dragonfly."

"I filed a police report. Nothing to add. Am I offline?"

"Yes. John says 'good job' and you're on standby."

"Okay, thanks."

"You're welcome. Enjoy your stay in Atlanta."

She disconnected. Cade slipped the phone back in his pocket as he approached the elevators. As usual, there was a herd of people waiting. Some began chanting in unison as if that would somehow make the right elevator light come on.

"Down, down; we wanna go down!"

As he waited, Cade's mind returned to the moment that the blonde had dragged the car out of the hotel's driveway. A Crown Vic's roof came almost even with his shoulders. She'd been tall enough to easily see over it, so that made her between five-seven and five-ten.

And her legs. By God, she'd had magnificent legs. Even from across the street, he'd seen that she'd had the long, solid legs of a fitness diva.

How had she happened to be on hand to deal with the car bomb? He'd never seen or heard any reports of flying blondes in Atlanta. Chances were she'd been on tap just like more than half of the other people he'd met during this operation. That would make it likely that she'd been in town at least a few days, stashed somewhere as an ace in the hole.

It had to have been one hell of an explosion up there. Cade wondered if she'd still been hanging onto the car when it blew. Yeah, probably. She couldn't very well let go of it. Damn.

Motion in the lobby below caught his eye; the guy who'd been taking pictures in the street was cradling the camera and leading a small herd of people through the dense throng of conventioners, heading toward the front doors of the hotel.

Spurred to action for yet-unclear reasons, Cade glanced around for a way through the crowd by the elevators, but he realized that backtracking to the stairs near the con suite would cost him too much time. He looked over the rail at the lobby below.

The fountain below the balcony was the only area clear of people. Swinging his legs over the balcony rail and letting himself dangle at the bottom of the rail, Cade dropped perhaps seven feet into six inches of water.

Amid cries of "Jesus!" and "Holy shit!", he clambered out of the fountain and bored through the crowd after the knight and his entourage, nearing them just before they'd reached the sidewalk at the end of the hotel's carport.

"*You! The knight!*" yelled Cade.

The knight and most of his group stopped immediately. They saw Cade, soaked to the knees, running toward them.

One woman shrieked, "He's got a gun!" and pointed when she saw Cade's shoulder holster, but someone else laughed and said, "So do all the stormtroopers, Sandy. I don't know who he's supposed to be from what movie, though."

Cade hauled out his wallet and flashed his Atlanta PD Auxiliary Services ID as he came to a halt and said, "I'm not a character from a movie. The gun's real."

Turning to the knight, he said, "You were taking pictures in the street before the explosion. Did you get any closeups of the blonde who took the car?"

"Hey, man!" said the knight, "What I got in this camera's worth some money! I've already called World News Net..."

"Yeah, fine," interrupted Cade. "WNN can wait. I need to see what you've got in that camera."

Someone said, "Then you can catch the six o'clock news, just like everybody else, man. This isn't evidence, it's news."

Glancing at him, Cade said, "She grabbed a taxi and took off with it. I'm calling that grand theft auto. That makes this camera evidence, so you can show me what's in it or you can spend the weekend in jail."

A guy behind the knight whined, "That's bullshit, man! She saved the goddamned hotel and everybody in it. They're saying she was killed in the explosion and now *you're* saying you're gonna call her a *car thief?*"

"Only if your friend, here, doesn't cooperate."

The knight stood tall and said, "This is a four hundred dollar digital camera. I can't give you a tape and there's no way in hell you're getting this camera."

Sighing, Cade said, "Look, I don't want your camera and I don't want to arrest anybody." Leaning close, he growled, "I just want to see the damned pictures. It's been over half an hour since the blast, so I figure you've either made a copy on a computer or you're selling the only copy, which would make you one truly stupid fuck. Which is it?"

The knight stiffened briefly at that, but he realized that he could either cooperate or spend his DragonCon weekend in a jail cell.

"Yeah. I made a copy on my laptop," he said. "In case the news guys ripped us off."

"They won't," said Cade. "That's not how they work. You'll sell them a copy and make me a copy on my laptop and nobody will go to jail. Good enough?"

"You won't try to sell your copy?"

Raising his right hand, Cade said, "I swear I won't sell them or put them up for the public on the internet. Now decide -- and I mean *right now* -- whether you're going to make me a copy or make me arrest you."

The woman asked, "Jeremy, how are you going to make another copy on his computer? You have to have the camera software installed on the laptop."

"No sweat," said Cade. "I have a null cable. We'll hook the lappies up and send the pics to my box."

And so it was. Cade accompanied Jeremy and his little group to the WNN offices, who -- after seeing the camera's contents on the tiny flip-out screen -- sent someone to buy a camera like Jeremy's in order to get the software needed to transfer and remove the pictures from the camera.

The news honcho coughed up several thousand dollars when Jeremy swore there were no other copies -- a lie he'd have told anyway to keep his own copies -- and the group returned to the hotel.

Half an hour later, Cade had a copy of all the pictures. He sat at the desk in his fourth-floor room and studied each picture in turn as he cleaned his Glock and replaced the rounds he'd fired, then he chose three of the best pictures to print.

Cropping away everything but the woman's face, he printed the pictures as full-page images and studied her some more over a cup of instant coffee.

Even as Cade had examined the smaller pictures on the laptop's screen, he'd begun to feel certain that -- somewhere, at some time -- he'd either seen the woman before or seen someone who could damned near be her twin.

Holding a full-page blowup of her face made things come together in his mind. In 1996, he'd made a TDY visit to Nellis AFB with Captain Margaret Adams of Air Force Intelligence.

On the last weekend of the visit, she'd wanted to check out downtown Las Vegas. Some time during that Saturday night he'd seen the woman in the picture, but something about her was different. Her hair? Maybe she hadn't been a blonde.

Using his art program, Cade darkened her hair a few shades, then darkened it some more. There was still something not quite right. Had she been wearing glasses? No, he didn't think so. Something else. Colored contacts, maybe.

Laptops and hard drives are like any other machines; they'll usually break down only at the worst possible times. Cade couldn't burn a backup CD on the lappie, so he decided to take other precautions against losing the pictures.

Using the room's phone line, he signed onto the internet and opened an account at a free web host as 'ABC Products', created a directory for the pictures on the server, made a picture-list web page and titled it 'productimages', and sent everything up to the site. He then made a dummy index page that said, 'Under Construction' and contained no links.

After adding a 'no robots' text file to the root directory to keep search engines out of the website, he tested the pages by viewing a couple of the sequentially-numbered pictures.

It occurred to Cade that -- once WNN used the pictures on the news -- both Jeremy and WNN would be questioned at length, and Cade's involvement would be discovered.

In order to wipe away all traces of his recent web activities, Cade moved the laptop's 'cookie' files and cache files to a temporary directory, then rebooted to DOS and deleted that directory and all the 'index.dat' and history files using 'wipe.exe', which overwrote files with garbage code before deleting them.

He then backed up his 'favorites' list, uninstalled and reinstalled the browser so it would look as if he'd had to fix problems with the program, and very briefly visited several common websites to create new cache and history files.

When the coffee was gone, Cade checked his watch, put the computer away, and put his thoughts and speculations about the woman on a mental shelf as he brushed his teeth, put on a clean shirt, and tossed his convention guides in his backpack.

He had less than an hour to get to the first of four writer's conferences listed in the program guide -- a discussion about 'Women of Science Fiction' -- and he wanted to stop in the dealer's room on the way.

## Chapter Four

The door to room 422 opened as Mandi neared it and a tall guy in jeans, cowboy boots, and a green Army field jacket stepped out. He pulled the door shut with a glance in her direction that turned into a rather long look, then he hefted his black backpack and followed her toward the elevators.

He had to be close to fifty; Mandi wondered which team he was with, and in what capacity. All the rooms from 420 to 430 had been reserved as a block to centralize personnel, so he had to be some kind of a cop or fed. Or a liaison?

Pressing the 'down' button, she heard -- no, she *felt* -- the man come to stand quietly a few feet behind her. Very quietly, she added after a few moments. Almost unnaturally quietly.

There was no rubbing of fabric or scuffing of his boots on the carpet. No shifting of his backpack or even the soft creak of old boot leather as weight shifted from one leg to the other. The guy was an embodiment of silence.

Mandi had to actually focus her hearing a bit to be sure he was breathing, and she found it mildly unnerving that anyone could stand so silently for so long.

Another few moments passed before she turned and grinningly said with a raised eyebrow, "Just checking to see if you're really back there. You're very quiet."

He nodded slightly and returned her grin. When she'd turned, his eyes hadn't been on her butt or her legs, as she'd expected. They'd been on her hair or shoulders, because they'd met her eyes instantly. Mandi found that odd, too.

The guy seemed to study her face as he said, "Yeah, I guess I am kind of quiet sometimes. That's a nice outfit, milady. It doesn't scream 'look at me!', but it can't very easily be ignored, either."

'Milady'? Who calls a woman 'milady' these days? Mandi accepted his compliment as given and saw his eyes drop to her breasts. Correction; to her badge, which hung from one of her tiny demi-lapels. Her eyes fell to his badge in return.

"Mandi Steele," he read, extending his hand. "Hi, Mandi. I'm Ed Cade."

His eyes returned to hers as she shook his hand and said, "So I see. Nice to meet you. Why's the name block on your badge light blue?"

"I'm registered as a guest author. Artists get a different color -- light green, I think. Staff types get red or yellow."

She glanced at his badge again, then asked, "Are you staying on this floor? Was that your room you came out of?"

"Yup."

"I don't think anyone else on this floor is registered as a guest author. Why you?"

"Maybe it's because I'm really an author."

Uh, huh, thought Mandi. Or maybe he was a reporter who'd gotten wind of something? He'd come out of one of the rooms in the agency block, but...

Her expression made him add, "I'm with John's crew. They pulled me out of retirement for this op when they found out I'd be here anyway."

If anything, her puzzlement grew. "Retirement? From what? You don't look old enough to be retired."

Shrugging slightly, Cade said, "I am, though. Retired, that is. So I must be old enough, I guess. How about you? Which team are you with?"

"No team. John put me in as a stand-alone."

"Woo! A superspook, huh? Foreign or domestic? There seem to be some of each here today."

Shaking her head, Mandi said, "No, I'm not exactly with the NIA. I've been, uhm... coordinating things, you could say."

Something in Cade's expression seemed to change almost imperceptibly as he nodded without comment. Mandi instantly got the impression that he didn't believe her.

"What is it?" she asked with a small smile, "The fact that I'm a blonde? Don't you think I could coordinate anything?"

Raising a hand slightly in protest, Cade grinningly said, "Oh, no, milady, it's nothing like that. I'm sure you're very good at what you do. I have no doubt you could run an office if you had to. You'd look absolutely great while you did it, too."

Thinking that Cade meant that he thought she might be one of those 'secretaries' who can't really type, Mandi asked rather ominously, "What the hell are you getting at?"

She wasn't in the least prepared for his answer.

"Mandi," said Cade, "I saw you haul a car into the sky today. Admin types don't do stuff like that. They don't like to get their hands dirty."

A jolt shot through Mandi and her gaze at Cade narrowed peeringly as she quietly asked, "Are you *nuts*?! If you are, just tell me now so I can get the hell away from you, okay?"

The red 'down' light came on as the elevator chimed its arrival. Cade stepped around Mandi to clear the doorway.

Shifting his backpack slightly, he said, "Yeah, I was afraid you might react like that. The dealer's room can wait. Let's go back to my room for some show and tell."

The elevator doors opened as Mandi whisperingly blurted, "*What?!*"

Nobody got off the elevator and the people aboard it looked questioningly at Mandi and Cade until the doors closed again.

Once they were alone, Mandi stepped very close to Cade and was about to say something scathing when Cade said, "Okay, maybe that was a poor choice of words, but I guarantee you'll be glad I showed you the pictures."

Hovering between anger and startlement, Mandi peered at Cade sharply as she asked, "*What* pictures?!"

Shifting his backpack around front, Cade unzipped it and fished out the three printouts, which he handed to her.

"The pictures these blowups were made from," he said. "A kid with a digital camera took them. He sold them to WNN about an hour ago."

After staring at the pictures for all of two seconds, Mandi grabbed her cell phone out of her purse and dialed.

Cade heard the same woman he'd talked to perhaps six times in the last few days say, "Zero-eight-two-six."

"Angel here," said Mandi.

"Go, Angel."

"I need to talk to John. *Right now.*"

"He'll call you back. Do you need local assistance?"

Loudly enough to be heard by the woman on the phone, Cade said, "Tell her Dragonfly said 'no'."

"Angel, do you confirm?" asked the woman.

Unrealizingly nodding as she studied Cade, Mandi said, "Yes. We aren't in any danger here. We're trying to prevent a blown cover. Mine."

"Okay, Angel. Hang up and stand by."

"Thank you."

For a long few moments, Mandi continued to study Cade in silence, then she said, "We seem to know some of the same people, Dragonfly. I'll accept that as a positive reference."

Grinning, Cade said, "Well, that's damned decent of you, ma'am. You're 'Angel', huh? I'd say that fits well enough. What now? I'm pretty sure someone thought of this possibility."

Nodding, Mandi said, "They did. We did. Where did you get these printouts?"

"I printed them for reference. I thought you might still be in town and I wanted to be able to make a positive ID if I saw you again. Guess I don't really need them now, huh?"

Folding the pictures and putting them in her purse, Mandi said, "No, you don't. Do you have any other pictures of me?"

"Why even ask? You know they'll toss my room and check my laptop on general principles."

Grabbing his jacket and yanking him close, Mandi growled, "Don't be difficult. I'm not in the mood."

Almost nose-to-nose with her again, Cade quietly said, "You shouldn't get tough with people who are trying to help you. All the pictures are on my laptop."

Mandi's cell phone chirped and she quickly answered it with her free hand, not releasing Cade as she did so. Cade had no problem at all with being an inch from her face. It allowed him to listen easily to both sides of the conversation, which was rather short.

"I'll meet you in 422," said John. "Five minutes. Here's Alan. Tell him what you know to get the ball rolling."

"Hi, Angel," said Alan. "What have you got for me?"

"Nothing," said Cade. "I'm the one with the info."

He reached for the phone and Mandi let him take it as she finally released his jacket, then he gave Alan particulars about the kid who'd taken the pictures and the names of those who'd bought the pictures at WNN.

"Is that everything you've got on them?" asked Alan.

"That's it," said Cade. "If I think of anything else, I've got your number."

"Okay, thanks. Put Angel back on."

Cade handed the phone back to Mandi and heard Alan say in a rather intense tone, "Angel, we don't know this guy from Adam. He's just a part-time reserve asset that John called in to fill the ranks for this op. I think you should stick to him until we know that we know all he knows."

With a laugh, Cade said, "The 'part time reserve asset' isn't exactly unhappy with that idea."

"Aw, shit!" said Alan. "He can hear me?"

Somewhat acidly, Mandi asked, "Alan, do you have any other shining pearls of wisdom and advice?"

"Uh... No. Sorry."

"Later, then. Bye."

Hefting his backpack as Mandi tapped her phone off and put it away, Cade grinningly offered her his arm and asked, "Shall we go, milady?"

Mandi shot him a glare and said, "Yes," as she started walking. Cade followed at a slight distance, the better to eyeball her backside and legs as she marched ahead. Mandi abruptly stopped and waited for him to catch up, her slight glare unabated.

"Great legs, ma'am," said Cade. "Great everything, really."

She made no reply as she walked beside him. At 422, he let them in and left the door slightly ajar for John, then took his coffee mug to the sink and began making a fresh cup.

"Want to try some of my instant coffee?" he asked.

"No." As an afterthought, she added, "Thanks, anyway, but we came here to see some pictures."

Cade glanced in the mirror. Mandi was standing in the middle of the room. Oh, well. She knew she didn't need an invitation to sit down. Come to think of it, she probably didn't feel any need to sit down as often as regular people did.

A sharp double tap at the door announced John's arrival and entrance. The two men with him began methodically searching Cade's room as John approached Mandi and Cade and shook hands with both of them.

"Sorry," John said as he gestured at the two guys rooting through Cade's suitcases. "Her people insisted."

"Figured they might," said Cade. "Alan seemed the cautious type. If I need one, can I get a loaner laptop while you root through mine?"

Nodding, John said, "No problem." He turned to one of the guys searching the room and said, "Chuck, he may be dropping by later to borrow one of the pool laptops."

"Yes, sir," said Chuck, resuming his efforts.

"Ed," said John, "Alan played back your report on my way here. Can you add anything to it?"

"Can't think of a thing, John. All I really had were some names and a room number here at the hotel."

After another few moments, Chuck came to look through Cade's backpack and check his pockets, then said, "That's it, sir. Nothing left but the computer." Turning to Cade, he asked, "What's your boot-up password?"

"Don't need one," said Cade. "Just hit 'enter'."

The guy raised an eyebrow at that, as did John.

Laughing, Cade said, "Boot to DOS and you can wipe the password file and reboot without one. I won't keep anything on a computer that I couldn't show my mother."

Chuck looked at John and shruggingly nodded agreement.

John looked at Cade and said, "Well, okay, then. Sorry for the inconvenience."

"Oh, I guess I'll survive," said Cade. "What now? Think you can put a lid on this thing?"

"Yeah, we think so. It depends on whether WNN has already sent copies to affiliates."

At that, Mandi groaned softly.

Cade turned to Mandi and asked, "Mandi, why you don't wear a mask or a hood? Or something?"

She replied rather testily, "Do you really think you're the first to suggest that?"

"Not likely, and you didn't answer the question."

Sighing exasperatedly, she said, "I've tried dozens of the damned things. At high speeds they come apart, blow off, or burn off, and everything



I've tried that'll survive and stay put looks like shit. Does that answer your question well enough?"

Chuckling, Cade said, "Well, yeah. I guess so."

With another quick round of handshakes, John led his search team out of the room, leaving Mandi and Cade to themselves. Mandi called Alan with an update, then sighed and sat down at the room's small desk.

## Chapter Five

All that could be done was being done. John's people would try to find and secure all copies of the pictures and warn everyone about dire consequences, etc..., but Mandi seemed to lack faith that his efforts would be enough.

She'd known and accepted the risk of complete exposure, of course, but she'd also hoped strongly against it. Another sigh escaped her as Cade put his stuff back in his backpack and zipped it shut.

Without looking up from the desk, she muttered, "Now we wait to see whether I'm going to become a TV star tonight. I've got a feeling that my privacy is about to be shot to hell."

"Not necessarily. Vegas is full of great-looking, leggy blondes. If anyone says you look like you, just thank them for the compliment and move on."

For a moment Mandi staringly said nothing, then she quietly asked, "How the *hell* did you know I live in Vegas?"

"I saw you there," said Cade. "Back in 1996."

Sitting up and turning around to give him an exasperated look, Mandi replied, "1996? After all these years, you're absolutely sure it was me you saw?"

"Yeah," Cade said with a shrug. "I am. Mind if I make a suggestion?"

Tossing the pen she'd been fiddling with onto the desk, Mandi almost shouted, "Oh, sure! Oh, hell, yes! Why not?"

Thumbing at the door, Cade said, "Could be that John's people will square this away. If not, you might as well enjoy your last few hours of anonymity, right? I'm just saying, *'business as usual and hope for the best'*. And we have about fifteen minutes to get to that writer's panel."

Mandi almost laughed at his last words, but she realized he was probably right. What the hell; might as well. She stood up and picked up her purse, putting her sentiment into words.

"What the hell; we might as well." Pointing at his shoulder holster, she asked, "Do you really think you need that?"

"I'm on standby. I think John would take it poorly if I had to say, 'Wait one while I run upstairs and get my gun'."

Nodding with a chuckle, Mandi said, "Yeah, I guess he might, at that."

Cade got the door for her with a gentlemanly flourish and they headed for the elevator.

"Ed," said Mandi, "Most people are full of questions when they first meet me."

Nodding, Cade said, "Yeah, that seems likely," and nothing more as they approached the elevator.

He pressed the 'down' button and stood beside her as he'd stood before; silent to the extreme. Mandi suddenly realized that she hadn't noticed his footsteps in the hallway, either.

"Why are you so quiet?" she asked.

"Just a habit, I guess."

For once, the elevator arrived quickly and they boarded. As Mandi stepped in and turned around to face the door, a brief and almost complete silence occurred around her and she wondered if her pictures had already somehow been leaked.

As the con-related chatter resumed around her, she heard two teen guys whispering in the back.

"Wow! Check her out, man!"

"You think I'm *not*?! Jesus! I'd *lick* my way up to her..."

A woman said, "One more word, Tim. Go ahead. One more."

"You aren't my mom, Jackie. I can... *Ow!*"

"If you don't knock it off, I can tell your mom what a wonderful little gentleman you *weren't* at DragonCon. Now can the crap or I'll pinch your other tit, you little twerp."

There were snickers and giggles and a snort of laughter. Mandi glanced at Cade with a grin and Cade returned it as the elevator doors opened and they stepped into the lobby.

As the woman herded the two teens past them toward the escalators, Cade said, "There goes your adoring public."

"Oh, wow," Mandi said in a flat tone. "Be still, my heart."

They set forth toward the Orchid Ballroom as Cade said, "Most men never grow out of that stage, you know."

Grinning, she said, "I've noticed that now and then."

Sighing dramatically, Cade said, "I feel so transparent."

Mandi laughed, looked at him, and laughed again.

"Ed, you're probably one of the most un-transparent people I've ever met."

"The word for that is 'opaque', ma'am."

After a quick, sharp glance at him, Mandi gave him a wry grin as she said, "Yes, I know. I wasn't sure you would."

"Gee thanks. That, by the way, was an 'antiphrasis'."

Mandi stopped and looked intently up at him for a moment, nodded, then continued walking.

As they reached the escalators that led to the ballrooms below, Cade asked, "You had to look that one up, didn't you?"

When Mandi didn't answer, Cade said in German, "I'm very sure you have been told often that you're a very beautiful woman."

Without a hint of hesitation or unnecessary modesty, Mandi replied in German, "Yes, I have."

Nodding, Cade said, "Kinda thought you could do that."

"Why?"

"You wouldn't have been sent here unprepared."

Giving Cade a sidelong glance, Mandi asked, "What makes you think I was sent here?"

"You aren't a product of normal anthropogenesis and nobody on Earth could create you in a test tube. You were manufactured somewhere else."

He glanced at her and added in French, "And whoever did it did a damned fine job."

Mandi grinned and returned in French, "Thank you again," with no regional accent. It was schoolbook French; the precise, formal kind you learn only in classrooms from people who've never walked the streets of France.

"You had a good teacher," said Cade. "Human or machine?"

As they entered the Orchid Ballroom, Mandi said, "My language teacher was a computer about the size of this hotel."

"I'll bet most of it was empty space; mostly just places for people to hook up to it or whatever."

Choosing a pair of chairs in the third row, Mandi said, "You'd win that bet."

A woman tapped on a water glass to start the panel introductions. Reps from two small presses and three self-published authors gave their names and credits, then the moderator -- a woman who'd written two PG-13 novels and self-published them -- opened the floor to questions.

The first question came from a woman in row two, who asked, "Why is it that women in science fiction are always portrayed only as victims, goddesses, or demons?"

One of the small-press reps, a guy named Donovan, said, "They aren't, actually. Most women in sf are used as support characters, just as they are in movies and music videos. It's a trend that should be rectified."

"Rectified how?" asked a woman in the seventh row. "Even most female authors tend to use male lead characters."

Donovan shrugged and said, "If you're really an author, you'll write your characters your way."

"But if I buck the trend, will I ever be published?"

"Ninety-nine percent of all manuscripts aren't published when they *don't* buck trends, so all you can do is try, like everybody else."

The rest of the session was about the same. Nobody asked any questions that couldn't be answered in about the same manner, and one of the small-press guys gently ranted about how expenses and tight budgets made publishers extremely selective about what sorts of manuscripts were accepted.

One of the self-published authors used the small-press guy's rant as a springboard for extolling the virtues of being your own publisher, citing total control and other aspects.

Someone asked him how many copies of his book were sitting in his garage, waiting to be sold, and how many copies had been sold. The self-publisher's answer was rather vague, but it didn't actually seem evasive; in fact, it seemed to Cade that the guy had simply been unprepared for the question and really didn't have the actual numbers at hand.

A guy in the fourth row asked if e-publishing could be considered a valid form of being published.

Donovan took that question, too, and opined that -- as far as he was concerned -- 'real' books were made of paper. It was a wholly predictable response from a guy who made his living as a paperback publisher.

Cade raised a hand, and when called upon said, "Since 1999, I've paid taxes on nearly thirty thousand dollars that came from ebook sales on the Internet. How are books that people pay for and read *not* 'real' books?"

Glancing to his left and right as if for solidarity with the others of the panel, Donovan said, "Let's make one thing clear, sir; you've been selling computer files, not books."

"That's why they call them 'e'-books. My question stands."

The moderator said, "This is off-topic. This panel is about 'Women of Science Fiction', not methods of publishing."

"You could have said that earlier," said Cade, "When the second or third question wasn't about 'Women of Science Fiction' and before thirty minutes were spent on off-topic topics. Let Mr. Donovan answer my question, if he will."

"He won't," said Donovan. "She's right; this is off-topic and we should get back to the reason for this panel."

Cade's chuckle earned him a curious glance from Mandi and a few others nearby as the moderator, herself, rather ineptly tried to manufacture a topic-related question to force the panel back on track and get it rolling again.

As Mandi and Cade headed back to the escalators, she said, "Only one percent of manuscripts being published doesn't offer authors much hope of making a living from their work."

"Those people want to see their name on a paperback. For them, it won't be about money unless they get published. Most of them don't even have a realistic concept of how much -- or how little, actually -- published authors truly earn from their books. Today they'll bitch about stacks of rejection slips, wasted time and postage, and stupid editors who can't see the value in their work. If they happen to get published, they'll wind up bitching about being screwed by their publishers over rights and book returns from chain stores."

After a short laugh, Mandi asked, "Then why do you go to these panels?"

Grinning, Cade said, "Sometimes they stay on topic."

She shrugged and said, "I feel as if I've just wasted an hour with that one. Don't you?"

"Nope. I can usually find some way to use even an experience like that in one of my ebooks."

Mandi was about to say something when her cell phone chirped. She and Cade stepped out of the flow of foot traffic as she answered the call.

"Angel here."

"Alan. We found Hamad Marjeel and two of his people right across the street. The Rivage seems to be getting all their business today. Instead of running, they grabbed a couple of hostages in 831 and they're demanding media coverage."

"Meaning you want me to go in as a reporter?"

"It's all we can come up with. We're staging up in 835."

Mandi said, "I'm on my way."

"You'll be holding a mike and handling the interview," said Cade. "You'll need a cameraman."

"You're volunteering?"

Shrugging, Cade said, "Well, if you'd prefer to have one of the younger guys in there with you... You know, one of the guys with a wife and kids..?"

Mandi gave him a wry look and nodded, then said, "Alan, I already have a cameraman."

"Cade?"

"Yes. We'll be there shortly."

She put her phone away and gestured for Cade to hurry along as she took the escalator steps three at a time, weaving her way upward past some very startled people.

Cade followed at a somewhat more sedate pace, taking only two steps at a time and easing past the other riders. The terrorists wanted media coverage and they had hostages as leverage, so they weren't going anywhere right away.

At the front doors, Mandi was waiting for him.

"You sure you're up to this?" she asked.

"What's the hurry?" asked Cade. "They'll be there. Where do we get news credentials and hardware on short notice?"

As they started across the sidewalk to the street, Mandi said, "That's Alan's job."

"Might want to give him a ring and see what he's doing about that."

"I already know what he's doing about it. He's doing whatever he has to."

As it happened, that's exactly what Alan was doing when they walked into room 835. The two newsies from Channel Nine and the three from WNN were already there, arguing about who'd be going in to talk to the terrorists.

Alan handed the video camera he was examining to Cade like an unwieldy football and asked, "Do you know how to operate one of these?"

"I aim it at the bad guys while I press the trigger button."

"You've got it."

John came into the room and asked, "What's the plan so far, people?"

"They'll act like reporters," said Alan, nodding at Mandi and Cade. "If they can disarm the situation, they will. If not, they'll continue to act like reporters and we'll try something else."

A man came trotting into the room to hand Alan a couple of laminated press badges. He stood by as Alan examined them, then he led the real newspeople out of the room.

Handing one of the badges to Mandi, Alan said, "You're Mary Winston, intrepid reporter for WNN." Handing the other badge to Cade, he said, "And you're Grant Parker from Channel Nine. This will be called a cooperative news effort."

Turning to John, he said, "If anyone was watching, they saw the real Grant and Winston rush over here."

Nodding, John said, "Okay, then. Check the gear and confirm the feeds to WNN and Nine. There'll be some deliberate static in the first few seconds and an excuse will be made about adjusting the signal, then we'll switch the feed to an in-house loop. While our terrorists are watching themselves being interviewed on TV, anyone outside will be taken back to whatever was on before."

## Chapter Six

Cade left his coat and gun with John, and for appearances' sake, both Mandi and Cade were taken to the doorway of 831 to let the terrorists see them putting on Kevlar vests as they received platitudinous encouragements.

When they were finally sent into the room, Hamad Marjeel stopped them at the doorway and one of his men quickly frisked them for weapons and checked their gear before allowing them to pass. The man then shoved ahead of them into the room to take up a position at one side of the bed.

Marjeel and the other two men appeared to be in their twenties and thirties and wore western clothing. All were clean-shaven and only their weapons and attitudes made them look more like terrorists than a trio of off-duty yuppies.

As Mandi and Cade emerged from the room's short hallway past the bathroom, they saw two women in their sixties lying stiffly on the bed. A man on each side of the bed held a pistol aimed at each woman's head and Marjeel held a black Beretta 9mm pistol aimed generally between Mandi and Cade.

In a tone dripping with disdain, Marjeel said, "Welcome, friends of the media. Before we begin, do you understand that your function here is merely to record my words, and not to speak unless invited to do so?"

"Yes," said Mandi.

Cade had been examining the side of his camera. He bumped it once with the heel of his hand, listened to it for a moment, then looked up and nodded as he said, "Sure."

"Are you having difficulties with your camera?"

"Well, it seems okay now. Your guy, there, may have yanked something too hard while he was messing with it."

"Are you sure it will work properly? Do you need another?"

Holding the camera up and aiming at the ceiling, Cade pulled the trigger. A red 'record' light came on at the front.

"Looks like it's working now," said Cade. "I couldn't get the one I wanted to use for this. Somebody probably has it out on the loop, shooting traffic footage or..."

"Quiet!" snapped Marjeel. Turning to Mandi, he asked, "Are you ready to begin?"

"Yes," said Mandi, thumbing the mike's 'on' switch.

"Yeah. Locked and loaded," said Cade, patting the camera.

His comment drew narrow glances from Marjeel and one of the other terrorists, which likely meant that the one who'd ignored his words hadn't understood the term. Maybe he didn't speak English? Or maybe he just didn't speak it well.

Mandi stood in front of the camera long enough to introduce herself as Mary Winston of WNN and introduce Hamad Marjeel according to what he'd written on a sheet of hotel stationery, then she stepped aside and let him have center stage.

Marjeel began reading from a prepared speech that dragged on for a good twenty minutes. It was full of catchwords and phrases dear to the hearts of America-bashers everywhere, but it also contained quite a bit of Islamic religious rhetoric.

He started the speech conversationally enough in firm tones, but soon he began to sound a bit strident, and by the time he hit the third or fourth page, he sounded a helluva lot like Adolf Hitler, almost ranting at the camera.

The speech ended rather abruptly and Marjeel seemed to compose himself in silence for some moments before saying, "Now it is time to prove yet again to the Great Satan America that we are not only willing to kill, we are willing to die."

He'd barely begun to turn toward the bed when Cade let up on the camera's trigger, again whacked the side of the camera, and said, "Hey, wait one. Damn. Can we get another take on that last bit?"

Everybody was looking at him as if he was crazy, including Mandi. Cade thumped the camera again and triggered it briefly, making the light flicker, then thumped it again.

"Well, that's it," said Cade. "Did we get enough?"

Raising his pistol, Marjeel thundered, "*Do you wish to die?!*"

One of the guys by the bed -- the possible non-English speaker -- also aimed his gun at Cade and the other guy's gun wavered from the woman who'd been his target.

Holding the camera in both hands as if offering it to Marjeel, Cade said, "Well, here, dude. You try to make it work."

When Marjeel grabbed for the camera's handle, Cade shoved the camera at Marjeel's face like a basketball. Launching himself right behind the camera, Cade drove Marjeel across the room and to the floor, his left hand locked on the wrist of Marjeel's gun hand and his right grasping the front of the terrorist's shirt.

They landed hard, both of Cade's knees tightly together in the center of Marjeel's stomach as his back hit the floor. A loud, shouting groan escaped Marjeel on impact and his body tried to curl up, but Cade was in the way.

When Marjeel wouldn't let go of the gun and tried to shove Cade off, Cade rammed an elbow straight down into his throat, then forced Marjeel's gun arm over the camera and leaned on it. There was a sickening snap of bone, Marjeel shrieked, and Cade was at last able to pry the gun out of his fingers.

Marjeel tried a rather inept left-handed punch at Cade, so Cade swatted him in the temple with the Beretta to calm him down. Raising his head, Cade looked around.

Mandi was standing beside them. Both of the other gunmen were down and their guns were in Mandi's hands. The two hostages were sitting up, barely beginning to realize that their danger was over as what seemed like a dozen more people in SWAT gear flooded the room.

Cade rolled off Marjeel and got to his feet, handing the gun to one of the SWAT guys. Marjeel feebly tried to spit at Cade, but missed. He still seemed a bit disoriented.

John walked up and extended a hand to Mandi, then to Cade, and said, "Good job, people. Great job."

"Thanks," said Mandi.

"Yeah," said Cade. "I'll be down the hall."

"Okay," said John, "See you in a few."

Mandi looked after him quizzically as he left the room and asked John, "Is he okay?"

"Sure," said John. "He's like that, that's all. A few minutes from now he'll be his usual cheery self."

'His usual cheery self, huh?' thought Cade with a small grin as he entered the hall and headed for 835. 'Up yours, John.'

The guy at the camera console in 835 looked up as Cade came in and started to say something, but Cade raised a hand and said, "Play it back for me. Show me what she did."

Nodding, the guy hit rewind as he said, "Good job in there."

Another 'good job'. Damn all overused phrases.

"Thanks."

When the scene on screen had reversed to Cade holding the camera, the guy hit 'play'. Cade kept his eyes on Mandi as the action proceeded. She

seemed to leave the floor and lean slightly forward before she almost disappeared completely.

The black and blue colors of Mandi's Kevlar jacket and dress seemed to stretch across the room to the first gunman and continued streaking across the bed to the second gunman.

Both men fell to the floor at about the same time and the blur came to a stop by the men struggling on the floor. Mandi stood holding both mens' pistols as she watched Marjeel and Cade scuffle.

"*Jeezus!*" breathed the console guy.

"Try it at half-speed," said Cade.

The guy stopped the tape and rewound, then set the speed bar and played it again. Mandi was still blurred, but vaguely identifiable as a blonde in a blue dress instead of simply a streak across the screen. They were still unable to see what, exactly, she'd done to the gunmen.

"*Jeezus!*" the console guy muttered again. Checking his watch against the tape counter, he said, "When you made your move, she took the other two out in less than three-tenths of a second!"

"Yeah, she's pretty quick," agreed Cade. "Thanks."

He turned from the screen and went to the bathroom, took a leak and washed Marjeel's taint from his hands, then combed his hair and headed back out to the bedroom.

Half a dozen people were clustered around the console, playing and replaying Mandi's part of the action and making various amazed comments about her as she appeared in the doorway. For a few moments she watched and listened to them, then she looked at Cade.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

As Cade said, "Yup," some of the awe-struck people turned to stare at her. Two men hurried over to her, raving about how she'd handled the two gunmen so quickly and helping her out of her Kevlar vest.

Another guy pulled open the closures on Cade's jacket and took it, then Cade left Mandi to her adulation and went to climb back into his shoulder rig and field jacket, tossing his phony 'press' badge on the bed.

John came in and momentarily joined the group by the console, then went to stand by Cade and asked, "She's really something, isn't she?"

"Oh, hell, yes, John. Every bit of something. How's your picture-collecting coming along?"

"I can only tell you what I told her. Our people are working on it. So far we've recovered five sets at WNN alone."

"It doesn't look good for total containment, huh?"

Shaking his head, John said, "Honestly? No, it doesn't. And if they get to the internet, we can forget about it."

"No shit. John, do you remember the Marilyn Monroe and Elvis look-alike contests back in the sixties?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. Vaguely, I guess."

"They happened all over the country. If Mandi's pictures get out, maybe the thing to do is hold contests in L.A., Vegas, and all the major cities as quickly as possible. Send up some chaff. Make Mandi Steele-wannabes all over the place and give her a nationwide crowd to get lost in; otherwise she'll have to hide between missions in order to have any privacy at all. Now tell me something, John."

"What's that?"

"Tell me why didn't you just let her buzz into the room and grab all the guns. I've seen the tape. With a running start from the hallway she could have zapped them all in half a second or less and been out of there."

With a straight face, John said, "It was felt that we needed a distraction to minimize risk."

"And I need taller boots. Just tell me you aren't going to tell me, John. Don't bullshit me."

Nodding, John said, "Okay. I can't tell you."

"That means someone else is in command of this op. Someone I don't know. I really don't like that, John."

Sighing slightly, John said, "Well, I don't either, but you know it isn't the first time and it won't be the last."

"Can you tell me who's running the show?"

"Not at this time."

"That sucks, John."

Nodding again, John said, "That's how I see it, too, but that's how it is."

Someone called to John from the doorway and John excused himself, patting Mandi's shoulder on the way past her and saying, "Thanks again for your help."

Mandi shortly disengaged from her SWAT fan club and joined Cade by the bed.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

"No," said Cade. "John can't tell me who's running this op."

"Neither can I," said Mandi. "Alan's getting his orders from John and won't admit to knowing anything else. Does it really matter who's at the top?"

"It does to me, but as long as John's in my command chain, I'll go along with things. Do you have dinner plans?"

"Yes. Some of the people from my group are going to DelMonico's around seven if nothing else happens. Want to come with us?"

"No, thanks," he pulled the DragonCon schedule halfway out of his pocket, "I'm gonna disappear before they let the news people out and go find some food. There are a couple of things I want to check out between seven and nine."

Reaching to touch his arm, Mandi said quietly, "You gave me the opening I needed in there. Thanks."

Regarding her silently for a moment, Cade said, "You didn't need me at all, Mandi. After I saw the playback, I asked John why you didn't handle the whole mess yourself."

Letting her hand fall to her side, Mandi said, "That wasn't the plan, Ed. That's all I can say."

A woman called Mandi from the doorway.

Mandi nodded to let the woman know she'd heard and turned back to Cade to ask, "What's your issue-cell number?"

"Forty-two-eighteen. Yours?"

"Zero-two-two-one."

Although he knew that the cells were recharged and reissued in no particular order, Cade grinningly said, "Wow, that's a low number. You must be somebody special, ma'am."

Laughing, Mandi said, "No, not me. They just handed me one from a box."

An awkward moment of parting was developing. Cade curtailed it by extending a hand and saying, "I'm off in search of dinner. See you later, milady."

Catching her lower lip between her teeth for a moment as she shook hands, Mandi said, "Yeah. See you later, Ed."

As Cade left her to head for the door, a guy asked, "Have you been debriefed?"

Thumbing at the console that was being packed into metal suitcases, Cade said, "It's all on tape. John has my number."

'Debriefed', thought Cade as he entered the hallway. What kind of a putz came up with that word? Probably a politician.

## Chapter Seven

Mandi watched Cade leave the room and wondered how such people came to be. She'd met a few others somewhat like him since her arrival on

Earth and her involvement with the NIA. None of them had talked much and few had been as smilingly sociable with her as Cade.

She paused by the door to help the two men who were working to angle the long commo equipment trunk through the narrow hallway to the corridor.

One guy grouchingly asked, "How the hell did they get it in here in the first place?"

Grasping the top strap in her right hand, Mandi lifted it out of their hands and said, "I'll hold it. You guide it."

After a moment of staring, the men steered the trunk through the door frame and into the corridor, where Mandi put it down on end for a guy with a two-wheeled dolly.

One of the guys marveled at the way the leather-and-metal handgrip on top had been deformed by her grip and said he was going to replace it just to have this one as a souvenir.

When John saw Mandi at the door of 835, he excused himself from the two women who'd been hostages and went to her, leading her a short distance away from everyone else.

"Mandi," John enthused, "I just wanted to say that I've never seen anything like that in my life. It was amazing. I can't tell you how happy we are to have you aboard."

"Thanks, John. Can you tell me why you wouldn't let me go in there alone?"

Expecting her to simply accept his words, Mandi's question appeared to take him somewhat aback, but he recovered and said, "No. I'm sorry, but I can't."

"Can you at least tell me whether it was your idea or someone else's?"

He shook his head. "No, Mandi. I'm sorry, but..." A thought seemed to occur to him and he asked, "Where's Cade? He hasn't been debriefed yet."

For some reason, it gave Mandi a twinge of pleasure to say, "I believe he went to see about some dinner, John. Besides, what debriefing is really necessary? You have it on tape."

John regarded her thoughtfully for a moment.

As he was about to say something else, Mandi asked, "Was he 'debriefed' after what happened earlier today? From what I've heard, he just filed a police report and left."

"You know about that, huh?"

"Yes," she said flatly. "Ringer told me why the car blew up. What's going on, John? Why all the secrecy?"

Looking pained, John said, "Look, Mandi, talking could cost me my job. Give me a break, okay?" After a short sigh, he added, "Here's some good news. We think we may have all the copies of the pictures sold to WNN. The risk at the moment is that someone who had a set may have posted them on the internet. Nobody's admitted to that, but the only way to know for sure is to wait and see."

Thumbing over her shoulder at room 835, Mandi asked, "What about the tape of what happened in there?"

In a firm tone, John said, "It goes into an NIA vault. One copy goes to Washington. That's it."

"Does Washington get copies of all your incident tapes?"

"Well, no, but this one's not exactly routine and I've been ordered to supply a copy."

Altogether unenthused, Mandi muttered, "Uh, huh. Is there anything else, John? I have to go do some things."

He shook his head and said, "No, nothing else that I can think of. Thanks again, Mandi."

Nodding, she said, "You're welcome. See you later, John."

Heading back past 835, Mandi refocused her vision and began looking inside the trunks, bags, and boxes that were lined up for removal along the wall.

She saw the outlines of all sorts of objects, electronic components, and weapons, but no tapes. Glancing around slowly, she let her vision sweep the interiors of nearby rooms from 835 to 831, but saw no videocassettes of any type.

Then she realized that the large trunk was missing from the equipment lineup. Lifting slightly from the floor, Mandi flew toward the elevator alcove, arriving just as the doors opened for the two guys who'd taken the trunk on the dolly.

Landing and smiling as she approached, Mandi said, "Hi, guys. Need another hand with it?"

One grinned at her as they stood the dolly upright in the elevator and said, "No, ma'am. I think we've got it this time."

Mandi boarded the elevator and pretended to examine the damage she'd done to the handle as she scanned the trunk and chatted with the guys.

She saw three cassettes in the trunk and used her heat vision to melt the fragile tape within each cassette. They -- whoever 'they' happened to be -- would realize the damage hadn't happened by accident, of course. The damaged tapes were Mandi's message to them: "No pictures."

Would it really do any good? Or would her action simply piss somebody off enough to leak the other pictures? Mandi sighed, knowing that her exposure was inevitable, anyway, but she vowed to stave it off as long as possible. Privacy was just too damned hard to come by.

There wasn't really any way to pressure the authorities. She couldn't in good conscience refuse to help in matters of life and death. On the other hand, she could let them know that quite a number of their other hopes and plans involving the cooperation of a superwoman would become null and void the moment any pictures were found -- or even suspected -- to have leaked from any government offices.

Mandi mentally studied her list of agency... 'acquaintances'. That was the best that she could call them, really, even after two weeks of working with them. Most of them were more than a little in awe of her and some even seemed to fear her.

John Cooke, who was nominally in charge of this NIA op, but seemed unable to let even his star players know who was really running the show.

Alan Vosier, who reported to and took his orders from John.

Karen Phillips, who liaised between John and someone else, probably the nameless entity controlling the op.

Ed Cade, who called himself semi-retired, appeared to work directly with John, and... And what? She realized that she knew almost nothing else about him. Nothing at all.

Mandi suddenly also realized that Cade had so far seemed to come and go like a cat, disdaining such formalities as 'debriefings', although he'd filed a police report after the first incident of the day because he'd used his gun.

He definitely hadn't seemed either in awe or afraid of her. Instead of asking her dozens of questions about herself, he'd simply asked her to validate his own conclusions.

Or had he? Yes. Once, at least; in asking whether her language teacher had been human or machine. In all else, he'd simply stated his conclusions about her, and they'd been right.

Furthermore, although she and Cade hadn't discussed possibilities or been issued a plan of action, when Cade had pounced on Marjeel, he'd done so with apparently no doubt at all that she could and would deal with the other two terrorists.

How could he have had such implicit faith in her?

Mandi couldn't really envision any of the other agency people she'd met attempting much of anything without a thoroughly pre-discussed plan that had been specifically approved by someone up the chain; a plan that would cover all contingencies and especially peoples' asses after any fuckups.

That line of thinking led her back to the question of why she hadn't been allowed to go in alone. Those of consequence within the NIA knew her capabilities from demonstrations of her speed and strength at White Sands on two occasions.

The elevator doors opening at the second floor roused Mandi from her contemplations. Two men and a woman stepped aboard and moved to one side, then the doors closed and the elevator descended.

When the doors opened again, Mandi nodded goodbye to the two men with the trunk and strode out of the elevator at almost a march step, in

keeping with her mood, but had no particular destination in mind.

The lobby of the Rivage Hotel seemed crowded with people in various costumes. Mandi asked a nearby woman in an alien costume what was going on and was informed that preliminaries for the first costume contest of the convention were about to be filmed for the local six o'clock news.

Someone heralded the arrival of a camera crew and equipment and shepherded them to one side of the doors to a ballroom, where they began setting up their lights, reflectors, and other gear. Two hotel employees wheeled a big-screen TV to the same area and plugged it in, then left.

Oh, great. If John's people had missed even one copy of the pictures or failed to properly intimidate even one news hound, she could be in the middle of this crowd when some talking head said, "This footage just arrived..." and everybody saw her airlifting a taxi on that huge damned screen.

Would they do that after being contacted by the NIA? Oh, hell, yes, they would, even if it meant having someone 'anonymously' send the pics to several news outfits at once so they could cover their asses later.

Mandi spun on her heel and -- again at a march step, but this time with a destination in mind -- headed for the walkway where she'd made her Atlanta debut.

Disdaining the revolving door, she used the left side door in a manner that made the mechanism ring and clatter and continued down the walkway with a glance at the spot where the explosive taxi had been.

At the bottom of the ramp she had to wait for the light at the corner to interrupt the flow of traffic. Looking around, Mandi saw the faint remains of a stain on the nearby sidewalk and spotted glitterings of overlooked shards of glass in the shrubbery by the wall. Glancing up, she saw that the cafe's window had already been replaced.

When the crossing guard stepped into the street and waved to people on the sidewalks, Mandi's march continued against the flow of more costumed people on their way to the contest preliminaries.

Across the street and up the steep steps she went; past the pool and into the lower lobby of her own hotel, with little attention spent on anything except getting past the oncoming herd of people and the crowd by the escalators.

The group waiting for the elevators in the main lobby was large, as always. Mandi cut left and headed for the stairs, instead, dodging people who preferred the stairs as a short cut to the convention's hospitality suite in 221, which was only a few steps from the stairwell.

Traffic on the stairs thinned to nothing above the second floor and Mandi flew above the steps until she reached the fourth floor.

Through the stairwell door and down the corridor toward her room she went. A man in a suit -- one of Frank's people -- glanced out of one of the rooms and recognized her with a nod and a small salute. Mandi nodded back as she passed, but her stride remained constant until she reached her door.

Once in her room, Mandi picked up the TV's remote as she set her purse and key card on the bed, flicked the channel to WNN, and noted the time on the screen bar.

Five-fifty-eight. Two minutes to newstime. Mandi sat on the edge of the bed and watched the remnants of an item about some event in Marseilles, France, that didn't seem particularly newsworthy to her.

The cell phone in her purse chirped and she reached for it with more than a trace of irritation. Someone had to choose just this moment to call her...

Tapping it on, she said, "Angel here."

"Dragonfly here. You sound a little tense, milady. Sounds as if we're watching the same channel."

Listening to the background sounds at his end, Mandi said, "Yes, we are. It sounds as if you're in a bar, Dragonfly."

"Only because I am, ma'am. I stopped in the lobby's pub to grab a burger platter. Had the bartender turn on the news, in case the newsies have used the last couple of hours to figure a way around the confiscations. Have you made any plans yet?"

"Plans?"

"Yeah. If they show the pictures, will you stay at the convention or leave?"

With a ladylike snort, Mandi said, "Leave, I'd think."

"Won't help," said Cade. "If I can make blowups, others can, too, and they'll circulate nationwide. Worldwide. Did you see the 'Dawn' lookalike contest in the program guide? If the pictures are shown, what would you say to a 'Mandi Steele Lookalike Contest'? After something like that, you'd be just another pretty tree in the forest while you're here."

After a moment of horrified silence, Mandi asked, "You're actually serious, aren't you?"

Around a mouthful of french fries, Cade said, "Yup. I know a guy who can set it up and they can build it into one of the other costume contests. It can be the first of its kind."

"The what?!"

"The first ever 'Mandi Steele Lookalike Contest'. Who knows? If you enter, you might even win. Think about it and call me back after the news."

He disconnected and Mandi sat staring at the phone. Had Cade lost his mind?

## Chapter Eight

The last commercial ended and the fanfare intro music for the top-of-the-hour news began as a camera zoomed in on the head and shoulders of a smiling brunette anchorwoman who introduced herself as Wendy Swale.

When the first quarter of the hour dealt only with the usual sorts of news and issues of the day, Mandi began to feel as if she'd been worried for nothing. After all, John had the full weight of the US government behind him, and...

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Wendy, "We've just been informed that the following footage, taken with a digital camera in downtown Atlanta earlier this afternoon, has been sent anonymously to more than one hundred news organizations worldwide. With more on the story, here's David Thrush, our news director."

Thrush's head and shoulders were full-screen as he greeted the audience, then he was quickly reduced to quarter-screen as a second camera feed filled the rest of the screen.

Mandi's fists clenched and her heart sank as she watched herself leap over the taxi, lift the front end of it, and launch skyward. The camera rather belatedly elevated to follow her upward and stayed focused on her until the taxi exploded.

Car horns sounded, the camera swiveled and lowered to come to rest on a rapidly approaching wall of traffic, and then there was a brief break of blackness before the entire sequence of events was repeated.

As the scene replayed a few more times to his left, Thrush explained that the pictures appeared to be genuine. He nodded to someone off-screen and the repetitions of Mandi taking off with the car were replaced by a blow-up of her face.

The expanded view wasn't very clear, but at that moment Mandi wasn't really in the mood to critique photographic skills. Her face had just appeared on national television.

In the name of the people of Atlanta, Thrush thanked the 'mysterious superwoman' for her heroic deed, hoped aloud that she'd somehow survived the explosion, and begged her to come forward to receive the thanks of a grateful public.

He then said that there'd be further discussion of the pictures on a later news-related show and relinquished the screen to Wendy, who echoed his sentiments that the superwoman come forward in an apparently heartfelt manner before she glibly continued reading from the teleprompter about other news of the day.

Mandi stood up as she stared at the screen, then strode to the closet and took out her two suitcases. As she opened them on the bed, her cell

phone chirped. She ignored it, returning to the closet for an armload of clothes.

There was a knock at the door as she laid the clothes on the bed. She almost ignored that, too, but her glance in that direction noticed a sheet of paper being shoved under the door.

She went to pick it up. It read, 'Come to my room. Door is open. Cade.'

Opening the door, she found him leaning on the doorframe, a bottle of beer in one hand and a cell phone in the other.

"Why would I want to go to your room?" she asked.

Pulling an Ice House beer from under his jacket, Cade opened it and handed it to her as he said, "Here, I smuggled this out of the bar for you. Frank and everybody else on the teams have probably dropped their forks and are most likely on their way back up here. I'd say you have about five minutes to be elsewhere."

Taking the beer, Mandi wryly said, "Gee, thanks, mister, but Timbuctu and Borneo are considered 'elsewhere' too. Why should I go to your room in particular?"

"So you won't be in your room when they get here, that's all. Turn off your phone. Kick off your shoes and relax. We can ring John and Alan on my phone and tell them to settle the herd, then talk about what to do next."

Laughing, Mandi asked, "Next? Next I head back to Vegas."

She took a long hit from her beer as Cade said, "Uh, huh. I've heard they even have TV's in Vegas nowadays, ma'am. John said that there are still four terrorists unaccounted for. Do you really want to be way out West if they try something else this weekend? We still don't know why they chose this time and place. Could be it isn't over yet."

"He didn't say anything to me about four more of them."

"Well, he didn't tell the rest of us about you, either, so it could be he just doesn't communicate very well, y'know?"

Levering himself off the door frame, Cade said, "I'll leave my door open, just in case. Later, milady," and swigged his beer as he headed for his room.

Some guy with a phone to his ear opened the temporary ops room's door across the hall, saw Mandi, and spoke to someone as he stood there. Cade veered across the corridor and noddily pushed past him into the room.

The guy followed, protesting, but his objections ceased as Cade showed him his ID.

"Where's Frank?" asked Cade.

"Uh, downstairs, at dinner. Which group are you with?"

"I'm on John's B-team. We worked with the cops today. You guys got any loaner laptops in here?"

"No, they're two doors down. See Mitchell or Gray."

"Will do. Thanks," said Cade, heading for the door.

Some twenty steps later he had to use his keycard on his door, which hadn't been closed when he'd left the room. Letting himself in, he closed the door securely and turned to see Mandi step from behind the hallway corner by the bed.

With a grin, Cade said, "Hi, there. You're as quick as ever. Should I send out for more beer?"

Waving her half-full bottle, Mandi smiled and said, "Oh, not just yet, I think. I didn't really come here to party. Thanks for running interference for me."

Looking enlightened, Cade said, "I knew there was a name for that," and handed her his phone. "Might as well call John and see what he has to say about what happened."

Mandi put the phone on the desk and pulled the chair out to sit down, then said, "In a little while. First I'd like to hear what you think about what happened."

Cade sat on the end of the bed and sipped his beer, then shrugged.

"I can think of a few possibilities. One; a kid named Jeremy sandbagged a copy of the pictures and sent them to news outfits all over the place. Two; some news guy may have set up a way around the ban. If the pix really were sent to a hundred unaffiliated stations -- and I think they probably were -- some of those stations would have put them on the air."

He sipped again, then said, "Three; the same unnamed people who are running this op -- or those above them -- may have decided to spill the beans about our new, no-longer-secret weapon. You know; to cheer up the voters and give the terrorists the finger at the same time. They wouldn't necessarily have felt the need to tell John he was wasting his time trying to corral all the pictures. I'm sure this thought has occurred to John, as well, and that he's checking into who had access to the pix every step of the way."

Shrugging, Cade sipped again, then said, "Whatever; we can chase down that end of things later. As I said, you're no longer a secret. You're also noticeably beautiful and you have distinctive features. Since plastic surgery probably isn't a realistic option, I'll suggest that we use what's available downstairs -- a science fiction convention with 25,000 registered attendees -- to toss together a look-alike contest."

After a moment, Mandi sipped her beer, then shook her head as she quietly said, "You don't *look* insane, you know. You don't usually sound insane, either. Did you skip your dinnertime meds or something?"

Chuckling, Cade said, "Maybe I'm just all flustered at being in the same room with you, Miz Superlady, ma'am."

Mandi returned his grin as his cell phone rang and he answered it. She heard John instantly ask, "Cade, have you seen Mandi?"

"She isn't in her room?" asked Cade. "I saw her there a little while ago."

"She isn't answering her phone and if she's in there, she isn't answering her door, either."

"Huh. Got any idea why she'd be avoiding people, John?"

There was a pause before John very quietly said, "We really need to talk to her, Cade. Is she in your room?"

"The official word is 'no', John, but why don't you come here *alone* and have a look? Repeat; *alone*."

Another short pause ensued, then John said, "Alone it is."

John disconnected and Mandi regarded Cade for some moments in silence, then said, "You could have asked me before you invited him."

"Do you want to try to find out what's going on? I do."

"Do you think John will know who released the pictures?"

"I think that's not the most important issue right now. Done is done. Now it's time to try to fix things a bit."

Standing up and pacing, Mandi asked, "The contest? How the hell is a lookalike contest going to make things better? If anything, it'll call even more attention down on me."

"It'll call more attention to the superwoman, yes, but it'll only get *you* second or third place as a runner-up."

Stopping her pacing and staring at him with open irritation, Mandi said, "Okay, Ed. It's time to explain what you've got in mind -- and explain it well -- or drop it."

Tossing his empty beer bottle at the trash can, Cade said, "You got it. Agent Phyllis Morey can make anybody look like just about anybody else and she has her kit with her. At the contest you'd fly in..."

"I'd fly in?!"

"It's the easiest way to instantly prove that you're you, right? You'd get an intro, do a trick or two, a bunch of people would take a bazillion pictures of you, and then you'd see or hear an emergency and excuse yourself to fly out and deal with it. The contest would go on in your honor, but without you, 'cause you'd be busy having your makeup removed."

"Makeup."

"Yup. At your first public appearance, you wouldn't quite look like you. A bit more ear, nose, and chin. Wider cheeks. A slightly different skin tone. A birthmark or a mole. Like that. Then you lose the makeup and get on stage later as one of the many contestants. You might come close, but you probably won't win. Sorry 'bout that."

Mandi noticed the way he'd switched from sounding speculative to sounding rather definite in his last sentence, but she didn't challenge him on it. In fact, the idea didn't sound quite so insane, after all.

"Of course, you might want to give some more thought to wearing some kind of a mask when you're on duty," said Cade. "And it probably wouldn't hurt to..."

A rap on the door interrupted whatever he'd been about to say. Cade rose to go to the door, checked the peephole, and let John into the room. John nodded to Cade as he hurried toward Mandi, but he stopped well short of her as he saw her tight expression.

"Well, John?" she asked. "What happened?"

For the first time in the thirty-odd years Cade had known John, the guy actually looked apologetic.

"Mandi," said John, "We tried. We really did. My people picked up nine copies and warned everybody, but somebody pulled an end run. A hundred or so international TV stations and newspapers received an anonymous email that contained a download link to a website on a Dutch server."

Her expression unchanged, Mandi asked, "And now?"

Shrugging slightly, John said, "We can try to find out who did it and prosecute him. Or her."

Setting her empty bottle on the desk, Mandi said, "Which helps me not one damned little bit."

With a sigh, John said, "It's about all we can do."

"Not quite," said Cade. "I told her about my idea for a contest. If we can provide her some cover, we owe her the effort, and this is a perfect place and time to test the idea."

"It's pretty short notice for a schedule revision, Cade."

"That's my problem. If we start the ball rolling here, will the agency help us organize similar events in other cities?"

Shrugging again, John said, "Can't see why not, if we use cutouts to handle the details."

"Cutouts?" asked Mandi.

"Go-betweens," said John. "With anonymous seed money."

"Aw, dammit!" said Mandi, "Speak English."

Cade laughed at John's expression and said, "They'd set someone up with a few bucks and an office. That someone would find local advertiser-sponsors who'd supply the place, the bleachers or whatever, the refreshments, crowd control, security, and all the other stuff an event needs."

With a little grin, he added, "All you'd have to do is show up, show off a bit, and smile a lot for the cameras. Think you could handle that, ma'am?"

Mandi gave him a mock glare and smilingly asked, "How would you like to be dropped from ten thousand feet?"

"No sweat. Been there. Dunnit."

With a saccharine-sweet little smile, Mandi asked, "Without a parachute?"

"Yup."

Glancing disbelievingly at John, Mandi said, "Bullshit."

"Nope," said Cade. "You said 'without a parachute'. We'll stop at my house so I can change into my flight suit."

Her gaze narrowed as her head canted slightly.

"You have a flight suit?"

"Sure do. Got it to use with my Falcon 195."

Again glancing at John, Mandi said, "Okay, I'll ask. What's a Falcon 195?"

"A hang glider."

One of Mandi's eyebrows went up as she peered at Cade, then she looked at John and said firmly, "Okay. He'll do."

"Glad to hear it," said John. "Do for what, exactly?"

Laughing shortly, she said, "Just about anything, I expect."

## Chapter Nine

Paul Money ignored the buzzing of his walkie-talkie until he'd finished scribbling a phone number on a tiny memo pad.

"If you have any real problems, call this number," he told the female volunteer staffer. "Ted's crew knows how we like to set up the speakers. Ask if they brought Darcy's amps, okay?"

With a nod, the woman headed for the doors. As Cade approached the stage, Paul waved to him, glanced over the stage once again, and then answered his two-way and dealt with another issue that had developed in the dealer's room.

Cade hefted his backpack and waited until Paul had finished that conversation before he said, "Hi, Paul. Look up."

With a harried expression, Money said, "Oh, nothing much. It's seven o'clock and we're still working on stuff that should have been done half an hour ago. I'm swamped with details, three people are out sick, and..."

Casually pointing skyward without lifting his arm, Cade said, "I said '*look*' up, not what's up."

Paul Money looked up and his mouth fell open as his eyes widened. A blonde woman in what seemed to be a white bathing suit with a red cape and blue boots appeared to be standing on thin air near the auditorium's high ceiling. She gave him a little wave and a smile.

"Oh, damn!" muttered Paul, thumbing his walkie-talkie on. "What the hell..? I'll get someone in here with a ladder."

"She didn't get up there with a ladder," said Cade. "She won't need one to get down, either. Cancel the call."

"Damn it, Martin, answer up!" Paul muttered into the walkie-talkie. He turned to Cade and asked, "Cade, why the *hell* are you jeopardizing the entire convention with a stunt like this?! We don't need a lawsuit."

"It isn't a stunt, Paul. She's the woman who was on the news. Cancel that call."

Glancing up, Money asked, "The, uh... superwoman?"

Cade reached quickly for the walkie-talkie, snatched it out of Paul's hand, and turned it off.

With a chuckle, he said, "Oh, *good* guess. I'll give this gadget back to you in a minute. This isn't a gag. That's her."

Turning a very skeptical gaze at Cade, Paul asked, "And *you* just happen to know her?"

Shrugging, Cade said, "Yeah, that's about the size of it. Everybody knows somebody, y'know. She'd like to make her public debut here at DragonCon. If you can fit her in, that is."

Paul Money took a deep breath, counted to ten, then asked in a controlled voice, "How would both of you like to be banned from this and all future DragonCons and..?"

Cade raised his voice slightly and interrupted with, "Damn it, listen up! She's the real thing, Paul."

A pair of blue boots slowly descended next to Cade, followed by two very fine female thighs, then the rest of the blonde woman Paul had seen hovering above him. Once she was standing next to Cade, Mandi slung her cape over her shoulder with a touch of flourish and smiled brightly.

After a moment of openmouthed startlement, Paul unfroze himself and walked around her, waving his hands above and around her, then he returned to face both of them.



With a grin, Cade laughed, "Trusting soul, aren't you? Nope, no wires, Paul. She wants to go public and she's willing to put on a little show. If you can squeeze her into tonight's program, I'll introduce you."

"Ah..." Paul groped for words, then he seemed to pull himself together quickly and asked, "A show?! When?!"

"Like I said, sometime tonight, but..."

Paul interrupted with, "I'll make some calls. We'll put her in at the end. That way she can have all the time she wants."

"In that case," said Cade, "Mandi, meet Paul Money. Paul, this lovely superlady is Mandi Steele."

Mandi extended a hand and Paul -- who'd many times in the past escorted name bands and TV and movie stars around a DragonCon -- took it as if he'd never met a celebrity before.

After introductions were finished, Cade said, "Paul, you didn't let me finish. Don't make any calls about her. No announcements. We'll keep tonight's appearance under wraps until the last minute."

Looking at Cade with more than a little confusion, Paul asked, "Under wraps?"

"Yup. Tonight's crowd will already be assembled to watch the costume contests and the bands. There's almost no chance that anyone with a grudge about today's events will be able to try anything on such short notice."

Paul's face turned troubled and cautious. He glanced at Mandi for a moment, then looked around the auditorium.

When his gaze again met Cade's, he quietly and soberly asked, "You mean like another bomb, don't you?"

Nodding, Cade said, "You got it. One short show, tonight only, top secret until she flies in. Still interested?"

"You... uh... You really think it'll be safe?"

"If nobody leaks, yes. That's why we're talking to you, Paul. You can adjust the schedule without having to put changes through a committee. Nobody has to know a damned thing until Mandi lands on the stage and you announce her."

Staring at Mandi, Paul bit his lip and said, "Ah... Just a minute. Lemme think."

Speaking for the first time, Mandi smilingly said, "I'll just get in a little exercise while you think about it, Paul."

The rich contralto tones of her softly spoken words were still tickling his brain as Mandi lifted a few feet from the floor. She leaned slightly toward the forward edge of the stage and then seemingly dove completely across the auditorium.

At the far end of the room, Mandi banked hard left at the wall and made three complete circuits of the auditorium at what must have been more than sixty miles per hour.

Paul softly muttered, "Hooo-ly shit..!"

"Yup," said Cade. "She'll bring her own props, too."

"Huh? Props? What props?"

Nodding, Cade said, "She wants to use a Crown Victoria like the one that blew up."

Stepping back slightly, Paul blinked at Cade and exclaimed, "She can't bring a goddamned *car* in here!"

"Sure she can. The gas tank'll be empty. It'll never touch the carpets. No problem."

"But..."

"Don't worry so much, man. We'll clear it with the hotel if you'll clear us a path through the crowd. Rope off a trail about eight feet wide from the front double doors to the auditorium and have people on hand to keep it clear at showtime."

"But... The *doors!* Will a car even fit through the doors?"

Grinning, Cade said, "Yup. Already checked that out. We'll have three inches on each side at the ballroom doors and almost four on a side at the front doors. We'll have to put the antenna down, though."

Mandi streaked back across the auditorium and looped once over the mens' heads to settle gently to the stage a few feet away from them.

Flipping her cape over her shoulder again, she walked toward them with a smile.

Paul's eyes were on her chest. Cade's eyes met her gaze, as usual. Mandi liked that about him; he wasn't one of those guys with a boob fixation and he had no trouble making or keeping eye contact when he talked with her.

"Well, Paul?" she asked. "Do I go on stage tonight?"

"I... uh, I really ought to check with..."

"Nope," said Cade, shaking his head. "Safety first. Nobody else is to know a damned thing about this until showtime. Yes or no, Paul. She can go public here tonight or at a press conference at WNN tomorrow."

"Paul," Mandi said softly, "We'll give WNN ten minutes' notice so they can get a camera crew over here. Think of the publicity for the convention."

In a visible quandry, Paul grimaced and glanced at Cade, then asked, "You're sure it'll be safe..?"

"If you keep it secret, it will be."

Mandi perked up and glanced at the doors, causing Cade and Paul to also look that direction.

"Gotta go," she said. "People are coming."

"That's just the sound crew," said Paul, but Mandi was already gone when he turned.

"She's pretty quick," said Cade, as Paul looked around the auditorium. "I may as well get underway, too. What's a good time for the show? Ten? Eleven?"

"Uh... around midnight, actually," said Paul, scribbling his cell phone number on his notepad and handing it to Cade. "We always run a little late and she'll be the last act. What's your cell number?"

"Can't give it out; it's an agency internal number. Doesn't matter; I'll be here and you can give me fifteen minutes notice to let Mandi and WNN know when to show up."

"How can you be sure WNN will show up?"

With a small grin, Cade said, "I know a few of the news people." Shifting his backpack to his left shoulder, he added, "See you later," and headed for the doors.

On his way to the escalator, Cade took out his cell phone and called John.

"It's a go, John. Mandi's chunk of the show will start around midnight. I'll be able to give you about fifteen minutes notice."

"Good enough. We'll have people in the crowd on general principles. Do you want me to notify WNN?"

"Fine with me. We'll give them ten minutes or less to get over here. Good?"

"Good. Anything else, Ed?"

"Nope. I'm gonna find some dinner and get the hell away from all these people for a while."

"Later, then."

"Over and out and stuff like that."

Cade made it as far as the second-level escalators before Mandi stepped out of a phone alcove and said, "Hi, there."

"Hi, yourself, milady. Superpeople changing in phone booths isn't exactly an original concept, y'know."

"Then it's a good thing it doesn't have to be, isn't it? How'd the rest of the visit go?"

"Good. You'll go on stage around midnight. Paul's gonna give me about fifteen minutes to set things up. You'll be the last part of the show."

Mandi nodded. "Sounds fine. What about the car?"

Leading the way to the parking area, Cade said, "That's where we're going now. I've got the keys to one of John's agency rentals. It's got about

an eighth of a tank, so we'll siphon it dry and give it a wash before we take it inside."

"A wash? At this hour? Where?"

"Around back at the loading docks. That's where they wash the hotel vans. Manuel said he'd meet us there at eight and spiff it up inside and out for twenty bucks."

"Manuel?"

"He's a hotel employee. He gets to keep the gas, too; all but enough to get the car moving again later. How's your stage makeup holding together?"

"You tell me. The cheek implants felt odd and they kept shifting. I was afraid to talk for fear of spitting on Paul."

Grinning, Cade asked, "Want me to find you some, uh... *super* glue?"

Giving him a droll look, Mandi said, "Very funny."

Pointing at a nearly-new white Crown Victoria in a line of similar cars, Cade chuckled and said, "Just like Pearl Harbor. All lined up in neat rows. That's the one we want."

He opened the door for Mandi and handed her into the car, then got in and drove the car to the loading docks. Manuel hopped down from the dock and pulled a red plastic five-gallon gas can and some hose from behind some boxes.

A few minutes later the car's gas tank was more or less empty and Manuel had produced cleaning equipment. By eight-thirty the Crown Vic had been washed, vacuumed, waxed, and was ready for indoor use as a prop.

While Manuel put things away, Cade dampened one of the hotel towels, put it into one of the hotel's plastic trashcan-liner baggies, and set the baggie on the passenger-side floor.

He then hosed the driveway all the way to an empty parking slot and hosed out the slot itself. Moving the car to the slot, he parked it and locked it, then returned to Mandi.

Manuel looked a bit puzzled when he saw where Cade had put the car.

As he rolled up the hose, Manuel said, "Man, you lookin' for trouble parkin' in those spaces."

"I'll fix it with the boss. Here's thirty bucks. The extra ten is just plain ol' appreciation for the help."

With a smiling nod, Manuel took the money and said, "Hey, de nada, man. You lemme know when you got anything else you need done, y'know?"

"Will do."

Nodding again, Manuel went into the building. Cade and Mandi walked around to the front of the hotel and stood watching the never-ending crowd flow from one hotel to the other for a few minutes.

"It's only eight-thirty," said Mandi. "Is there anything going on that you particularly want to see?"

Watching a brunette in a skimpy barbarian-princess outfit go down the ramp, Cade said, "Nope. Not really. I've seen the movies and I'm not into the RPG stuff. Guess we could hit some of the dealer's room before it closes for the night."

He turned to face Mandi and said, "After all, that's where we were both headed when we met."

"So we were," said Mandi with a smile. "Good enough."

## Chapter Ten

The dealer's room was jammed with people, as expected. As Mandi and Cade circulated, he looked for WiccaWorks clients and took a few moments with each to let them know he'd drop by the next day so they could restock from the products he'd brought.

Mandi found a silver pendant on a chain that appealed to her at one of the booths and bought it while Cade was talking to the booth owner. Their conversation wrapped up about the same time as Mandi's purchase.

Cade stepped over to Mandi, lifted the pendant and chain from her hands, and offered to put it on her. Lifting her hair, Mandi let him drape the chain and fasten the clasp as she looked in the booth's mirror.

Her eyes met his as he brought the two ends of the chain together and thumbed the clasp. When her eyes fell to the pendant, his didn't, nor did his hands fall away from her shoulders immediately.

"It's kind of amazing," said Cade softly. "You can haul cars into orbit, but you look and feel just like a showgirl."

One of Mandi's eyebrows went up.

"A showgirl?"

Grinning, Cade said, "That's what they call women of exemplary beauty who strut around on stages in fancy costumes. I'd have expected you'd know something like that, being from Vegas and all."

Turning to look at him, Mandi said, "Uh, huh. Smartass. You aren't from Vegas, so how the hell do you happen know so much about showgirls?"

With a shrug, Cade said, "Been there. Got involved with a dancer for a while. A nice lady, but kind of obsessive."

Tilting her head, Mandi asked, "Obsessed about what?"

"Dancing. It's all she thought about, day and night. Well, almost all. She thought about me, too, now and then."

"Did she?"

"Oh, yeah," said Cade with a firm nod. "Every night for two weeks. Then I had to go back to Dallas." Sighing dramatically, he added, "Leaving her was kind of traumatic, y'know?"

Grinning, Mandi said, "I'm sure it was and you have my most profound sympathy, of course. Are you going to tell me that I remind you of her? Maybe that I look a bit like her?"

Trying to appear somewhat shocked, Cade said, "Of course not! She was a head taller than you and had brown hair. Not nearly as pretty, either. Great legs, though."

"Uh, huh." Mandi lifted her pendant and eyed it as she said, "You know, I've been expecting something like this to happen sooner or later."

With a snort of soft laughter, Cade said, "Sorry, but nothing's happened, ma'am. That wasn't a pass."

Looking at him somewhat sharply, Mandi asked, "If it wasn't a pass, what was it?"

"At most, a compliment. Ready to move on?"

Glancing around, Mandi said, "I guess so."

They were less than halfway down the aisle before she asked, "Are you sure it wasn't a pass?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," said Cade, reaching for a book past a tall woman in Klingon garb who was studying a figurine display.

Possibly because he'd spoken, she chose just that moment to turn and her rather massive, plastic-armored left breast collided with the side of Cade's face with an audible 'thunk'.

Apparently assuming no responsibility whatsoever for the collision, she stiffened and straightened, glaring at Cade. Mandi snickered, but otherwise kept silent.

"You wanna watch where you stick your goddamned nose?" bellowed the Klingon woman, sounding as if she might actually be from Brooklyn.

"You wanna watch where you point those things?" returned Cade. "They're dangerous."

A large hand clapped solidly onto Cade's shoulder and clamped down.

Cade turned to see a guy a head taller than himself, also wearing Klingon gear, who said, "That's my girlfriend, dude."

"Hands off," said Cade. "She bumped into me, that's all. No damage, no problem."

"I'll decide if there's a problem," said the guy, his grip on Cade's shoulder intensifying a bit.

Reaching up quickly, Cade drove his thumb into the inside of the faux-Klingon's bicep just above the elbow and snapped the area solidly back and forth. The guy hissed and yanked his arm away as if he'd been shocked.

Stepping toward the Klingon to let some people get past, Cade said, "Okay, then. You decide. Is there a problem?"

The Klingon wannabe rubbed his arm and glared at Cade as if thinking about the question.

A fortyish blonde booth attendant rapped the pommel of one of the daggers from her display on her table and said, "Don't make me call security, boys."

Pushing ungently past Cade, the female Klingon went to stand by her boyfriend and tugged his undamaged arm. After another moment of glaring, he turned to accompany her.

As Cade turned to go with Mandi, the booth attendant held up the dagger in her hand and said, "Hey. I'll give you this dagger if you can teach me that trick."

Cade eyed the dagger. It had a wire-wrapped black handle, a fancy brass crossguard, and a stainless, stiletto-style, double-edged blade about seven inches long.

"Way too fancy," said Cade. "People would think I was from the French Quarter or something. How about those, instead?"

He pointed to a set of three small stamped-out stainless throwing knives. Each knife was about five inches long and they came with a sheath that held all three at once.

She shrugged at his much less expensive choice and said, "Uh... Sure. Okay."

A few minutes later Cade left the booth with his knives as the woman practiced the move on her boyfriend's left arm. He yelped satisfactorily and she grinningly waved at Cade.

"I think I've got it!" she said.

Cade waved back as Mandi sidled up to him and took his left arm in hers, a gesture that made him look at her with a raised eyebrow as he tucked the knives into his back pocket.

"The dealer's room closes in ten minutes," she said. "That leaves two hours until showtime. Is there anything on the schedule that you particularly care about?"

"Nope. Actually, it'd be nice to get away from the crowds for a while and I left most of my dinner sitting on the bar. You got any thoughts on the matter?"

With a shake of her head, Mandi said, "Not really. This is my first time in Atlanta. I saw a couple of places in the city guidebook, but they're nowhere near downtown."

With a grinning glance, Cade said, "You can fly at warp speeds, milady. Even with heavy ol' me aboard you could zip pretty much anywhere in town in seconds."

Matching his wry grin, Mandi gave Cade's arm a squeeze and said, "Okay. True enough, but I don't feel comfortable about leaving the area. Four of the men on John's list didn't turn up today, which doesn't necessarily mean they aren't somewhere near."

Shrugging, Cade said, "Let's take a walk, then. Maybe we'll find something interesting within a couple of blocks."

They were nearing the dealer's room doors when Mandi gave his arm another squeeze and said, "You're a refreshing change, Ed."

"Refreshing, huh? Gee, lady, how'd I manage that?"

"You just are. The others on the teams act as if they either worship me or they're scared shitless of me. I've only met two people during this operation who seem able to treat me like... well, who don't go overboard one way or the other. You're one of them. Mind if I ask you why?"

"Why I don't worship you or why I'm not scared of you?"

"Yes. Both."

Stepping back and eyeing Mandi from toes to hairline, Cade said, "Well, you asked..."

He opened the door to the sidewalk for her and followed her through before he spoke again.

"Mandi, you're kind of like a fighter jet in that you're extremely powerful and you're on our side in this thing against terrorism. People should respect things like fighter jets and behave in a responsible manner around them, but they shouldn't fear them. You're also a very beautiful woman and I expect you have all the usual feelings that come with being a female human being. Your feelings deserve a level of respect and responsibility."

Some moments of walking toward the corner passed before Mandi asked, "And..?"

"And what?"

"That's it?"

With a shrug, Cade said, "Yes'm, that's about it. I've been treating you like a beautiful woman because that's mostly what you are to me. If you need more than that -- or less than that -- you'll probably have to look elsewhere."

"Mostly?"

"Yeah, mostly. I'm not forgetting that you can speak other languages and fly, but at the moment you're just walking beside me and being good company. Seems to me that I should respond in kind; that is, to make every effort to be good company in return. If you wanted more, you'd probably be somewhere else with someone who'd feed your ego."

With a grin, Cade added, "With the guys on the fourth floor, for instance, who'd either be waiting on you hand and foot and fawning all over you or avoiding you."

Sighing, Mandi said, "That gets old fast, you know. People either weigh and measure every word they say or they babble. There's almost no middle ground."

"The price of fame," said Cade, "However clandestine."

"Screw fame," said Mandi. "I haven't had an intelligent conversation with anyone but John since Wednesday. Well, not until you showed up, anyway. All anyone wanted to talk about was me. Same old questions, over and over."

Making a suitable sigh of pity, Cade said, "Well, I'll try not to disappoint you, milady. I won't ask where you're from, how you got here, how fast you can fly, or anything like that."

Peering sharply at him, Mandi said, "Yeah, you've managed to avoid those questions so far. Why?"

"Because I don't really need to know the answers. It's enough that you're on my arm and sharing time with me."

Continuing to regard him askance, Mandi asked, "Or is it that you already know the answers? Did John or someone else brief you about me?"

"Nope. You appeared out of nowhere today when you hopped over a car and jumped into the sky with it. A little while later I ran into you at the elevators."

"So when you jumped on that guy, you just assumed -- without knowing anything else about me -- that I'd do something about the other two?"

"Yup. I figured all you needed was a distraction to provide a reasonable opening. You'd just survived a major explosion, so it didn't seem likely that bullets would slow you down much, and all the guns were pointed at me at the time anyway. I'd have been real surprised if you hadn't done what you did."

"Surprised?" asked Mandi. "You'd have been dead."

Snapping his fingers as if just realizing that fact, Cade grinningly said, "Well, then, it's a damned good thing I guessed right, isn't it?"

Mandi's face was stern as she stopped to face him and said, "You certainly put a hell of a lot of faith in that guess."

"Correction; I put a hell of a lot of faith in you."

"You know what I mean, Ed. What if I hadn't lived up to your expectations?"

"Well, I'd have been somewhat disappointed, of course..."

"I'm not joking, dammit!"

Shrugging, Cade began walking again as he said, "Okay, you weren't joking. Next subject."

Taking two strides to catch up, Mandy snapped, "What?"

"Next subject. Next topic of discussion. The last one wasn't entertaining us, so let's talk about something else."

"No! I want to know how you could just *presume* that I'd..."

Interrupting her, Cade said, "I just did, and it's history, so let's drop it. As far as I'm concerned, you can probably do anything I can imagine; anything I ever saw in a comic book. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me at all to find out that the comics about superhumans began after someone found out about you or someone like you back in the thirties."

Mandi's gaze narrowed tightly as she asked, "You really think I'm that old?"

Looking her over, Cade said, "Could be. I think you'll probably look just as delicious another sixty years down the road. Or maybe a couple of hundred years. How long do superpeople live, anyway?"

Pretending vast shock, Mandi rolled her eyes and softly exclaimed, "Oh, wonder of wonders!"

Giving her a narrow look of his own, Cade asked, "What wonder of wonders are you referring to, ma'am?"

Not bothering to contain her grin, Mandi said, "You finally asked me a real question. Did it hurt?"

"Well, it didn't at the time, but I think it's beginning to. Wanna know where?"

Laughing, Mandi said, "Ah... no, I can guess. I can't tell you how long I'm likely to live, Ed. I really don't know."

Nodding, Cade said, "Doesn't matter. I was just curious." Lifting her hand upward to kiss it, he added, "And I hope it's a really big number."

## Chapter Eleven

Near the end of the next block was a pub and microbrewery that had a couple of pool tables. Mandi and Cade discovered the place to be almost empty, despite large numbers of convention attendees wandering the streets.

Two guys at a table near the window nodded to Mandi and Cade as they entered and approached the bar. Cade ordered a couple of beers and some quarters.

Gesturing around the pub, Mandi said, "Well, Ed, you did say you wanted to get away from the crowds."

As the bartender pulled a couple of glasses of beer for them, he said, "It's like this every year. The only convention that brings in less business is the Salvation Army thing." Nodding toward the window, he added, "Which just happens to be going on this week, too, of course. It's the worst week of the year for everybody but the hotels and restaurants."

The reddish-colored beer cost five bucks a glass and it tasted rather bitter. Cade decided that he preferred his usual Ice House beer as he set his local brew on a table and put quarters in one of the pool tables.

"Don't like it, huh?" asked Mandi, nodding at Cade's beer.

"Not particularly. Too bitter. I'll break."

"Oh, really? We aren't going to flip a coin?"

"No, ma'am, we aren't. I've got a strong feeling that if you break, you'll run the table."

Rolling a stick on the table to check it's straightness, Mandi said, "Oh, but maybe I'm not much of a pool player, sir."

Watching her chalk the tip of her stick by spinning the stick and lightly buffing the contact point, Cade said, "Uh, huh. That's what all the sexy blonde hustlers say."

Cade made the four on the break and made another five balls before a bad leave put the cue ball behind three of her stripes. His attempted jump shot made the seven ball, but the cue ball followed it into the pocket.

Mandi grinned as she stepped up to the table. One after another she rather elegantly pocketed all of her striped balls, including one that involved a long, almost right-angle cut to reach a distant corner pocket.

When only the eight ball remained, she eyed the six-inch shot and smilingly asked, "Want to concede the game?"

Shaking his head, Cade said, "Nope. Work for it, lady."

With a chuckle, Mandi popped the eight into the pocket. The two guys who'd been watching from a nearby table had come to stand by Cade.

"Man, she flat kicked your ass," said one of them.

"I think she got lucky on the fourteen," said the other guy.

"Yeah?" asked Cade. "Put your quarters up. You just volunteered to be her next victim."

The guy nodded and reached in his pocket, then fed the table as the other guy introduced himself as Mike and the other guy as Stan, then put his name on the chalkboard for the next game.

"Hey, there's three of us here, dude," confided Mike. "One of us has to beat her."

Glancing at Mandi, Cade chuckled and said, "Yeah, right."

Cade put his name on the board, as well, and sat down with his beer. He enjoyed watching women shoot pool, especially women in short skirts, and Mandi had magnificent legs.

Midway through her game against Stan, Mandi leaned over the table for a shot, lifting one leg slightly off the floor as she stretched. She seemed to take longer than usual about it.

The shot hadn't seemed that difficult, even with the need to stretch for it. Cade glanced from her legs to the table to try to see why she was taking so long just as Mandi turned to look grinningly back at him.

His gaze shifted from the table to her face. Her expression seemed to change to one of surprise for a moment, then she turned back around and popped the ball into the pocket.

'Ha,' thought Cade. 'She thought she'd catch me eyeballing her legs.' With a grinning mental shrug as he sipped his beer he added, 'She damned near did, too.'

Mandi gave him an odd, studying glance as she rounded the table to take her next shot. Cade deliberately pretended to find something interesting about his beer and held it up to look at the way the light filtered through it.

Mike muttered something as Mandi sank the eight, then he sighed and said, "Oh, well. It was worth the money to watch her do that, I guess."

Stan laughed and got up to take his turn. During the game Mandi chanced to be standing directly in front of Cade as she leaned across the table to aim, shifting her hips as she moved slightly to her right.

Oh, hell, yeah, Cade looked. As Mandi leaned forward, her skirt rode up a bit and tightened delightfully around her butt and thighs.

In the corner of his eye, Cade caught a motion in the big front window of the pub and glanced that direction. Mandi's reflection was grinning slightly as she looked back at him.

Cade matched her small grin, shrugged as he flicked his eyebrows at her, and went back to studying Mandi's assets as she made the shot and straightened up with a muted 'gotcha' look on her face.

As Mandi methodically worked her way through her balls, Mike leaned over to quietly ask Cade, "Where the hell did she learn to shoot like that?"

"She's from Vegas," replied Cade, as if that explained everything.

When four games had passed without Mandi missing a shot, Mike simply reached up and erased his name from the chalkboard.

"That's enough for me," he said, "I'm a believer."

Stan looked at his watch and said, "We've got time for one more game."

Mike shrugged and held up his glass.

"Go for it. I've still got some beer left."

As he racked the balls, Stan said, "I can't believe she's kicking our asses with a bar cue. Why doesn't she have a stick of her own?"

"You'll have to ask her," said Cade. "I just met her today. We haven't discussed much personal stuff yet."

"I left it at home," said Mandi. "I didn't expect to need it."

"Huh," grunted Mike. "I'd say you do all right without it."

"No shit," muttered Stan.

Two brunettes came into the pub as Mandi broke the rack. They approached and stopped at a distance as Mandi shot, then angled around the pool table.

One went to Stan; the other went to Mike, who stood up with Cade as she approached. Stan introduced them as Susan and Sara, then Cade and Mike pulled up two more chairs for them and everybody sat down to watch the game.

"Will talking disturb her?" asked Sara.

"I seriously doubt it," said Cade, with a shake of his head.

Turning to Mike, Sara said, "Sorry we couldn't get loose earlier. We got kind of busy in the ER. Do you think this game will take long? We're starving."

Mike laughed shortly and said, "No, I don't think it'll take long. She's good." Shaking his head slightly, he added, "She's *real* damned good. Five games and she hasn't missed yet."

"Not at all?" asked Susan.

"Not once."

Appropriately impressed, the newcomers watched Mandi quickly pocket her last three balls and the eight.

"Make that six games," said Mike. "Damn!"

After Mike and Stan had left with their starving ladies, Mandi leaned her rump on the pool table and asked, "Well? We still have time for a game, too. Want to try your luck again?"

Grinning wryly, Cade said, "Sure, if I break."

Unassing the table to reach for her beer, Mandi said, "No problem. Go for it."

After a long sip while watching Cade rack the balls, she asked, "How old are you, Ed?"

"Fifty-three. Why?"

"Just curious. If you had any health problems, you wouldn't be working with John's group, would you?"

Lining up to break the rack, Cade said, "Nope."

Sipping her beer again, Mandi said, "After the show tonight... Well, I'm thinking that I'd rather not be where anyone is likely to look for me."

Pausing to look at her, Cade asked, "Reason?"

Mandi shook her head and said, "I'd just rather not have anyone knocking on my door after the show."

With a shrug, Cade said, "We'll tell John. He'll tell the others to leave you alone."

Giving him a studious look, Mandi sipped her beer again as Cade sent the cue ball through the rack.

"I didn't say I wanted to be alone," she said. "I said I wanted to be where I wouldn't be found."

Looking up from the table, Cade set the butt of his cue stick on the floor, regarded her thoughtfully for a moment, then asked, "Would it be too much to hope for that you're referring to my room as your sanctuary?"

With a small shake of her head, Mandi smiled slightly as she said, "No, Ed. It wouldn't be too much to hope for." She sipped her beer and quietly added, "But it might be all you could hope for."

"Uh, huh. Does that mean I'd have to behave myself or that you'd have your way with me and then discard me like a used paper towel in the morning?"

Laughing, Mandi said, "No, it just means that... Well..." she hesitated further, then gestured at the pool table and said, "See if you can figure it out in the meantime. I'll understand if you're reluctant later."

After a moment of studying her, Cade nodded and lined up on the nine ball. Seven shots later, only the eight remained and it wasn't too far from a pocket. Cade called the pocket and sank the ball with a sigh of deliberately unconcealed relief.

Laughing, Mandi said, "Oh, good game, sir."

"Coming from you, that's a heavy compliment, milady." He sipped his beer and asked, "Back to what you said about being 'reluctant later'. You're gorgeous and I enjoy being with you, so I'm having trouble with the idea that I might be reluctant."

Nibbling her lip, Mandi regarded Cade for a moment, then looked around, apparently to be sure nobody else could hear.

In a low tone, she said, "You might find sex with me... ah... well, it could be somewhat... ah... unsatisfying."

Matching her soft, confidential tone, Cade stated, "You're trying to say that I couldn't get in, aren't you?"

Reddening slightly, Mandi nodded.

Cade shrugged. "Oh, well. There are other ways to please a woman."

Peering at Cade as if to determine the truth of his words, Mandi asked, "That wouldn't bother you?"

With a small smile, Cade sipped his beer again and softly said, "It wouldn't bother me anywhere near as much as knowing I missed an opportunity to taste a woman like you intimately." After a brief pause, he grinningly added the respectful afterthought, "Ma'am."

Again eyeing him as if to decide whether he'd told the truth, Mandi sipped her beer and laid her stick across the pool table. Picking up the menu from the small table, Cade looked it over and opted for another burger basket rather than some of the other items available, most of which seemed to contain pasta.

"Would you like anything?" he asked, showing Mandi the menu. "I'm getting the burger basket."

Mandi scanned the menu and said, "Same for me," as she reached into her purse for quarters she hadn't expected to need.

"I'm buying," said Cade, waving the menu.

"Thanks," said Mandi, "But I'm looking for quarters. I lost the last game, remember?"

Looking startled, Cade exclaimed, "Oh, yeah! So you did! Wowsers! Thanks for reminding me!"

"Just treasure the moment," said Mandi drily. "It may not happen again. Ever."

"Oh, yes'm!" said Cade with a nod and a tiny salute. "As you say, ma'am. Treasuring it now, ma'am. Back in a minute."

As he headed for the bar, Cade heard Mandi mutter, "Smartass," then she called, "Extra mustard, okay?"

## Chapter Twelve

Allowing a little extra time to get back to the hotel and fight the crowd in the auditorium, Cade suggested that he and Mandi head back at eleven-fifteen.

"Besides," he added, "I've only won one game tonight. That's wearing rather heavily on me, you know."

"Poor baby," said Mandi, snapping in her last two balls and the eight. "If it's any consolation, nobody else has won against me in something like six months."

"Well, in that case, I guess I'm all consoled now, ma'am."

Mandi chuckled and racked her stick, then picked up her purse and sipped the last of her Coke.

On the way to the front door, she stopped, took a look around the bar, sighed, and said, "This may have been my last night of real anonymity, Ed."

Cade leaned to kiss her cheek and said, "Doubtful. Like I said, there are lots of beautiful blondes. Just try to blend in."

With a ladylike grunt and a roll of her eyes, Mandi led the way to the sidewalk. Enroute to the hotel, Cade called room 423 to make sure John and Phyllis Morey were in place.

By eleven-thirty they'd found standing room near the front of the auditorium and a nervous -- almost frantic -- Paul Money had spotted them from his position near the stage.

He edged through the crowd to them and asked, "Is everything ready?"

"Yup," said Cade, "Mandi will go change and wait for my call. I'll stay here and wait for your fifteen-minute warning. As soon as I make that call to her, I'll take some of your people and we'll rope off her route from door to door. You'll station people in here to make sure the doors stay clear. Exactly fifteen minutes from your signal, she'll walk in with the car."

Paul nodded, although he was apparently still not fully convinced that things would be that simple or go smoothly.

"Paul, relax," said Cade.

With a sharp glance, Paul snapped, "I *can't* relax!"

Shrugging, Cade said, "Okay. Won't help any, though."

Mandi chuckled and said, "Later, people," and slipped out the doors to the corridor. Paul returned to the backstage area.

The last scheduled show ended at ten to midnight. Paul gave the signal -- a small wave and a nod -- and Cade called room 423, where Mandi waited with John, then he took the rope team to set up the walkway.

"We've never done this before," said one of them. "Why the hell are we roping off the hall?"

"You'll see," said Cade. "Keep the walkway clear, and that's a dead-serious order, people. You don't even have to be nice about it; just tell 'em to get the hell off to one side."

"Excuse me, but just who the hell are you?" asked a woman. "I don't think I like your tone."

Glancing at her, Cade said, "We don't have time to discuss this, lady, so get with it or get lost. If you stick around, you'll see why it's important to keep the walkway clear."

As soon as the ropes were in place, Cade tagged four of the bigger guys with the task of keeping the lane clear and told the woman who'd balked to stand by at the driveway doors. She glared at his crisp order to stand by, but said nothing and went to the doors. Cade sent another guy to wait by the auditorium doors.

At five minutes until showtime Cade saw three people with WNN tags and camera gear cross the lobby toward the auditorium at a dead run.

Cade whistled sharply and yelled, "WNN! Get over here and set up! You have about two minutes!"

The guy in charge of the little group came to talk to Cade.

"We were told..."

"She'll be coming in those doors," interrupted Cade, pointing at the street entrance. "You can buzz around her, but don't get in her way. She'll be carrying a Crown Victoria like the one that blew up today."

The brunette woman in the WNN group exclaimed, "She's bringing a *car* into the hotel?!"

"Yeah, so stay clear of things. Now you've got one minute."

Walking to the street entrance, Cade looked up in time to see Mandi land with the car at the bottom of the ramp. A few others saw her land, as well, and assorted sounds of amazement came from the bisected crowd.

Mandi headed quickly for the doors. Cade and the balky woman pulled them open wide and held them as Mandi very carefully carried the Crown Victoria on her shoulders through the doorway and into the hotel.

Once she was inside, the astonished crowd stood watching her pass as if she carried an armed nuclear weapon, but Cade shouted, "Keep 'em back! Back!" on general principles.

WNN's two camera guys circled Mandi and the car like a pair of wolves, panning every inch of the scene as she marched toward the auditorium with the Crown Vic. The woman with the microphone settled for walking alongside Mandi at a distance as she spoke softly into the mike. She sounded as if she was reporting a golf tournament at first, then her voice became somewhat louder as she got over her own astonishment.

At the other end of the roped-off path the auditorium doors had swung open at the same time as the street doors. Some of the con volunteers there were busy keeping the rubbernecking crowd clear of the doors, but as Mandi approached, the people shrank back from the entranceway.

After carefully easing the sedan through the auditorium doors, Mandi lifted herself and the car into the air and flew toward the stage, but didn't land there.

Paul had felt it necessary to make sure they knew the stage couldn't handle the weight of the car. As Mandi settled to hover about a foot above the stage, he paled slightly and prayed that she'd remember not to touch down.

Grabbing the mike from the stand a few feet in front of Mandi, Paul cleared his throat and said in an odd tone of somber astonishment, "Ladies and gentlemen... *this* is Mandi Steele!" His voice firmed up and he very clearly and in a strong tone repeated, "*Mandi Steele!*"

The crowd gasped and there were a few shouts, but not because of Paul's introduction. Mandi had shifted the car from her shoulders upward and was now holding it by its frame at arm's length above her head.

With a pause as he glanced back at her, Paul continued speaking by reading from a prepared note, detailing her accomplishment of the day by which she saved downtown Atlanta from a similar Crown Victoria packed with explosives.

WNN's camera guys continued circling Mandi at the extreme edges of the stage as the woman with the mike bit her lip and dared herself to step forward to speak with a smiling woman who was holding a car rock-steady over her head and who wasn't touching the stage.

To the woman with the mike, Mandi quietly said, "Catch me outside when I put the car down."

The woman nodded and stepped back as Mandi flipped the car onto its nose and grabbed the front axle, then flipped it completely end over end and caught it at the same point.

Some people in the front rows screamed and a couple of them fainted. Cade was amused to see that one of the fainters was the Klingon woman from Brooklyn.

"Paul," said Mandi. "It's time to say hi."

Paul nodded and approached her with his microphone.

"Hi, everybody," said Mandi. "I decided to go public after those pictures of me appeared on the news. DragonCon seemed like a perfect place for someone like me to do that."

There were some chuckles and some barks of laughter from the crowd as Mandi held still for the cameras. After a few moments she lowered the car to one shoulder. Paul dropped the mike at her feet and ducked almost convulsively away.

"Aww, I scared him," Mandi said with a grin. "Sorry, Paul. My bad. People, I have to take this car back out to the parking lot now. Since this is

the end of the show, you're all welcome to follow me outside."

Mandi flew toward the doors and people made way for her without having to be told. The WNN newsies hurried to catch up and failed because Mandi didn't bother walking to the street doors.

She lay flat in the air beneath the car and flew it through the doorway, over the heads of those now within her roped-off pathway, and out the street doors to the parking ramp.

Once she was in position and hovering a couple of feet above the ramp, Mandi simply shrugged the car upward a few inches and zipped out from under it before it could begin falling to the ground.

The Crown Vic landed almost perfectly on all four of its tires at once, bounced heavily, and shuddered to stillness. People came to wonderingly touch it as if to see if it was a real car.

Pinching the fabric of her bodysuit at each shoulder, Mandi gave it a couple of ear-splitting snaps that seemed to obliterate the two big, dark smudges on her back.

"Kewl," said Cade. "Talk about stainproof..."

She then took off her cape and gave it a rolling snap that left a faint cloud of undercarriage residue in the air.

As she put it back on, Cade opened the front passenger door to retrieve the damp towel in the plastic bag, then used the towel to wipe smudges off the skin of Mandi's arms and shoulders as the WNN people approached.

"Messy, messy," whispered Cade. "You need a bath, lady. Do you always get this dirty when you play with cars?"

Mandi snickered as she held up a forearm smudge for Cade's attention. He used the opportunity to check her makeup as he buffed her arm clean. No damage. Prosthetics in place.

"Makeup's fine," whispered Cade. "You know, those fake teeth are kinda sexy."

Glancing sharply at him, Mandi started to say, "They aren't..." then said, "Watch it, smartass."

"Oh, yes'm. Watching it now. In fact, there's a spot on the back of your right leg. Hold still another minute."

Kneeling behind her, he folded the towel to a clean spot and rubbed the smudge from Mandi's calf. As he stood up, he saw the brunette newswoman eyeing him sharply, curiously.

Patting Mandi's shoulder, Cade whispered, "There you go. All clean, milady. Go gettun," and stepped back a pace as he re-bagged the towel.

A hotel employee stood near the front of the car. Cade tossed the bag to her with a grin and said, "It's a hotel towel."

The woman looked at the bag, then at Mandi, and clutched the bag tightly to her middle as if afraid someone would take it from her. Had the towel suddenly become a souvenir?

From the glove compartment of the car Cade took a sheaf of folded papers, which he handed to Mandi. She, in turn, offered one to the newswoman, who took it and started to introduce herself.

"I'm Julia Waters," she said, "WNN news. Would you answer a few questions for me?"

"After you've read the brochure, if there's time," said Mandi. "That's my press release. I can't stay long, so see if your questions are on there, okay?"

Julia's eyes fell to the brochure and she opened it.

As she did so, Mandi held up another brochure and said, "I have about a hundred of these, if anyone wants one."

The crowd seemed to surge forward as a mass of grasping hands. WNN's newsteam found themselves jostled out of position as both Cade and Mandi handed out the brochures.

Many immediately began clamoring for autographs. Cade handed Mandi a pen and continued to hand out brochures as Mandi signed brochures, clothing, arms, and whatever else people presented with a quick, cursive 'MS'.

Just as they handed out the last of the brochures -- right on cue -- Cade's cell phone rang. He answered it, then tapped Mandi's shoulder and handed the phone to her.

"Mandi," she said, then listened intently for a moment, said, "Be right there," and pushed the 'off' button as she handed the phone back to Cade.

For the benefit of the audience, she asked Cade, "Will you take care of the car for me?"

Nodding curtly, Cade strode around the car, got in, and started it. Easing through the crowd, he headed the car down the ramp toward the street, glancing in the rearview mirror.

Mandi raised her arms for quiet and said, "I'm sorry, everybody, but I've been called away. Thank you all for your time," then she launched herself skyward.

Turning right at the corner, Cade drove half a block and turned right again into the hotel's receiving docks. One of the guys from John's A-group opened the second set of gates and Cade turned the car over to him, then shut the gates behind him as he drove the Crown Vic to the front parking area.

## Chapter Thirteen

As he walked up the steps to the hotel's rear entrance, Cade felt a watching presence and faded into some shadows to have a look around. Seeing no one immediately, he quietly dropped behind some bushes to get to another vantage point and continued studying his surroundings.

There was still no one in sight, but the feeling was stronger than ever. No one on the ground or in nearby windows, he amended. Cade glanced up and around and saw Mandi hovering twenty feet or so above him.

"If you want your clothes back," said Cade, "You'll promise not to sneak up on me like that again."

"It didn't work, anyway," said Mandi, descending beside him. "I can't believe you found a way to disappear halfway up a flight of steps. I had to go to infrared to spot you. How'd you know I was up there?"

Stepping out of the shadows, Cade said, "Just did."

"Well?" asked Mandi. "How do you think it went?"

"Well enough. We got away without having to deal intimately with the public or the news hounds."

Lifting a cardboard box from what appeared to be a trash pile in the shadows to one side of the doorway, Cade handed Mandi a baggie containing her blue dress, purse, and shoes.

"Your luggage, milady."

Mandi chuckled and took the baggie, then turned into a blur that seemed to change colors rapidly. A couple of seconds later the blur ceased and Mandi wore her blue outfit as she appeared to compress a wad of red between her hands.

Her red cape, Cade realized. The rest of her uniform must be inside it. He watched as she mashed it to the size of a packet of tissues and dropped it into her purse.

"All set," she said, snapping the purse shut.

"Damn," said Cade. "Wish I could do that. Don't know why I'd need to, exactly, but that was a helluva trick, ma'am. What about the prosthetics?"

Patting her purse, Mandi grinningly said, "They went in separately. I didn't think they'd compress well."

Nodding, Cade opened the door for her. They took the freight elevator to the tenth floor, then rode down to the fourth floor in one of the regular elevators.

John met them near Cade's room and accompanied them inside without comment until Cade shut the door.

"Well?" asked John. "How do you think it went?"

"That's exactly what I asked him," said Mandi.

"Well enough," said Cade, reusing his answer to Mandi. "We got away without having to deal intimately with the public or the news hounds."

"Great," said John. "I talked with Paul Money. He's setting up a lookalike contest for tomorrow evening." Focusing on Mandi, he asked, "You're going to be in this room tonight?"

"Yes," said Mandi. "We'll move my things in an hour or so, once everything's settled down."

"Good enough." Turning to Cade, John asked, "You're staying here tonight, or moving to her room?"

"Staying, if it's okay with Mandi."

"It is," said Mandi. "This is where people expect to find him, and he can answer the door if anyone drops by."

"Okay, then," said John. "I'll move Samuels into your room and you can have his tomorrow."

Looking at his watch, he said, "Well, it's getting late, so I'll get out of here." Turning to Mandi again, he held out one of the brochures and a pen and said, "Oh, before I forget, would you autograph one of these for my daughter?"

Mandi took it with a smile and signed it as Cade asked, "For your daughter, huh?"

John gave him a droll look, but said nothing.

"I haven't seen the brochure," said Cade, intercepting Mandi's return of the document to John.

Unfolding the paper, he saw a near-photo-quality picture of Mandi in uniform on the left side of the page. On the right side was a brief that gave her name, a post box address in Arlington, VA, an email address, and a website address.

"Kewl," said Cade, "It usually takes a whole day to put a site registration and activation through."

"We have friends in the business," said John. He handed a printout to Mandi and said, "The site is paid up for five years. Here's the login info for both the website and the email. You can let us know where to send your snail mail."

"I'll pick it up for now," said Mandi. "Thanks, John."

With a nod, John reached behind himself for the door handle and said, "No problem. Later, people," as he let himself out of the room.

When the door closed behind John, Cade turned to Mandi and said, "There's only one bed. I'll have the hotel bring up a folding bed if you want."

Shaking her head, Mandi said, "No need," as she went to the little refrigerator and opened it. "Want anything?"

"Maybe later. If your stuff's packed, I'll go get it."

Opening a Coke, Mandi sipped it before she said, "I'm all packed, but I think it would be faster if I went for it. You guard the hallway, okay?"

Leaning against the desk as he watched her drink again, Cade noddingly said, "Will do, milady."

Mandi froze in mid-sip and gazed at Cade for some moments, then came to stand a couple of feet from him as she said, "Again and again I hear 'ma'am' and 'milady'. Are you into bondage games or something?"

Meeting her gaze, Cade grinningly said, "Nope. That kind of stupidity never held any appeal for me."

"Then why all the 'ma'am's and 'milady's?"

"In case I forget your name, of course. If you're used to hearing me call you 'milady', you'll never realize..."

Rolling her eyes and swatting his shoulder, Mandi said, "Yeah, right. Seriously, Ed. Why?"

"I like it. If you don't, just say so. I'll stop."

Sipping her Coke again without taking her eyes off him, Mandi seemed to give the matter some thought. After a moment she set the can on the desk and went to the door.

"Ready?" she asked.

Cade nodded and went to the door, opening it to check the hallway. Seeing nobody in the corridor, he nodded again and waved her past him.

Mandi swept past him in a flash. Her blur of motion turned hard right just outside the doorway and disappeared. Cade peeked out in time to see her slash her keycard through her room's door lock, then disappear again.

*'Yeah, she's definitely quick,'* he thought, opening the door to his room fully and standing well clear of it as he mentally counted *'One... two... three...'*

A rush of air passed him with the blur that was Mandi. She set three suitcases and a cloth bag on the floor by the bed and disappeared. Cade held his position and counted again.

"...Four," said Cade as Mandi again blasted into the room.

"Four what?" she asked.

"Seconds. There and back, that is. The lock must have slowed you down on the first trip."

Grinning at him, Mandi opened one of her suitcases on the bed and took out a terrycloth bathrobe, which she laid to one side as she continued rooting through the bag.

Cade closed the door and came to stand near her as she produced a container of shampoo made to look like a miniature champagne bottle and handed it to Cade.

After studying the faux-vineyard label, Cade handed it back with a shrug and, "Yes'm. That's very nice."

"Not what you were expecting, was it?" asked Mandi.

"I wasn't expecting anything. I just came over here to see if you'd pull anything interesting out of that bag."

"Interesting? In what way?"

Shrugging again, Cade said, "Just interesting. No way in particular," and headed for the bathroom to make a coffee.

As he primed his travel mug with instant coffee and waited for the sink water to run hot enough, Mandi said, "You don't exactly seem absolutely thrilled about me being here."

With a short laugh, Cade looked at her in the wall mirror and shook his head unbelievably.

"What?" asked Mandi. "You don't."

Giving her another long look as he stirred his coffee, Cade grinningly said, "I'm minding my manners, that's all. There's a beautiful woman in my hotel room and I don't want to say or do anything that will make her leave in a huff."

Mandi gave him a skeptical look, then zipped her suitcase shut and set it on the floor. Picking up the shampoo and the folded robe, she took them to the bathroom alcove and set them on the counter, then turned to Cade.

"Say or do what, exactly, Ed? We talked about certain things in the bar, didn't we?"

Nodding, he said, "We talked, but that's all. I don't remember being specifically invited to do anything."

With a somewhat incredulous gaze, Mandi softly repeated, "*Specifically invited..?*"

"Yup. We discussed. We inferred. That's all. Men and women don't communicate all that well sometimes, Mandi. A long time ago I discussed and inferred like that with another woman, a friend of my sister's. It turned out that she'd just been talking about some of her thoughts and feelings about sex with someone she'd *thought* had understood that we'd just been talking. When I acted on what I *thought* she'd meant, she gave me one of those 'hurt puppy' looks and started crying and bitching about how all men were such jerks. Ever since, I've made sure to be sure."

With a narrow gaze, Mandi asked, "What do you mean by 'acted on', Ed?"

Sipping some coffee, Cade said, "I just made advances. I didn't throw her over my shoulder and head for the bedroom."

After a moment of studying him, Mandi asked, "What kind of advances?"

Setting his coffee down, Cade quietly asked, "Should I simply answer that question, or should I demonstrate?"



Her gaze still narrow, but now because she suspected Cade was teasing her, Mandi said, "Try demonstrating."

Smiling as he said a firm, "Yes, milady," Cade stepped forward and took Mandi in his arms as she, in turn, embraced him. Kissing her softly, he took his time about letting his lips brushingly caress hers, then made the kiss become a firm connection for some moments.

When the kiss ended, he continued to hold her as he whispered in her ear, "That's all I did, ma'am. I'm kind of hoping you'll handle it better than she did."

As Mandi chuckled softly, Cade punctuated the whisper with another brushing kiss on Mandi's cheek and grinningly asked, "Do I have to let you go now, or could we stay like this a while?"

Looking up at him, Mandi asked, "You realize what time it is, don't you?"

"It's about ten to one, but we don't have to be anywhere until the con opens tomorrow. Not even then, really, unless someone calls a briefing on a Saturday morning."

"Are you willing to chance that on only a few hours of sleep? You've had a long day, Ed, and as far as I know, I'll be here tomorrow night, too."

Cade cocked his head slightly as he looked at her.

"Ah, but what if you *aren't* here tomorrow night for some reason? Mandi, I've been up too late a few times before and survived early briefings." He paused and kissed her again before emphatically adding, "And tonight I'm with a superwoman who may as well be a goddess. *Hell*, yes, I'll take a chance like that! Want some help in the shower? Not to brag, of course, but I'm considered something of a lay expert in matters of gynocentric eudemonics."

Mandi pulled back a bit and eyed Cade for a moment, then asked, "You do know some unusual words, don't you?"

"Yes'm. And since you aren't asking me what 'eudemonics' means, so do you. Probably all of them, I figure."

She nodded slightly and smilingly said, "My education was very thorough. So you're a 'lay' expert, huh?"

"Well, a rather advanced student at the very least, ma'am."

"Uh, huh. I only have your word for that, so you must realize I'm going to have to make you prove it. I hope you don't mind my blatant skepticism, sir."

With a dismissive shrug, Cade said, "Oh, of course not, milady. I completely understand. Some things are just too important to be left unverified."

## Chapter Fourteen

Cade went to the bathroom to lose some used beer as Mandi again went to her suitcase. When he came out a few minutes later, a gloriously naked Mandi smilingly strode past him and cavalierly handed him the fancy shampoo bottle as she breezed by. Setting the bottle down on the desk, Cade kicked off his boots and skinned out of his clothes, then grabbed the bottle and followed her.

Mandi grinningly stood still or moved as directed to allow him best-possible access with the shampoo and soap as Cade took his sweet time about washing her. It surprised him to learn that she was ticklish in all the usual places.

It surprised Mandi equally to learn that Cade hadn't been kidding at all about the level of enjoyment he achieved simply by touching and tasting, but after several minutes of his joyful tasting, her surprise was replaced by other sensations that began to build within her due to Cade's questing tongue and roving, sensual touches.

A shuddering, gasping orgasm was all Cade wanted from her, and he worked hard for it. When the scent of honey and wildflowers began to fill the shower stall and the magnificent twin columns that were her thighs began to tremble, Cade happily redoubled his efforts until the sounds of his success filled the tiny bathroom.

Sure, Cade vaguely realized that something was affecting him like a mood enhancement drug, but somehow that just didn't seem very important at all as the honey and wildflower taste of her flooded his senses.

Mandi's fingers entwined tightly in his hair to hold him steadfastly in place as she crested. When she relaxed with a sigh a little later, Cade thought of the way she'd tossed the Crown Vic around and actually felt relieved that she hadn't accidentally squashed him as she'd peaked.

Sliding out from between her legs, Cade stood up and simply held her for a time as the spray cascaded over them both. A few light, feathery kisses to her shoulder and neck brought Mandi's face up to his and his next kiss was one of the kind that let a woman know that a man thinks the world of her.

"See?" he whispered, "Some things are worth losing a little sleep."

With a soft snicker, Mandi simply nodded agreement and kissed him again and they stood together under the spray for another few minutes before she spoke.

"Seems to me it's my turn to..." she began, but her words were interrupted by the phone ringing in the bedroom.

They looked quizzically at each other for a moment, then parted. Nobody would be calling either of them at that hour without damned good reason.

"Guess I'd better answer it," said Cade, kissing her again and stepping out of the shower stall.

Mandi said nothing as she reached to turn off the water. Cade grabbed a towel and used it as he left the bathroom.

Picking up the phone, Cade answered it with his room number.

"Four-twenty-two."

"Cade," said John in a tense voice, "I need to speak to Mandi."

"Hold one," said Cade, turning to wave the phone at Mandi. "It's John."

She nodded and came padding out of the bathroom to take it and say, "Hi, John. What's up?"

As he finished toweling himself dry, Cade faintly heard John say, "We need you in the ops room, Mandi. Let Cade stay there and get some sleep; you're going to have to make a trip to Washington tonight."

Nodding as if John could see her, Mandi said, "Tell me about it when I get there. I'm on my way. Bye," and hung up the phone as she turned to Cade.

"I heard," he said, tossing the towel over a chair and reaching for her, "And I've seen how fast you move, so how about a kiss for the road, lady?"

Mandi moved into his arms for a long, firm kiss, then she stepped back and said, "If I can, I'll be back tonight."

"Most excellent, ma'am. I'd like to wake up next to you."

Mandi smiled in her naked splendor and became a blur that moved around the room for a moment, then solidified back into Mandi a few inches from his face. She smilingly kissed him again, then again blurred as she sped out of the room.

"Damn," muttered Cade as he parked his butt against the desk and picked up Mandi's towel. It still carried the scent of her; the wildflowers and honey scent. He held the towel to his face and breathed deeply of her for a few moments, then hung both towels on the rack in the bathroom and climbed into bed.

Sleep was evasive for a while as he remembered various aspects of their shower together, but eventually it found him.

When he woke a little after nine, he was alone in the bed. After ablutions and making a cup of instant coffee, Cade called the ops room to see if Mandi was due back anytime soon. They either didn't know or couldn't say. He asked to be notified when she returned.

Cade tore the relevant pages out of his convention schedule and circled those events he'd attend. He then wrote, 'I'll be at one of these' on hotel stationery, used his knife to slice a line in the paper and inserted the rolled-up schedule pages in the slot, and finished his coffee before leaving to

find some breakfast.

At the front desk, he told the clerk to allow Mandi access to his room, then crossed the lobby to the restaurant. The smell of food hit him hard for some reason. Cade chose from the menu cautiously, not wanting to order more than he could eat, but he nonetheless ended up ordering a whole second breakfast platter when the first one didn't seem to do the job.

As he was finishing up the second platter, Cade's cell phone buzzed and he answered it with, "Cade here."

"Hey, ol' buddy," said Frank Stearns, "I hear you had some special female company last night. I'm kind of surprised you're up and around at all this morning."

'Ol' buddy, huh?' thought Cade, 'Shields up.'

He asked, "Are you in the ops room, Frank?"

"Huh? No. Why?"

"Do you know if Mandi's back yet?"

"Back? What do you mean 'back'? What'd she do, run out on you? Didn't you tickle her fancy?"

With a sigh, Cade asked, "Frank, why the hell did you call me?"

Frank Stearns laughed and said, "I just wanted to hear your version of things. How'd it go last night, *stud*?"

In a flat tone, Cade said, "Sorry to disappoint you, Frank."

Cade let Stearns hear him sigh again and thumbed the off button as he reached for his coffee. As he took a sip, Cade again recalled scenes from the shower and the way that scent of wildflower and honey had seemingly taken over his mind.

Pheromones? He couldn't remember reading anything about pheromones having any particular smell, but Mandi wasn't exactly a Jane Average woman, either.

Just a brief remembrance of that scent and its effect was enough to cause that effect to occur again. Cade ordered another coffee so he'd have an excuse to remain seated until that effect died down a bit.

A rather tall woman at another table noticed his discomfort and pinked slightly when Cade had to reach to adjust himself. She was wearing a barbarian princess sort of outfit that showed a lot of skin and Cade wondered if she thought his discomfort was her fault.

His gaze fell to her long legs and he shrugged mentally as he eyed her thighs. Yeah. She had pretty good legs. Sure. It could happen, given the right -- and somewhat closer -- circumstances.

The woman's pink became a bit deeper and she turned away nervously. That made Cade chuckle. Why the hell do women wear sexy, skimpy costumes like those if they can't handle the results? Big duh, lady. You have good legs. Men look at exposed female skin. Grow up and deal with it. Whups. Wait one. He peered more closely at the rest of her for a moment. She looked a little familiar...

Got it. Add some Klingon makeup and an outfit made of leather, metal stuff, and patches of motorcycle tires. She was the attitude-woman from the dealer's room. But she was at a table with three other women and no men. Where was her Mr. Klingon this morning?

Cade decided it didn't matter a damn where Mr. Klingon was, but he stopped eyeballing her legs so his system would relax enough that he could leave the restaurant in time to get to the eleven o'clock writer's panel.

A few minutes later he was able to down the last of his coffee and head for the escalators. As he was descending, Cade heard a soft swear word as something ripped behind him. He turned to find a woman kneeling to try to pick up the contents of her purse.

The seam of her tight skirt had opened all the way up to her ass and she was scrabbling to pick stuff up before the escalator step reached the bottom.

Cade helped her, of course, and they succeeded, then they stepped to one side of the escalator and he held her purse and stuff as she tried to do something about her skirt.

"It's too tight," said Cade. "It'll just open up again. Might as well say to hell with it and change when you get a chance."

She froze, then gaped irritably at him.

"Are you saying I'm fat?"

Cade eyed her ample bosom and the fullness of her thigh -- not an excessive fullness at all -- and shook his head.

"Nope. I said exactly what I meant. That skirt's too tight. It probably won't stay fixed."

Her irritated gaze became a glare.

"What the hell do you know..?"

Shoving her purse and stuff at her, Cade interrupted her impending rant with, "Yeah, right. Forget it, lady. Here. Have fun trying to hold yourself together," and walked away.

The writer's panel covered nothing that hadn't been covered before. Cade's main reason for not leaving was that Mandi might come looking for him and it was one of the places he'd circled on the schedule page he'd left for her.

With three hours to kill before the next panel, Cade went back to his room by way of the ops room. Mandi hadn't returned, but he learned that his laptop had been marked for return to him, so he retrieved it and used his room's phone line to check email and surf the net a bit.

He'd found next to nothing about superwomen the day before. Now there were dozens of sites. All of them had essentially the same pictures -- cuts from the news and scans of the flyer Mandi had handed out -- but a few had pictures from the car-juggling event and the parking lot afterward.

He turned off his laptop and put it in his backpack. Mandi's luggage was still in his room, but there was nothing about her that he wanted or needed to know so badly that it would justify opening her bags.

Cade made himself a coffee and flopped on the bed to see what was in the day's news. Quite a bit of it on several channels was nothing more than a recap of yesterday's events and repeated reruns of the video footage.

Scanning up the channels, Cade found an old movie and half-watched it as his mind chewed through the previous day's events the way he'd lived them and survived some of them.

But his mind kept returning to Mandi. Her face, hair, shoulders, legs... the sound of her voice... her smile...

He realized that some of what he was feeling and thinking came from her natural attractiveness and having spent the day and most of the night with her, but it seemed to Cade that he was feeling quite a bit more than he should for so short a time together. That led him to wonder why, which somehow led him back to her wildflower and honey scent.

Cade got up and went to the bathroom, but the maid had already cleaned the room and taken Mandi's towel. No matter; the scent was still etched in his mind.

'Etched.' he thought, returning to the bed. 'Yeah, that was a word for it. Unforgettable was another. Too much so?'

Could there be something about her scent that... well, that was as 'super' as the rest of her? That maybe had left some kind of indelible chemical mark on his brain?

With a chuckle, he caught himself and changed course. If it had left such a mark on him, was it necessarily a bad thing? It would conjure explicit memories of her. Cade's mind flashed on Mandi's exquisite legs and lovely face and he decided that he could definitely live with that sort of a mark on his brain.

Unless Mandi -- or her scent, or whatever else about her -- created disruptions of some sort, no biggie.

That was essentially his last conscious thought as sleep again overtook him.

Cade woke to the sounds of a phone ringing and pounding on a door, groggy as hell and thoroughly disoriented. His watch read almost six o'clock. When he tried to stand to go to the door, he staggered and fell back on the bed.

Dizzy as hell, too, and weak as a kitten. He made another effort to stand up and headed for the door again. When he turned the handle, John and a guy from Phil's team seemed startled to see him, then John rushed forward and steered Cade back into the room. The other guy closed the door and followed.

John sat Cade down in the chair by the desk as the other guy answered the phone and said, "Yeah. He's here. I think he might be sick, though. Yeah. Okay."

Turning to John, the guy said, "Doc Crandall's got the duty today. Do we need him?"

Glancing up, John said, "Don't know yet. Stand by."

Facing Cade, he asked, "Cade, what's wrong with you?"

With a terse shake of his head, Cade said, "Just woke up, that's all."

"You look as if you've just climbed out of your grave."

Looking up, Cade said, "Well, gee, thanks."

The guy on the phone snorted a laugh as John studied Cade's face rather critically.

"I'm okay, John," insisted Cade, "Just tired, I guess."

"Just like that, you got tired?"

Shrugging, Cade said, "Guess so. You know I was up late."

Checking his watch, John said, "Well, then, you've got most of an hour to get to the ops room. Tonight's Mandi show starts at eight and we want everybody in place ahead of time."

"She's back?"

"Yeah. She's going over a few things with Phyllis."

Nodding, Cade said, "Okay. Half an hour. Got it."

"You sure you're okay?"

Sighing, Cade stood up, spread his arms, and said, "Hey, I'm up and I'm dressed. I'll be there."

Once he was alone, Cade made himself a wakeup coffee and downed most of it on the spot. A look in the mirror confirmed John's appraisal; Cade looked as if he'd risen from a sickbed. He felt that way, too; dog-tired and faintly trembling, he turned on the shower and shed his clothes.

The shower seemed to help a bit. Cade leaned against the wall and did several fast pushups under the spray to get his blood moving a bit faster.

As he turned to face the spray he used some of it to rinse the staleness out of his mouth and discovered an intense thirst. After drinking what seemed like a gallon of water, the thirst eased somewhat and Cade finished washing up.

His coffee seemed to beckon to him as he dried himself. Cade slugged down what was left of the stuff and made a fresh cup, then went to get dressed. Before he had his shirt buttoned, the new cup of coffee was gone and he craved more.

"What the hell..?" he muttered, realizing that he'd felt the same way about the water in the shower.

Glancing at his watch, he realized he might not have time for any sort of dinner, which was all it took to make him feel ravenously hungry. He went to his backpack and took out one of the two big cans of chicken soup and a P-38 military-issue can opener that he kept in the bottom compartment.

One can wasn't enough. Not even close. A few minutes later both cans were empty and Cade didn't feel as if he'd made much of a dent in his hunger. Someone knocked on his door and Cade went to open it.

A guy in a hotel jacket said, "Room service," and wheeled a cart into the room.

"I didn't order room service."

"No, sir. A woman placed the order." Holding up a ticket, the bellhop showed it to Cade and said, "It's already paid for, sir; charged to another room, but to be delivered here."

By this time the smell of a steak dinner had wafted up from the cart and Cade suddenly didn't give a damn who'd sent it or why. He took the ticket and tossed it on the cart as he reached into his pocket for a tip.

"Yeah, great, thanks," he said quickly, tipping the guy and reaching for the cover on the oversized center platter.

When he lifted the cover, Cade found not one steak, but three, and they weren't the usual ten-dollar restaurant servings. These were big slabs of meat surrounded by potatoes, carrots, green beans, and more. Beside the tray lay only one set of silverware wrapped in a hotel napkin.

Cade's cellphone rang and he went to the desk for it.

Thumbing it on, he said, "Cade."

With a chuckle, Mandi asked, "Has your dinner arrived yet?"

"Just now, but they may have screwed up downstairs. There's enough food here for three people, but there's only one set of silverware and no plates."

Chuckling again, Mandi said, "No, they didn't screw up. I knew you'd wake up hungry, so I sent up a fairly standard conversion meal. I need another fifteen here before I can get loose. Save me a few bites, will you?"

"Mandi, what's a conversion and...?"

She interrupted him with, "Oops, gotta go. I'll tell you all about it later, okay? Bye!"

Realizing she was no longer online, Cade thumbed his phone off and said, "Yeah. Right. Bye," as he set it back on the desk. Conversion? What the hell..?

The smell of the food was almost overpowering. Cade decided he could wonder about things as he ate and headed for the food cart. Most of the way through the vegetables and the second of the huge steaks, he paused to set aside about a regular meal's worth of food, then continued eating.

When nothing was left but the food he'd set aside, Cade took the knife and fork to the sink to wash them and put them by the tray, then put the lid back on it and went to brush his teeth and comb his hair.

The vague trembling had left him and he felt a lot better, but Cade still felt a bit disoriented and confused. Between the soup and the steaks he'd put away enough food for half a dozen people, but he didn't feel as if he'd had more than an average meal. In fact, just thinking about that last bit of steak in the other room made him wonder if Mandi could make do with an apology and a late dinner after her show.

The room's hallway door opened and Mandi said, "Thanks for remembering to tell the desk to give me a room card."

Moving to join her in the main room, Cade asked, "After last night, how could I forget?" Indicating the covered tray, he said, "I saved you some dinner, as requested. Are you going to tell me what you've done to me?"

Trying to look shocked and hurt, Mandi asked, "What? No hello kiss? Don't you want to hear about my day?"

Cade took her in his arms for a kiss, then said, "Of course, milady. Tell me all about your day, but tell me later. Right now I want to know what's happening to me."

Mandi shrugged and said, "You're changing. It's nothing to worry about, but the conversion takes a lot of energy and mass. That's why you were so hungry."

"I'm still hungry. Your dinner almost disappeared."

Smiling, she said, "But now the hunger's more manageable and you can get by until after the show. Right?"

She stood by the cart as she sliced the steak and vegetables into bite sized chunks and sprinkled salt and pepper here and there to her liking. Unable to remember ever having read or heard anything about people changing due to association with Mandi, Cade asked, "Just what kind of change are we talking about?"

Without looking up from her efforts, Mandi said, "You're going to become sort of like me."

With a deliberately noisy sigh at her seeming inability to release any details, Cade replied, "Not blonde and stacked, I hope. That could take a helluva lot of getting used to at this point in my life, you know. Could you be maybe just a *little* more specific, Mandi?"

Glancing up with another chuckle and smile, Mandi said, "Nothing quite that outrageous. You're being upgraded, that's all. You'll be bulletproof or close to it. Stronger. Faster. Like that. Don't worry, you won't need a new wardrobe, as much as that may actually be a good idea."

Her grinning gaze traveled from his boots to his shirt as he said, "I'm going to let your sartorial commentary pass. What did you do to me to make this -- change --happen?"

Chuckling around some potato, Mandi said, "I didn't do anything to you. You did it to me." Sticking her tongue out at him and wagging it, she pulled it back in and said, "Like that."

Sitting on the end of the bed, Cade watched her fork up another bit of steak as he tried to figure out what the hell she was telling him. Like what? Was she saying she'd given him some kind of disease? All he'd done was lick her silly in the shower. How could doing that..? He felt like checking his tongue in the bathroom mirror.

"Are you about ready to go?" asked Mandi.

Looking up, Cade saw the food was gone. Mandi stood up and pushed the cart toward the door. Cade slipped into his shoulder rig, grabbed his cellphone, and put on his jacket.

"Yeah, ready," he said. "I'd still like to know..."

Mandi walked back and kissed Cade to silence him.

"Later," she said, "After the show," and she led him by the hand toward the hallway door as she added, "Just be careful when you handle things tonight. You'll be a little stronger than you're used to, so avoid handling people in particular."

"Stronger. Right. Oh, hell, Mandi; on-the-job is the worst possible time to have to learn new tricks or adjust to anything. How much stronger are we talking about?"

She opened the door and pushed the cart into the hall without releasing Cade's hand, which meant that he followed when he might have stopped to ask more questions.

Cade was thinking in human terms, which didn't prepare him at all to hear, "If you follow the norm, by ten or so you'll be able to bench press a couple of tons, give or take."

"Tons?! The *norm*?! There's a *norm*?!"

Putting the cart against the wall, Mandi gave him a quick kiss and grinningly said, "Yeah, there's a norm." With a chuckle she asked, "Gee, mister, did you think you were my very first?"

Laughing, she hauled him toward the elevators. John came out of the ops room and waved, said something to someone in the room, then moved to join them.

"John doesn't know," whispered Mandi, releasing Cade's hand, "And he doesn't need to know. No more questions for now, okay?"

Meeting her intent gaze for a moment, Cade nodded slightly as John caught up to them. John handed him a 'staff' convention badge and a tiny radio with an earpiece and a lapel mike, then they began walking again.

"We're all set," said John. "Frank called a friend and rented some blondes to fill out the..." At Mandi's sharp glance he hastily explained, "They're actors, Mandi. Frank's friend is in the talent business. He called one of the union reps here."

They reached the elevators and Cade pressed the call button as Mandi said, "Knowing Frank, that isn't terribly reassuring."

John laughed and agreed with her, then continued, "Yeah, but we wanted a full stage. They don't *look* like hookers, so even if that's what some of them are, they'll do. There'll be about twenty other spur-of-the-moment contestants unless they've added some since six o'clock."

Cade asked, "How did you come up with uniforms?"

"The superstore near Ft. McPherson. White bathing suits, boots and blue spray paint, red fabric, and gloves. Phyllis and agent Vocce took the girls to room 439, said that making their own uniforms was part of the job, and put them to work. One of them started to object, but the one who brought her kid along said that sewing and painting for a few minutes would beat the hell out of waiting tables tonight. They all stayed."

"Waiting tables?" asked Cade, "That one doesn't sound like a hooker. She brought her kid? Couldn't find a babysitter?"

Nodding, John said, "You got it. No problem, though. The convention has a babysitting room so parents can attend panels and the like without disrupting them. All we had to do was get her a day pass to the con."

The elevator arrived and they suspended the conversation until they arrived at lower lobby two and debarked. As they threaded their way through the crowd toward the ballroom where costume contests were held, Cade spotted the Brooklyn Klingon woman yet again. She carried a blonde wig and seemed in a hurry.

"That's Chandra," said John. "When she saw us bringing in a vanload of blondes, she got curious. We put her on the payroll for this event to keep her quiet."

"This is where I get off," said Mandi, pointing at a side door. "See you later, guys."

As Mandi headed for the door, John said, "She'll put on one of our homespun uniforms and join the other contestants after Phyllis fixes her face."

Cade gave John the fisheye and asked, "There's no way she can win, is there?"

Shaking his head, John smilingly said, "Sorry, but no. The best she can hope for is third or fourth."

"Have the judges already picked the winner?"

Again shaking his head, John said, "No, just one loser in particular. We didn't see any need to fix things past that."

"What's the prize?"

"There are three. First is five hundred bucks, a free pass to next year's convention, and some publicity. Second prize is a free pass and two-fifty. Third is one-fifty and a free pass." He shrugged and added, "And our actors are getting a hundred bucks each, win or lose."

Stopping by the second set of ballroom doors, John said, "This is your station." He grinned and added, "Since you slept through the regular briefing, here's your update, Cade. We're here to watch for bad guys."

"Ha, ha," Cade said flatly as he put on the 'staff' badge and installed his radio gear. "I'll catch 'em for you, but you have to clean 'em."

"Fair enough. We have people at the hallway doors upstairs, so anyone who shows up in this lobby is a bogey until proven otherwise. Carter'll let you know if she sees anything on her screens. All set?"

"All set."

Nodding, John said, "Later, Cade."

Returning his nod, Cade said, "Later, John."

## Chapter Sixteen

From his station at the ballroom doors, Cade almost didn't spot Mandi among the others when the women first paraded onto the stage. As his gaze passed over them, one of the women flicked her eyebrows at him and grinned. Cade studied her a moment longer, then nodded and grinned

back.

Phyllis had slightly altered Mandi's face and body in ways so subtle that Cade could only guess how she'd done it. All he could say was that she didn't look much like herself.

When the ballroom had been filled to capacity and then some, the lobby was cleared and all the double doors were closed. Cade and the others stood in front of the doors.

Slightly muffled by the doors, Cade heard the announcer blather for a while about the purpose of the event being to honor the woman who'd saved Atlanta, then footage of the event was announced, followed by a video playback of the previous night's car-juggling exposition.

Apologies were made that Mandi, herself, couldn't be there, assurances were made that she'd receive a complete recording of the event, and the announcer wrapped up his stage time by turning the show over to a woman, who announced the three prizes to be awarded by the convention and segued the announcement into an introduction of the contest judges.

At last they got down to the look-alike competition. Knowing the general routine each woman would perform, Cade could envision them strutting from the wings to model their outfits by turning around once, then moving across the stage to make room for the next contestant.

The male announcer eventually came back on stage to say that there would be a brief pause as the votes were counted and introduced another display of Mandi Steele video footage with thunderingly loud, dramatic music.

"Bogey on camera three," said Donna Carter's calm voice in Cade's earpiece. "The upstairs hallway. He came in through a side door and he's heading for the escalators. Computer says he's a ninety-five-plus face-match. Blue backpack, jeans, yellow shirt, white sneakers. He's wearing a 'staff' badge."

"Everybody stay tight," Alan said unnecessarily, "He could be a diversion."

"Another bogey... and another match," said Carter. "Again from a side door. Computer says he's definitely Mohammed Nassir from the red list. Blue shirt, green backpack. Jeans and gray sneakers. Another 'staff' badge."

As the escalator carried the men into view, Pierce said, "The blue backpack belongs to one of the two Hassans on the orange list. His other hand's empty, so he's going to have to reach into the bag. Same with Nassir."

The men on the escalator stepped off at the bottom and walked together for only a few paces toward Bartow's door before Hassan said, "I will meet you later. I must sit with some friends," and changed course toward the middle doors.

"Hassan's heading for Cade," said Bartow. "Looks like we get Nassir. Evans, do it."

"Copy," said Evans as he and Pierce stepped from concealment behind a table with a tall cardboard display and ran toward Nassir and Hassan.

Hassan broke into a run and reached under his baggy shirt as he approached Cade's duty station. Cade drew his Glock and prepared to take him down if necessary as he watched Pierce approach Hassan from the side, but Pierce launched himself to land on Hassan and bore him crushingly to the floor over twenty feet from Cade's doors.

Cade stayed in his doorway and looked to see how Bartow and Evans were faring with Nassir as Pierce struggled with Hassan. They weren't faring well.

Evans had rushed Nassir, but Nassir had hopped into the air and kicked him in the face, then landed facing Bartow and dropped flat, kicking at Bartow's leg.

There was a loud, sickening snapping sound and then Nassir was on his feet again and veering right for Cade with a MAC-11 autopistol aimed at him.

Cade quickly backed deep into the doorway. Grinning as he rushed forward, Nassir thought that Cade had panicked and ducked inside the ballroom. He was wrong.

As soon as Cade was out of Nassir's line of sight, he knelt as low as possible next to the wall and aimed upward at the space where Nassir seemed most likely to appear.

The instant Nassir's rushing form blocked the light from the lobby, Cade fired twice so quickly the separate sounds of the shots were almost indistinguishable, then he dropped his Glock and heaved himself at the MAC-11, shoving it upward as he rose to his feet.

The ugly little machine pistol sprayed the ceiling of the alcove, firing itself empty as Nassir pitched forward. Cade heard crunching sounds and felt bones collapse in his grip as his fingers met his palm around Nassir's thick wrist.

From somewhere in his mind came the thought, 'Well, damn. She was right.'

Cade continued his motion with Nassir's arm, glancing to see that the MAC's breech was open and showed no brass as he grabbed and opened a ballroom door to shove Nassir's gun hand through.

Closing the door on Nassir's wrist, Cade threw his weight against the door hard enough to nearly close it completely, then yanked it open again to grab Nassir's gun hand and haul his arm and the MAC back into the alcove.

A few screeches and a "Holy shit!" greeted him from people seated just beyond the door, but he ignored them as he re-closed the door and kicked the door stops down. Picking up his Glock, he checked Nassir for signs of life. There were none.

Both rounds from the Glock had entered below Nassir's sternum only a few inches apart. Only one had exited his back; the other must have hit enough bone to stop it.

"Cade here," he said into his lapel mike. "Nassir's dead."

"Copy that," said Carter, stepping out of a maintenance room behind the escalators. "All clear. Help is on the way."

With their sirens and lights off, two ambulances pulled up outside the lower lobby street doors. Two pairs of medics rushed into the lobby and were directed by Carter.

An injection quieted Hassan almost instantly as two of the medics checked out Bartow. Cade got out of Carter's way as she marched toward him with a camera.

She took a rapid-fire series of pictures of Nassir, zooming in on the MAC-11, his wrist, his face, and then circling his body once before she slung the camera on her shoulder.

Turning to the medics, she said, "Okay, he's all yours," then she produced a man's handkerchief from her jacket pocket and used it to pick up Nassir's weapon. She moved to stand near Cade and look him over as the medics hoisted Nassir onto a gurney and pushed the gurney away.

"Get any blood on you?" she asked.

Turning completely around for her examination, Cade said, "Don't think so. He went down fast and hard."

As he turned back to face her, Carter said, "You look clean enough to me. Let's get out of their way," and thumbed at the glass doors to the street.

Two guys with janitorial gear hurried across the lobby and began cleaning up the blood in the doorway. As soon as they'd finished, another guy covered the bullet holes in the archway ceiling with a large cardboard poster that said, "Keep looking up!" and pictured a spaceship with a little green man leaning out of the cockpit to smilingly wave at the reader.

Bartow and Evans had already been helped to the ambulance and Royce and Davies had replaced them. Carter tapped Cade's arm to get his attention, then pointed at his now-clean doorway. He nodded and stepped over to take his position before the doors.

Cade said, "Some people saw me grab the MAC when I opened the door."

"We know," said Carter. "John's got someone on them. Are you okay, Cade?"

With a shrug, Cade said, "I could use a coffee."

Nodding, Carter said, "Yeah, me, too. Later, Cade. Good job," and turned to head back to her camera room.

Fifteen minutes or so later, Cade heard the announcer hand out the prizes for first, second, and third place. The other contestants were heartily thanked and given surprise consolation prizes in the form of twenty-dollar dealer's room gift certificates, then the band cranked up.

Through Cade's earpiece came, "Open the doors now," and he kicked the stops back up on his doors, opened them, and stood to one side of the alcove as people left the ballroom.

It was a short rush of people; some headed for the restrooms or the escalators, but most of those gathered in the ballroom remained seated because the evening's entertainment would continue until around midnight.

Maybe ten minutes later John made his way to Cade through the swarming people and eyed the alcove for a moment before he said, "Both backpacks were full of plastique. It didn't really matter which one got through."

"Kinda figured that."

"Carter's people had cameras on the doors. I've seen what happened. Good job, Cade."

Another damned 'good job'. Cade wished someone would -- maybe just once -- say something original, or even just 'well done', but he nodded as he replied, "Thanks. What now?"

"For you? Nothing, unless Dante or Carter have questions about what happened. Head to the ops room and file a report, then you're off duty. Mandi will be along after they finish with the news people and convention photos."

"How'd she do? Fourth? Fifth?"

Trying to look as if he hated to be the bearer of bad news, John said, "Sixth, I think. Sorry. She just doesn't look enough like Mandi Steele. Won herself a consolation prize, though."

With a grin, Cade said, "Big deal. That's like 'Everybody Gets A Ribbon' day at an elementary school."

Through his earpiece came Davis's, "John, Danvers needs a word with you."

Shrugging, John said, "Duty calls. See you later. Don't forget that report before you sign out for the night."

Cade nodded and took his earpiece off as he headed for the escalators. Stopping in the lobby for a free newspaper at the luggage desk, he took out his reading glasses and scanned the news, then dug out the comics as he waited for an elevator.

On the fourth floor he took his glasses off, dropped the newspaper in his room, and headed for the ops room, where he used one of the computers to fill out a report form.

As he was typing the last of a general description of events as he'd experienced them -- and making a point of mentioning the door closing hard on Nassir's wrist -- he felt Mandi's presence nearby and looked up as she entered the room.

He waved and smiled, she waved and smiled, then Cade turned back to typing and quickly finished the description and the report and printed copies for signing. Mandi came to stand by the desk

"So you type, too?" she asked, "How fast?"

"About sixty these days. John said you came in sixth."

She sighed with mock regret and said, "Yeah, I just didn't look enough like me, I guess. Close, but no cigar."

As he signed the forms, Cade said, "Poor little you, milady. May I buy you a late dinner to ease your pain?"

"Getting hungry again, huh?"

"Yup." Lowering his voice, he said, "I found out what you meant by 'stronger' a while ago."

Matching his near whisper, Mandi smilingly leaned close and said, "Yes, I know. I was watching you. Those doors are only made of wood, you know."

Not particularly surprised that Mandi could see through things, Cade nodded his understanding, finished signing the forms, and stood up to take them to another desk.

When they arrived in Cade's room, Mandi headed for the fridge as she said, "There were no Atlanta police in the lower lobby, Cade. Not in uniform or out."

Nodding, he said, "I noticed that, too."

Opening a soda, she asked, "Why?"

Cade watched her sip the drink for a moment as he decided how to handle her question, then said, "Likely because they were asked not to be there."

After meeting his gaze for a moment, Mandi said, "A man was shot. Killed. Rightfully so, under the circumstances, but isn't that a matter for the local cops?"

"I'm not going to worry about it, Mandi. If you feel that something's not right, you'll have to talk to John."

She shook her head and said, "No, what I meant was; how is it the Atlanta cops weren't involved?"

Reaching for a soda of his own, Cade said, "Mandi, I think some long-standing rules are being bent. The terrorists are operating as small cells. They can scatter like cockroaches and pop up again anywhere, anytime, with explosives. We need more and better info about them, and I think Hassan's going to tell whatever he knows before the legal system gets him."

"A secret interrogation?"

Nodding, Cade said, "Very likely. Drugs, not torture. They're quicker, more effective, and they don't leave marks."

"And you're okay with that?"

"In Hassan's case, yes. He was caught with a backpack full of plastic explosive in a downtown Atlanta hotel and he was trying to get into a crowded ballroom to set it off. I flatly don't give a rat's ass how they get the info out of him. I also don't care whether the legal system gets him or not."

"What about Constitutional rights?"

Snorting a laugh, Cade said, "He was going to blow himself up, ma'am. His rights would have ended anyway. This way we may find out where he got the plastique, who funded the operation, who directed it, and more. If we turn him over to the legal system before we question him, we can only be sure we'll get his lawyer's name."

Mandi parked her butt against the fridge and said, "I see. So the Constitution no longer applies to all?"

"It should definitely apply to those who live by it. I'm personally not concerned about those who don't. The terrorists are all part of an insane religious cult, Mandi. They think it's their right and duty to blow themselves up in crowds."

He paused to sip, then said, "As I see it, the Constitution is really only capable of helping civilized people live together in peace. Terrorists aren't civilized, so we need a different rulebook to deal with them, preferably *before* they explode themselves in our shopping malls and schools." Gesturing around the room, he added, "Or our hotels."

"A lot of people would disagree with you, Ed. Not all Muslims are terrorists."

"I know that, and I'm not suggesting that they are, but you don't see any Jewish or Christian or atheist suicide bombers, do you? Only Muslims. The terrorists are hiding among their own kind, Mandi, and their 'own kind' aren't being very cooperative about turning them in. That means that some innocent people will be unnecessarily suspected and investigated because they happen to know -- or be related to -- the wrong person. That'll happen no matter how anyone feels about Constitutional rights. I think it's better to make an apology when necessary and risk a lawsuit now and then than to have to send condolences to hundreds of families when some Hassan or Nassir blows himself up at a convention."

Studying him, Mandi said, "Interesting. As much as you two are alike, John would have ended that with 'don't you agree?'"

"That's because John likes to hear people agree with him."

"And you don't?"

"Oh, sure, but I don't really care. I may tell you my views, but whether you agree with them is your business."

After another long look at Cade, Mandi said, "I see," and shifted off the fridge as she asked, "Are you ready to do something about dinner?"

Cade also stood up and said, "Great idea."

"Will they let you have one of the agency cars?"

Shrugging, Cade said, "Sure. No problem."

"Good. I think it would look better if we visit several fast-food places. It'll look funny if we order enough food for a party, then don't have a party.

Especially if the food disappears."

"Good point. Chances are good that someone would notice something like that on this floor." He paused, then added, "They keep pretty close track of the pool cars, too. Might be better if we just rented something. Or flew."

With a wry grin, Mandi asked, "You want me to fly you from one burger stand to another?"

"No, ma'am. We'd fly to where there are a bunch of them close together, like at beltway exits along the Interstate. Then we'd walk. No vehicle records to worry about that way."

Mandi nodded. "Yeah. Okay. Sounds good."

## Chapter Seventeen

Mandi didn't particularly like the man she'd met in Washington, but the President was the only one who could quietly approve a fairly large clandestine expenditure.

It was one thing to select and convert people, but it was quite another to provide them a base of operations, communications, training, equipment, and all the other logistical necessities.

He'd easily understood the urgency of getting the program underway, but he'd balked when Mandi -- well aware that their conversation was likely being recorded -- avoided discussion of her method of converting regular people to superpeople.

Leaning back in his chair, he'd asked, "Why can't we just convert one of our Ranger units, ma'am? Wouldn't that be a lot simpler and faster than hand-picking and having to train every single... what do we call them? Convertees?"

"Close enough," said Mandi. "Not everybody can be converted. Some people simply aren't suitable for the process."

"You're saying it won't work on everybody?"

To avoid saying that she simply wouldn't accept everybody, Mandi said, "Some of the money would go to pre-conversion evaluations. Training would eat most of the rest of it."

"What kind of training?"

"Imagine that you instantly became ten times as strong as you'd ever been. Could you immediately shake hands with someone? Hold a child? Could you take a step and not leap fifty feet? Could you even hold a coffee cup without breaking it? It takes time and training to adjust safely."

Their discussion had lasted almost an hour, at the end of which time he'd promised her five million and the use of a decommissioned underground missile facility in Nevada.

"If your program shows promise in six months," he said, "You'll get more money. I'm basically giving you this first five million for all you've done since you've been here."

Five million. It was a quarter of what she'd asked for and almost exactly what she'd expected.

Concealing a grin, Mandi grimaced slightly, sighed, and said, "Well, if it's the best you can do..."

The man held up a hand and said, "I'm sorry, but it is. For now, anyway. Give me results that I can show the other party when they start interrogating me about why I gave you money, ma'am. We'll take it from there when the time comes."

Thinking about the meeting as she flew back to Atlanta, Mandi had to admit that he'd been a bit more reasonable than she'd anticipated.

The meeting had been a test of sorts, of course, for both participants. She'd made it known through John's NIA offices that she'd wanted a private word with the President.

Known to be something of a Bible-thumper who didn't really approve of Mandi's costume or the fact that she professed no interest in religion at all, the President had nonetheless managed to clear an hour for her on a few day's notice and he'd listened to her pitch.

In Mandi's opinion, that had proven him at least to be tractable and reasonable enough to work with, even if he wasn't really very likeable.

Mandi had been able to appear in the Oval Office less than ten minutes after the President's secretary had called John. That had impressed the living hell out of the President, but he'd carefully avoided letting her know that.

She'd simply flown into the White House as someone had used a service entrance. It had been that simple. Exterior sensors had sounded an 'approaching object' alert, but Mandi had been over the fence and across the grounds before the sensors had understood what they were seeing.

Other sensors within the building had also detected her, but far too late to be of any use in stopping her. Mandi had flown to the doors of the Oval Office and knocked firmly as she'd said hello to his personal secretary.

The secretary had seen Mandi seemingly appear out of nowhere to float to a stop in front of the doors, then she'd felt a blast of breeze from Mandi's passage down the corridor.

Security personnel scrambled to surround Mandi almost instantly. They ran toward her in the hall and two popped out of hidden passageways, guns drawn and faces stern. One even yelled, "Freeze!"

"I have an appointment," said Mandi, then she turned to the secretary and asked, "Would you tell the President that Mandi Steele is here? He's expecting me."

Only one man -- a male secretary -- asked why Mandi hadn't presented herself at the front gate. The other four men and two women present were with the Secret Service, and they already knew the answer. One of them rather brusquely told the secretary to get back to work.

The guy pouted a bit as he left, then he asked the same question of the President's secretary in a hurt tone.

She gave him a roll of her eyes and said, "Think about it, dummy. She wants something or she wouldn't be here at all. This was just a grand entrance to let POTUS know she's nobody to take lightly or mess with in the slightest way."

Stiffening at her words, the guy stalked away muttering, "She's not even a U.S. citizen. I'll bet she doesn't even have a goddamned green card."

Perhaps two minutes passed before the electronic locks built into the doors of the Oval Office snapped off and the President opened the doors to greet Mandi with a handshake.

"Sorry about all the fuss," he said. "Come on in, ma'am."

Yes, he'd put on a show of being pleasant enough, but his calm had been an act right up until their very last moment together, and his gaze had too often been focused on her upper anatomy instead of her eyes during their conversation.

Mandi landed on the hotel roof and changed, then slipped into the hotel and went to her room, where she ordered a triple steak dinner to feed Cade's conversion before she checked in with John about the look-alike contest.

As she waited for John to finish a conversation, she heard three of the other agents discussing the previous day's events and Ed Cade's name came up.

"That cop Avery was stunned," said one guy. "He actually used the word 'stunned'. He said Cade popped that guy twice before he could get his gun out. Said he only barely had his own gun out when the guy went through the window."

The woman snickered and said, "I'll bet he was gonna yell 'freeze!' or something like that. He'd have been dead meat."

"Yeah, but some hindsight-quarterbacks with the PD are asking if Cade shot before he'd validated his target."

"No-fucking-way," said the woman. "Cade's never called it bad yet and he had over twenty kills on the books before he retired. If he'd screwed up even once, some political buttmonkey would have been all over it in a flash."

*'Twenty kills?'* thought Mandi. She turned to face the woman and asked, "Twenty kills? How many arrests?"

The three agents blinked at her for a moment, then the woman looked at one of the guys and asked, "Two, is it? The kids he busted for car theft in Miami six years ago?"

Nodding, the guy said, "Yeah. Sounds right. I've never heard of any others."

"Car theft?" asked Mandi, "Was he working with the police?"

The woman shook her head.

"No, he just happened to walk out of a building while two kids were trying to jack a Mercedes. One of them pulled a knife on him, so he showed them the antique .45 he carried when he wasn't on duty and turned them over to the cops."

"I see. So he's never taken *any* prisoners when he's been doing agency work?"

The guy shrugged and said, "If he has, I've never heard about them."

"Wait a minute, Jerry," said the woman, "I think she's getting the wrong idea, here. Ma'am, Cade's no 'Dirty Harry'; he just seems to have an absolute knack for being right where the shit hits the fan. To the best of my knowledge, he's never had a really decent opportunity to take a prisoner, you know what I mean? When it goes down, you do what you have to and hope you're making the best decision."

"Still... You really think that not one of those twenty kills could have been arrested instead?"

"Maybe," said the guy, "If they'd have run out of ammo or volunteered to stop shooting. In the only case I know about personally -- I was there -- the guy went down shooting at us with an AK. Didn't stop firing until he ran the clip dry. By then Cade had returned fire and put four rounds in him. It was a clean shoot, ma'am. The guy died pulling the trigger. As far as I know, all his kills have been like that. Nasty to the end."

"One thing, ma'am," said the woman, "Cade doesn't shoot to wound or incapacitate. If he shoots at all, he shoots to kill. That's what some of the flak's been about in his records, but the fact is, we all do the same thing. This outfit doesn't deal with muggers and burglars. We mostly get the diehards and psychos. At our end of things, if you pop a guy in the leg and yell 'drop the gun', chances are real good he'll kill you when he goes down shooting."

The guy beside her chuckled and said, "Cade's just been in a lot of wrong places at wrong times. Like Cindy said, he always had a real talent for that."

Mandi chatted with them about some of the things they'd been through to try to get a perspective on Cade's agency performance, but by the time she'd been called into John's anteroom office, she'd begun to have some misgivings about having converted Cade.

It had occurred to Mandi to wonder how Cade would handle being converted without consultation, but not for long. He seemed to be exactly the kind of man Mandi wanted on her team; capable, determined, outside the reaches of political parties and religions, and able to both teach and learn.

He was a little long in the tooth, but that didn't seem to make any difference concerning his effectiveness. And -- his profession as an armed spook aside -- he seemed a warm, giving person, not just another of those 'I am my job'-types.

Cade's reaction when she dropped by his room seemed to validate all her immediate gut feelings about him. He'd simply grabbed his gear and said that *'on-the-job is the worst possible time to have to learn new tricks'*.

Mandi had almost laughed at that. Almost. He was right, of course, but she didn't have the luxury of time. As soon as the convention job ended, she had to return to Las Vegas.

But still... Twenty kills and no arrests? Had she read him wrong, despite her training and genetic predispositions?

After signing in for the look-alike contest, she'd been led to a dressing room with the twenty-six other women and had put on the rather crude replica of her costume. When all the women had been paraded past the audience and judges, they waited in the wings for the results.

That's where she was when she saw John suddenly head for the doors. Looking through the walls, she saw agent Pierce holding a man down and agents Evans and Bartow on the floor as a man hurtled toward Cade with a weapon.

Mandi almost abandoned the contest to go to his aid, but the situation unfolded too quickly. In a bit less than eight seconds the attacker was unconscious and dying fast and Cade was again on his feet, talking into his lapel mike.

When Carter picked up the attacker's weapon and asked if Cade was okay, he shruggingly replied that he could use a coffee. Was that just a bit of bravado for Carter?

For several long-seeming moments more Mandi watched Cade after he'd resumed his post in front of the doors. He showed no outward signs of aftermath anxiety; his heartbeat and respiration returned to normal inside three minutes as he stood calmly in a loose parade-rest stance.

Had she been mistaken about him, after all? Had his soft side only been a facade for her benefit? John appeared and dismissed Cade, who headed for the escalators as John returned to the ballroom.

Mandi's contest alias -- Jane Blaise -- was softly called by the woman emcee, who was working from a list. She said that there would be photo opportunities after the show with a local modeling agency for any who wished to participate. Prizes were awarded and the contest ended, then Mandi and most of the others were led offstage.

At the photo booth, Mandi/Jane grinningly explained that her participation had been a spur-of-the-moment thing brought about by the offer of a costume for the occasion. She said that she had no interest in modeling and signed 'Jane Blaise' on a release form for pictures taken during the contest.

John was waiting for her as she left the dressing room.

"Only sixth place, huh?" he asked with a grin. "Too bad. You really do sort of look like her, you know."

She returned his grin with, "So they tell me." Glancing around to see there was nobody near, she asked, "Can you spare a minute? It's about Cade."

Stiffening slightly, John asked, "Cade? What about him?"

"How well do you know him?"

Giving her a studious look, John said, "We go back a long way, Mandi. The seventies in Europe. The Cold War. He was with a different agency back then. So was I, for that matter..."

"That's the job, John. How well do you really know him?"

"Well, I'd trust him with my life or anyone else's. Does that answer your question?"

With a trace of hesitation, Mandi said, "Almost. What do you think of his ability to recover almost instantly after something like what just happened? Do you think that's normal?"

John stopped and leaned back against the wall, his arms crossed and a thoughtful look on his face.

"It is for Cade," he said. "Why all the questions, Mandi? Has he done anything or said anything to you that..?"

Shaking her head, Mandi hurriedly said, "No, nothing like that. He's been a perfect gentleman around me. To me. No problems there. But I watched him kill that man in the lobby, John. A few minutes later his system was completely back to normal, as if nothing had happened."

Grinning, John said, "Oh, I wouldn't say that..."

"I would," she cut in. "His heartbeat was seventy-six. Respiration normal. How? Why?"



With a sense of being pinned like a bug, John answered, "That's just Cade, Mandi. Always has been, as far as I know. Years ago I asked him the same questions you're asking me. He told me that it's as if someone else takes over for a little while. The psychs call it disassociation."

At Mandi's peering gaze, John's arms uncrossed in a gesture of protest and he said, "Don't get me wrong. Cade's not crazy, Mandi. He's fifty-three, for God's sake. If he was going to go nuts he'd have done it before now. Jesus, you ought to hear some of the things he's been through."

"Great idea, John. When can I see his records?"

John's eyes got somewhat larger as he said, "Uh, well..."

Mandi put a finger on his chest that felt like a steel rod and said, "No. Don't say *'uh, well'*. Just say when I can see them."

Gathering himself against her imposing presence, John said, "Mandi, before I say 'when', I have to ask 'why'."

Letting her finger drop from his chest, Mandi said, "I wanted him for my project. I was going to talk to you about it, but now I have some doubts about him."

"Uh, isn't he kind of old for what you have in mind?"

Thumbing toward the lobby, she asked, "You can ask that after what happened out there? That guy was half Cade's age." She shrugged and added, "Besides, he calls himself semi-retired and he joined this op without a second thought, didn't he? Do you really think he'd turn me down?"

With a wry grin and a sigh, John shook his head.

"No. There's not a chance in hell of that, once you tell him what it's about. Okay. You'll see his records."

"When?"

"Is now good? He'll be filling out reports in the ops room, so we can use the computer in my room."

Mandi nodded and said, "Thanks, John. I wouldn't ask if I didn't need to know."

They headed up to the fourth floor and John pulled up Cade's records on his computer.

"This isn't everything," he said, "But it ought to be enough for now. If you aren't satisfied with these, you can see his complete file on Monday."

Mandi thanked him and began reading as John lay down with a damp towel over his face and dozed. Fifteen minutes later Mandi slid her chair back and stood up. John pulled the towel off his face and looked at her.

"Well?" he asked.

"You never mentioned that he'd been a mercenary, John."

"You didn't ask." Indicating the computer with a nod, he asked, "How do you feel about him after reading all that?"

Glancing at the computer screen, she said, "I'll still want to see his full file on Monday. There are a lot of variables."

"If you'll swing by the office, I'll arrange it."

John started to get up, but Mandi raised a hand and said, "No, stay put. I can find the door. Thanks, John."

"Only for you, ma'am," he said, putting the towel back over his eyes as he chuckled and repeated, "Only for you."

## Chapter Eighteen

Instead of using Mandi's roof entrance to the hotel, she and Cade walked down the vehicle reception ramp to the street, then continued walking south until Mandi said, "All clear."

Wrapping an arm around Cade, she leaped into the air. Minutes later they touched down beside a fast food restaurant which was surrounded by several similar restaurants.

After buying half a dozen super-burgers, they sat at one of the plastic-umbrellaed tables and dug into the food. Mandi spoke as she unwrapped her second burger.

"Ed, your records indicate that you've made twenty-four kills and no arrests while you've been with the NIA."

He met her gaze and said, "I wondered why you were so quiet, milady. That many, huh? Damn. Does that include the last two?"

Her gaze narrowed a bit as she asked, "Do you have a good explanation for not taking any prisoners?"

Speaking around some burger, Cade said, "Nothing that isn't in my records. Basically, ma'am, they just wouldn't cooperate. They never gave me the chance to arrest them."

"You're sure about that?"

He nodded. "Any of them could have put their weapons down, but they didn't. Where are you going with this? Having second thoughts about converting me?"

Maybe Mandi's mild surprise showed in her face. Cade's eyebrow went up as he sipped his Dr Pepper.

Nodding, she said, "I had some reservations, yes."

Cade shook his head and said, "Nope. Not 'had'. You *have* some real, live doubts. You're thinking maybe you've converted the wrong guy."

Finishing his third burger, Cade sipped his drink again and said, "I don't happen to think so, of course. Speaking of conversions, what's my max going to be?"

Mandi swallowed her last mouthful of burger and said, "Your max will depend on how well your system converts. If you're average, you'll be able to lift about six tons by Friday."

Staring at her briefly, Cade said, "Well, damn. That's a bunch. How much can you lift, Mandi?"

*'That's a bunch?!'* thought Mandi with a flash of anger, *'Is any of this really reaching this guy?'*

"A *hell* of a lot more than *that!*" she snapped, then she sighed and said, "Oh, hell. Sorry. You just don't seem to be taking any of this too seriously, Ed."

Making a stern, somber face, Cade said, "If it would help, I could fake it for you. See?"

When her irritation seemed to increase rather than decrease, Cade also sighed and asked, "Is it reversible?"

"No."

"Will it be bad for me in any way?"

"No. Exactly the opposite."

"Can I possibly envision at this moment what it'll be like?"

"Well... no, not really. You may *think* you can..."

Raising his hand, he interrupted her.

"No, I can't. You tossed a Crown Vic around. One car, about a ton. I saw you do it, so okay, I believe it. But me lifting six cars? It isn't that I don't believe you, Mandi, it's just that the *feeling* of power like that just isn't there for me yet, and it won't be 'till I've done something to make it feel real."

Sipping his drink, he added, "But what's really got you tweaked is my kill sheet." Cade shrugged. "Can't change those numbers. Can't undo the conversion, either. Seems to me that if I turn out to be a big mistake, you'll have to kill me rather than let me run loose in the world. Fair enough, ma'am. Are you ready to go see what they have next door?"

For a long moment, Mandi simply stared at him, then she swung her legs from beneath the table and stood up. Cade did the same and they walked around the hedges between the restaurants to another chain burger joint.

"There's a Mexican restaurant the other way," said Mandi.

"That's why I didn't go that way. You like Mexican food?"

"I just mentioned it, Ed. It's there, that's all."

"Yeah, and it can damned well stay there. I wasn't hungry enough to eat Mexican food when I woke up today."

Mandi snickered and asked, "You *really* don't like Mexican food, huh?"

"No, ma'am, I *really* don't. The stuff's a health hazard."

"It won't be a problem for you after the conversion."

"Great, but I still won't want any."

At the end of the hedges a loud rustling sounded as a guy in his twenties jumped in front of them and said, "Gimme your money," as he aimed a stiletto at them.

Cade opened his jacket and put his hand on his Glock as he said, "You don't get to keep the knife. Drop it, then get lost."

"You aren't going to arrest him?" asked Mandi.

The guy had spread his arms and leaned as if to put the knife on the ground. He suddenly leaned the other direction and took off running. Cade ran after him, caught up with him almost instantly, and grabbed his knife arm.

Bones snapped and crushed in his grip. The guy screamed and the knife fell from his hand to the pavement as he stared at Cade in shock and agony.

"Damn it," muttered Cade, "That's the second time... You. Get the fuck out of here. Now."

The guy seemed about to faint as his gaze fell to his crushed forearm. Cade raised his voice a bit. "*Now!*"

Without a word, the guy slowly backed away, then slipped into the hedges between the restaurants, disappearing into the darkness beyond.

Mandi walked up as Cade picked up the knife.

"It happened again," he said. "I mashed the holy shit out of his arm."

"So I noticed. Look on the bright side; at least you didn't kill him, right?"

Glancing at her, Cade said, "I didn't arrest him, either. What does a double negative do to my ratio?"

Giving him a droll look, Mandi said, "Very funny. Ha, ha."

Cade stopped at the restaurant's dumpster and snapped the knife's blade in a lid hinge, then tossed the broken parts in the dumpster as he said, "About a week, right? Then I'll be as strong as I'm going to be and I can start learning how to handle things so they don't break?"

"You could start now," said Mandi. "It's just a matter of conditioning and a little thought before action." She thumbed at the restaurant they'd just left and said, "For instance, you didn't squash your cheeseburger. Nor your drink cup."

As Cade opened and held the restaurant door for her, he said, "Hm. Good points. Guess I just need a little practice."

The paper-hatted clerk manning the counter seemed kind of nervous as Mandi and Cade approached.

"Uh... was that guy trying to rob you?"

Looking above the guy at the menu on the wall, Mandi said, "We'll have six number fours with everything. Fries with each."

She then looked at the clerk, who took the hint, nodded, and asked what they wanted to drink with their meals.

They again took their food outside to a patio table, and as they sat down, Mandi asked, "Aren't you curious about why the conversion makes you so hungry?"

Chuckling, Cade said, "Sure, but I'm more curious about how long I'll be this hungry. This could get expensive."

Smiling around some french fries, Mandi said, "The first few days are the worst, and by the end of the week you'll have other options. For example, you'll be able to draw power from heat, light, and electricity as well as food."

Nodding, Cade said, "Cool. I never did like cooking."

Mandi laughed. "John said you live on canned soup, coffee, and microwave meals."

"Yup. That and raw veggies as snacks. I hit the buffet at a steakhouse a couple of times a week, too. You're saying I'll be able to recharge on house current?"

"I'd recommend two-twenty current. It's faster."

"No problem. I can rig something for the dryer outlet."

Swallowing some fries, Mandi said, "Yeah, that should work. You'll need about a fifty-amp breaker."

"How long does it take to recharge?"

"It varies. Fifteen minutes to an hour."

They ate in silence for some moments, then Cade asked, "How long in direct sunlight?"

Grinning, Mandi asked, "With or without a shirt?"

Returning her grin, Cade said, "Say without."

"Five hours or so. Maybe a bit longer. You won't have to worry about sunburn, so get naked. You'll cut your recharging time in half."

Shaking his head, Cade said, "Reason enough to become a beach bum, I guess. Nah. I'm too old for a career change."

Cocking her head as she looked at him, Mandi asked, "Do you really believe that?"

Her tone got Cade's attention. She was up to something.

"No, not really," he said. "If I was, I wouldn't have started WiccaWorks.com or written over a dozen books. I figured you had some reason for converting me, but not wanting me to let John know about it. What's on your mind, milady?"

Pausing -- probably for effect, Cade thought -- Mandi said, "I'm putting together a special response team. I was kind of hoping you'd volunteer to help train people."

Taking another bite of burger and creating a pause of his own, Cade said thoughtfully, "Uh, huh. 'Volunteer', indeed. You were going to wait until after I'd finished converting and had changed so much that my old life wouldn't be enough, but your doubts about me made us reach this point a little earlier than you had in mind. Who's coming at us and what's the setup?"

"What made you ask that? 'Who's coming at us'?"

With a shrug, Cade said, "Just figures, as I see it. You *may* only be assembling a team to help with natural disasters and work with cops and firemen, but I'd have to doubt that. If you were, you'd be shopping for cops and firemen; people with that kind of training, who'd know the limitations of the equipment and people involved. Instead, you drafted me."

"*Drafted* you? Volunteerism isn't mandatory, you know."

"How long would my conversion be a secret if I turn you down, ma'am? When would all the government agencies and anybody else who figured out to hire a super-bodyguard or whatever stop knocking on my door?"

"You think I'd tell anyone you'd been converted?"

"John, maybe. Or maybe I'd slip up and do something super in public. Doesn't matter how the info gets out; it will. The combined might of an army might not be enough to take you down, but I'm not going to be quite that powerful, am I?"

"Well, no, but..."

"But I'm going to be powerful enough to make the authorities nervous as hell about having me around, right?"

Meeting his gaze, Mandi nodded slightly. "Yes."

"So unless I'm under someone's supervision -- someone stronger than me *and* whom they believe they can control, even if only because she wants their cooperation -- I may never have another damned day of peace or privacy. That's the way their little minds work."

After a moment, Mandi asked, "You're pretty angry with me, aren't you, Ed?"

He shook his head. "No. No point. In this case, done is done, right or wrong. How soon will you need me?"  
Mandi's gaze narrowed questioningly. "Don't you want to know a little more about what..."  
Cade began bagging their trash and said, "Sure. Let's check out the next restaurant. You can tell me all about it while we eat. Got a schedule to meet?"

"Uh, well, sort of. The President offered me the use of an obsolete missile base and some money to fix it up."

"Hm. Remote, mostly underground facilities. You're going to convert some women, too, aren't you?"

Somewhat guardedly, Mandi asked, "Why do you ask?"

Grinning at her, Cade said, "You're talking about converting a bunch of people, ma'am. It seems to me that I'll probably be too dangerous for unconverted women by Wednesday or so, and I'm thinking it would be nice if I had some variety, too."

Standing up and pitching the fast food bag at a trashcan about thirty feet away, he added, "Besides, it just wouldn't be fair otherwise, would it? And you'll be spending federal money, so somebody'd sue you for discrimination in a heartbeat."

Getting to her feet, Mandi said, "You can be pretty irritating at times, Cade. You know that, don't you?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I've been told that."

With a wicked grin, she said, "Well good. Then maybe you can figure out why I suddenly have a craving for Mexican food."

Cade shrugged again. "Hey, you're a big girl with your own money, ma'am. If you want Mexican food, then by God, it's your right to eat the nasty stuff. I'll be at the fish 'n chips place across the way. Just gimme a holler when you're ready to move on and be sure to brush your teeth real well later, okay?"

"What?! You aren't coming with me?"

Doing his best to look puzzled, Cade said, "Well, I *thought* that's what I said. Yeah. I'm pretty sure that's what I said."

Raising her voice slightly to a strident tone, Mandi asked, "How would you like to *walk* back to the hotel, Ed?"

"The oldest routine in the book. *If you don't cooperate, honey, you'll have to walk home*.' Tacky. *Very* tacky. I'd never pull something like that on a date. Besides, it's only about twelve miles. I can call a cab or take a MARTA train if I don't feel like walking."

"The what? What the hell's a MARTA train?"

"It's a buck-fifty to go all over Atlanta unless it's gone up since last year. There's a station a quarter-mile west of here, so no sweat. Still want Mexican food?"

Standing straight, Mandi gloweringly said, "Yes. I do."

Cade said, "Then by all means go for it. We can meet up later," and started walking toward the fish place.

There was a breeze and Mandi suddenly appeared in front of him, her hands on her hips and an angry glint in her eyes.

"Yes?" asked Cade.

In an ominous tone, she stated, "I'm not accustomed to being *abandoned* during a date."

"You aren't being abandoned. We can meet up in a little while and..."

"That's *not* acceptable."

"Then pick another restaurant tonight and eat Mexican food when you're out with someone else."

"Is that what this is about? Me converting other men?"

"Hell, no. It's about Mexican food. I told you how I felt about it, and now you seem to want to get some just to give me a hard time. *That's* what isn't acceptable, lady."

"Don't you realize how it would look if we split up?"

Sighing, Cade asked, "Like we had an argument? Like one of us flatly *won't* eat Mexican food? Like somebody isn't getting her way in things? Like one of us is trying to establish the beginnings of control over the other? And I'm not talking about me, by the way."

He gestured around and said, "I don't give a rat's ass what anyone way the hell out here thinks about a couple of tourists and you aren't some poor, defenseless prom queen. If you really want Mexican food, go get some. If it doesn't really matter, let's go to the fish 'n chips place."

## Chapter Nineteen

Mandi cocked her head and looked at Cade for a moment, then asked in a way that sounded more like a discovery, "You really *aren't* trying to manipulate me, are you?"

"Nope. You're Mandi Steele, the woman who can juggle cars and shrug off big-assed explosions. You don't need me or any man to escort you to a taco factory. Or anywhere else."

"What if I simply asked you politely to come with me?"

"Then you'd be trying to manipulate me at this point in things. Same answer. Same reasons."

"You're only leaving me with the choice of going to the Mexican restaurant or going with you. Isn't that manipulation?"

"No, that's just self defense. There's a third option. You can just do what you want and not worry about whether anybody's getting the upper hand or how things look to the natives."

After another moment of regarding him, Mandi chuckled and said, "The funny thing is; talking about Mexican food made me think about it. Now I really do want some."

With a short sigh and a nod, she said, "Ohhkaay. I'll find you in a little while," and headed for the Mexican place.

Cade watched her go for a moment, then began walking toward the street. As he reached the other side of the highway, a blue, late-model car full of people cruised past, abruptly made a U-turn, and headed back.

It screeched to a stop a few feet from Cade and all the doors opened at once as six young men of various colors got out and spread out to surround him.

The guy who'd lost his knife to Cade earlier was among them. His forearm was bound tightly with a sports wrap bandage and he tried not to move it much.

"That's not good enough," said Cade, pointing at the elastic bandaging. "You'll need a cast."

The injured guy said, "Watch out. He's got a gun."

"Fuck his gun," said the apparent leader of the mob, ambling up to Cade. "He won't try nothin' 'cuz he know they ain't no way he can take us all."

The guy's left hand remained behind him as he approached. Whatever he held was heavy enough to make the muscles of his forearm stand out. Likely a gun.

Cade said, "Five guys and a scared cripple. Could be you need a little more help."

One guy laughed and another one simply glared at Cade as the others hung back a bit and waited for their leader's commands.

"Oooo, he be a bad-ass!" cackled the laugher.

The leader showed his left hand, which he'd been keeping behind his back. In it was a black Taurus 92F autopistol.

He pointed his pistol at Cade and said, "Okay, badass. Check this out. Muh man Lolo, there, he only had a pissy little knife a while ago. Whatchoo gonna do about *this*?"

Cade said nothing and let the guy blather on with his ghetto bravado as he aimed the gun at Cade's head and pulled the hammer back for emphasis. The guys behind Cade moved well to either side, apparently on general principles.

Letting his eyes follow the muzzle of the gun, Cade simply stood still and waited. Sure enough, when he didn't get a response, the guy assumed that Cade had changed his mind about being brave and stepped up to put the muzzle of the weapon to Cade's right temple.

"Well?!" he screamingly demanded as he reached for Cade's Glock, "I axed you a question, mufucka! Whatchoo gonna do?! *Huh?! Huh?!*"

Fainting toward the Glock with his left hand to distract the guy's attention, Cade ducked slightly and swatted the Taurus upward with his right hand as he turned his fainting left into a jab at the guy's eyes. Grabbing the guy's gun hand, he twisted it downward and back so the Taurus pointed at the guy's chest.

"Bye-bye," said Cade, putting his index finger over the guy's trigger finger and forcing it to move.

The gun barked and the guy jerked, then sagged backwards in openmouthed shock, clutching his chest. He landed hard on his left hip and when his elbow hit the pavement, the gun fired once into the air above the parking lot.

Cade had drawn his Glock from its holster. He stepped back and indicated that the men to his right and left should move back toward the car, then he and they watched as the guy on the ground gasped and let go of the gun to use both hands to clutch his chest. His eyes closed and his breathing was ragged.

One of the others suddenly jumped into the car's driver's seat, but Cade pointed his Glock at the guy's face and said, "No, not yet. Get back out here."

Once the guy was again standing by the car, Cade indicated the guy on the ground and suggested that they take their trash with them. After another stunned moment, two of them moved toward the man on the ground.

Cade stepped over to put a foot on the guy's gun and said, "This stays. He doesn't need it anymore."

Without argument, they stuffed their leader into the back seat of the car and sped away. Cade put his gun away as Mandi seemingly flashed into existence in front of him.

Looking at her, he asked, "Change your mind about fish?"

"I heard a shot as I entered the restaurant. I saw what happened, Ed."

"If you heard a shot before you looked, you didn't see why it happened. The guy put a gun to my head. That gun."

Cade moved his foot and took out one of his paper towel hankies to pick up the gun.

"Who were they?"

"Friends of the guy we disarmed. Look, I'm still kind of hungry and the cops will probably show up soon. Unless you want to spend the next few hours talking to them, you'll get us out of here."

"Us? You're the one who was involved in the fight."

"It was never a fight, and if I have to deal with the cops over that asshole, you've wasted my conversion. I'll just keep doing what I've been doing with the same people."

Giving him a flat gaze, Mandi said, "Well, maybe that's for the best, if your opinion of civil authority is that low."

Nodding, Cade said, "Yeah, okay. Later, Mandi," and started walking toward a phone kiosk at a nearby gas station.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Pausing, Cade said, "If you want to know that, you can take me there or come with me."

"What are you going to do with that gun?"

Shoving the gun into his belt, he said, "Same answer," then started walking again.

He heard her mutter something just before her arms slid under his from behind and she lifted him into the night sky.

"Now tell me where the hell you were going," she said.

"Okay," said Cade, shifting in her grip for some comfort under his arms. "Back to the hotel."

"What about the gun?"

"Turn it in. Dump it somewhere. Doesn't matter."

Mandi landed them behind a nearby building and stepped in front of him to hold out her hand.

"Give me the gun, Ed."

Cade dropped the clip and cleared the chamber, caught the ejected round, and handed the gun to her, which she tossed on the concrete pavement.

Twin beams lanced from her eyes and the gun glowed a dull red almost instantly. Flames and acrid smoke billowed out of it as the lubricants and plastics burned away, and suddenly the gun's outline glowed yellow, then almost white before it collapsed and became a bright puddle.

The puddle spread itself like water on the concrete, then solidified quickly after she turned off her heat vision.

"Mandi," said Cade, staring at the smoking puddle, "That was truly impressive. Will I be able to do that?"

Ignoring his question, Mandi said, "Now the bullets," again holding out her hand.

Thumbing the loose round into the top of the magazine, Cade dropped the mag in his jacket pocket as he said, "No point in wasting ammo. Carter uses a nine millimeter. So do some of the others."

They heard sirens approaching and saw red and blue lights flashingly reflect off the sides of buildings at the end of the alleyway as two cop cars sped past the entrance.

Before Cade could ask, "So, do I walk home or not?" Mandi had slung an arm around him, pulled him snugly to her, and launched upward.

She remained only barely subsonic during their flight to their hotel's roof. At lesser speeds, Cade might have enjoyed being hugged to her like that, but he'd had to struggle to pull his jacket up enough to cover his head against the shrieking, blasting wind of their passage through the air.

When they landed, it became obvious that the jacket had borne the brunt of that flight, having become considerably frayed -- almost shredded -- at edges that had been exposed to the wind.

Quickly retrieving her purse from some hidden location near the roof door, Mandi yanked the door open and leaped down the flight of stairs to the hotel's top floor.

Cade quickly put a foot in front of the closing roof door and followed her as she let herself out of the stairwell below. She was standing by the elevator doors as he exited the stairwell.

As he approached her, Mandi said, "We'll talk later."

Stopping beside her, Cade asked, "Why? You planning to feel differently about things later?"

Glancing sharply at him, she said flatly, "No, but I want to give us both time to cool down a bit."

"Ah," Cade said with an understanding nod. "Right."

They waited in silence for the elevator and rode it to the fourth floor. When the doors opened, Mandi instantly strode out and headed for their room.

Cade ambled out and headed the same direction, but he angled toward the ops room as Mandi used her keycard. She watched him take off his jacket, drape it over his arm, and knock on the ops room door, then saw the door open for him before she let herself into their room.

As soon as she'd closed the door, Mandi adjusted her vision and hearing and watched Cade head for the coffee pot in the ops room.

He asked, "Anybody here using nine millimeter ammo?" and a brunette woman with her feet propped on the writing desk raised a hand.

"I am. Why?"

Cade reached in his pocket for the magazine and tossed it to her as he said, "Happy birthday, Beth."

She caught it and examined it, then asked, "Where'd you get this, Cade?"

Shrugging, Cade said, "I haven't used nine millimeter for years. No need to hang onto it if you can use it."

That seemed to be answer enough for Beth. She nodded and said, "Thanks," then dropped the magazine in her purse on the desk and asked, "Where's Mandi?"

Shrugging, Cade said, "Dunno. In the room, I think."

Peering at him, Beth asked, "Aren't you two getting along?"

With a small sigh, Cade said, "No, not really. That's why I dropped in here for coffee."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No. She's tense about some things that don't mean shit to me, that's all. Remember when I wouldn't go with Connie when she switched our Perlman tickets for that Barbara Streisand thing without telling me?"

"Yeah. She was max pissed at you, Cade."

Parking his butt against the desk, Cade sipped his coffee and said, "Well, this is the same kind of thing and I didn't cooperate tonight, either. Is the lost and found in here?"

"You lose something?"

Turning up the bottom seam of his jacket, Cade said, "Nope. Just want to swap jackets. This one's gotten kind of ratty at the edges."

"Try the closet, left side. Have you had dinner yet?"

Shrugging, Cade said, "I could probably eat something."

"Then pick a clean one. Something fairly nice, so you can take me to dinner tonight."

Grinning slightly, Cade said, "You're a pushy woman, Beth."

Returning his grin, Beth asked, "You gonna do it or not?"

Laughing, Cade asked, "Are you kidding? You're half my age and you're beautiful. Hell, yes, I'm gonna do it. I just wanted you to know you're a pushy woman, that's all."

As Cade headed for the closet, Beth lowered her feet to the floor and said, "Crap, Cade. I'm thirty-six and I'm never the woman men notice first in any room."

Checking out a green windbreaker, Cade said, "That's just your own, personal, heavily biased opinion, ma'am. How many times have you caught me eyeballing your legs?"

That made the only other person in the room -- Tony -- blurt a laugh and say, "He's got you there, Beth."

"Oh, bull, Tony. He eyeballs every woman's legs."

"So? We all do. Can't help it." He let his eyes roam her figure for a moment, then added, "But only if they're worth it, Beth, and yours are definitely worth it."

"Hey!" Cade snapped in mock anger, "Watch it, dude. You guys work in the same office. You can put the make on her anytime, but tonight she's my date." Putting on the jacket and adjusting the fit, he said, "See, Beth? An unbiased second opinion, offered without the slightest hint of duress."

Beth snorted and said, "Unbiased. Sure. He's a man. Like he said, *'Can't help it.'*"

"Finish the quote," said Cade, "*'Only if they're worth it.'* Need to make any stops before we go?"

She shook her head as she slung her purse on her shoulder and said, "No. I'm starving. I haven't eaten since breakfast."

Opening the door for her, Cade asked, "So I'm just some poor, susceptible schmuck you're tapping for a meal, huh?"

With a sigh and a roll of her eyes, Beth said, "Oh, Jesus. If you've got any objections, now's the time, Cade."

He paused to look thoughtful for a moment, then said, "Yeah, one. No Mexican food," and pulled the door shut.

Across the corridor, Mandi had watched and listened as Cade had led Beth into tacitly accepting -- or at least acknowledging -- a personal compliment.

She realized that Beth was a woman who felt a need to try to be 'one of the guys' when on duty, and she understood well the kinds of barriers such women maintained against anything that might somehow dent that image.

Mandi also realized that Cade hadn't been in any particular need of a dinner date. He could have simply swapped jackets and headed downstairs alone to contend with his hunger.

As Beth and Cade waited for an elevator, Mandi studied Beth; her posture, her figure, her vitals. Heartbeat and respiration were up slightly. Beth was somewhat nervous, switching her weight from leg to leg, but that may have been because she'd been on them all day.

She surreptitiously checked the lay of her clothing, tapped her earrings, and touched her hair to make sure it was in place, then glanced at Cade, who said, "Relax. You look fine, Beth."

Leaning on the doorframe, Mandi continued to watch them. Yes, Beth definitely had things other than dinner in mind. Out of all the other men on the teams, she'd decided to consider Cade, but when? Before or after he'd called her beautiful?

He was only in his first day of conversion, so if he was very careful... It seemed unlikely that he'd be careless with Beth, especially with two other inadvertent injuries fresh in his mind.

Cade's vital signs were normal, as usual. Did he realize at all that he'd been selected for more than dinner? Mandi snorted and wryly wondered if the likely prospect of getting laid later would cause him any more excitement than shooting people.

Probably not, she decided. He seemed to deal with things as they happened. One of them would steer the conversation and a suggestion would surface. Would it be Beth or Cade? Or would it be Beth, specifically because Cade had built up her confidence enough to ask him up to her room?

Mandi stopped with a sense of startlement and examined that last bit of speculation for a moment. Where the hell had that come from? Was she just projecting her own thoughts about how he should proceed or did she really think that's what Cade would do?

Shaking her head at herself, Mandi turned from the door and went to the fridge for a canned drink, then sat on the edge of the bed and lay back to stare at the ceiling.

Yes, that was very likely what he'd do if Beth didn't seem able to drop her guard and let him in on her own. He'd find reasons to compliment her and make her realize the truth of them until she decided absolutely about bedding him.

And then, Mandi realized, he'd likely suggest a coed shower and do to Beth what he'd done to her. He'd likely do it to her again in bed, then slide himself upward into position and...

The can of soda in Mandi's hand abruptly crumpled and her drink seemed to splatter everywhere. Uttering a nasty word, Mandi went to the bathroom for a towel to clean up the mess.

She wasn't angry at Cade. His conversion wasn't far enough along; he wasn't capable of making love to her like that yet. Mandi was just angry with herself for allowing her imagination to cause a wet accident on the bed.

Taking off her damp dress and washing it in the bathroom sink, Mandi gently wrung it out and hung it in the tiny closet space, then she dried it with her heat vision.

When the drying was finished, she lay back on the bed again and sighed at the evening as a whole. A few minutes later she reached for the TV remote and scanned the channels for something interesting, but it was only nine-thirty and she wasn't really in the mood to watch TV.

Clicking off the TV, Mandi set the remote on the night table and headed for the shower, realizing as she caught herself marching that she was angry with Cade, after all, and even more so because he was very likely to get laid tonight.

She changed course toward the desk, took her uniform out of her purse, and put it on, then slipped her NIA-issue cell phone and the keycard into her right boot-top and let herself out of the room.

Flashing down the hall to the stairwell, she flew to the roof and used the keycard to block the door lock while she fetched the flattened can from where she'd dropped it earlier.

Swapping the can for the card, she tucked the card back into her boot and launched skyward. If anything came up, John could reach her on the cell and she wasn't about to sit in that room all night.

## Chapter Twenty

The hotel restaurant was closed when Beth and Cade arrived in the lobby, but the bar and lounge area was still open. Their menu at that hour was rather unimpressive, and Cade politely said so.

"Well, sir," said the lone waiter, "There are still a few places open on Peachtree Street," and he named three.

Cade thanked him and he and Beth headed for the doors. As they passed the big glass windows by the luggage check-in desk, Cade very deliberately allowed Beth to see his reflection eyeing her reflection's rump and legs.

Pretending to have been caught in the act, he said, "Sorry. I wasn't kidding about your legs, you know."

Beth gave him an aloof, arched-eyebrow look, but she said nothing and worked hard to conceal a grin as they continued out the doors to the street.

At the same bar and grill where he'd shot pool with Mandi, they ordered burger baskets and beer. Beth was more than a little surprised when he ordered two baskets with extra fries.

"Wow," she said, "And I thought I was hungry."

"I was going to order three, but I didn't want you to think I was some kind of a pig."

She thought he was joking, of course. Their conversation ranged over the events of the previous two days, then she asked questions about Mandi, none of which he could answer.

With some incredulity, Beth said, "For someone who's bunking with her you don't know a helluva lot about her."

"Nope. Guess not."

"What do you know about her?"

"Not much. Haven't needed to. Besides, she's just crashing with me to avoid being pestered. I'd rather know about you, Beth. How'd you get into this business?"

Shrugging, Beth said, "I was a Delaware cop who never got out of the office. I was bored shitless and going nowhere. The NIA said they could use me, so I switched over."

"Seems to me I first saw you in -- what? -- 1993?"

She nodded. "Right after we busted that colonel at the Watergate in March."

"You were impersonating an Air Force captain and I said something about being a sucker for a woman in uniform. If I recall correctly, you rolled your eyes and sighed at me."

"I'd heard that line thirty times by then."

Doing his best to look hurt, Cade said, "Hey, it wasn't a line. Put on a uniform sometime and try me. I'll fall all over you, ma'am. Putty in your hands, and all that."

As their food arrived, she snickered and said, "Sure, I'll do that someday. Pass the salt and pepper."

They chatted some more as they ate, and when her food was gone, she began filching his french fries as they talked. Cade pushed the burgerless basket toward her and reached for the second burger.

"Mind if I order another one?" he asked.

In some startlement, Beth asked, "You got a tapeworm or something?"

"Nope. Just hungry tonight for some reason."

Shrugging, she said, "Go for it."

After the third burger and fries, Cade felt as if he'd make it through the night without quite starving. Beth had occasionally stared at him as he'd put away the third basket of food, but she'd only remarked that he might want to see a doctor sometime about his appetite.

It occurred to Cade that he'd made no eliminations of solid or liquid waste since he'd nibbled on Mandi. That pretty much had to mean that anything he ate or drank was being used fairly completely by the conversion process.

He wondered if he could take that to mean that any mass would do in a pinch. If so, a phone book would do as well as a steak dinner as a midnight snack. He put that thought on the shelf as he realized water would do, too, and nobody'd miss any amount of water he could possibly drink.

"Beth," he said, "How come you were free to make me take you to dinner tonight?"

"*Make* you? I didn't *make* you... Oh. You want to know why I don't have a boyfriend, huh?"

"Yup. May I speak freely?"

"Uh... Okay, I guess so."

Nodding, Cade said, "Okay, then, I'll run with it. Regardless what you may think of yourself, most men see you as a fine looking woman..."

"You've decided that based on your opinion and what Tony said upstairs?"

"No, and don't run yourself down around me, okay? He was right and you know it. Men glance at every woman, but they only *really* eyeball the best ones. You've got great legs and a fine figure and you don't even come close to qualifying as plain or ugly. So, unless you're a closet lesbian, why is there no man in your life?"

Before she could answer, he raised a hand and added, "And if you *are* a lesbian, that's something I don't need to know about while we're both working for the government."

Giving him an amused look, Beth asked, "If I were a lesbian, would that bother you?"

Shaking his head, Cade said, "Not even a little bit. A couple of my friends back in Florida are lesbians and we get along just fine. They make stuff for my online store and use me as an escort now and then."

Beth blinked at him and asked, "An escort?"

"Yeah. One works for a company that throws those damned 'one big happy family' employee parties. We go as a group and I pretend to be her boyfriend."

With a chuckle, Beth said, "That must be interesting."

Shrugging, Cade said, "We usually make an appearance, circulate a bit so she can say she attended, and leave unless there's a reason not to. We also babysit each others' cats."

"You have cats?"

"Yup. Three."

"I thought men preferred dogs."

"Not this one. Don't like sports, either, if that's where you're going next."

She nodded and said, "Yeah. I was. No football, huh?"

"Nope. No team sports. Boring. Remember how you said I could speak freely?"

Beth's reply sounded rather cautious as she said, "Yes."

"How freely?"

Still sounding cautious, she said, "'*Freely*' means freely."

Sipping his beer, Cade regarded her for a moment, then said, "I could pretend and play games, but it's getting late. I'd very much like to come back to your room with you, Beth. I'd very much like to make love with you."

After a few moments of meeting his gaze, Beth asked, "What about Mandi?"

"She moved to my room to avoid dealing with too many people after she went public."

Another few moments passed before Beth nodded and quietly asked, "You aren't into anything kinky, are you?"

With a small grin, Cade asked, "Would kissing my way up your legs be kinky? Would inhaling the scent of you while I kiss your shoulders be kinky?"

Beth pinked a bit and bit her lip, then said, "No."

"Would pleasuring you with my tongue be kinky?"

Her pink deepened to a near-red, but she said, "No. Of course not."

"How about..."

Putting her beer down firmly, Beth said, "I get your point," then she picked up her beer again and nearly drained it.

"Want another beer?" asked Cade. "Want to give things a little more thought?"

"Are you trying to talk me out of it now?"

Shaking his head, Cade poured some of his beer in her glass and said, "Oh, no, ma'am. Definitely not. I just thought another beer might be in order before you pounce on me."

Her eyes got big in startlement.

"*Me* pounce on *you*?"

Nodding, Cade said, "Yeah. I was kind of hoping you would, you know. It's always nice to feel appreciated."

Beth snickered and sipped her beer. The bartender had seen Cade share his beer and looked inquiringly toward their table. Cade nodded. Two fresh beers arrived shortly.

"Another one of these," said Beth, "And I may do more than pounce on you, Cade."

"Suits me, ma'am. Could you wait until after I've licked you senseless, though? I'd really enjoy making you..."

"*Cade!*" she hissed, glancing at the bartender.

Sharing her glance, he nodded knowingly and said, "Ah. Yes, of course, ma'am. Mustn't embarrass the natives."

"*Screw the natives! We mustn't embarrass me!*"

Leaning forward, she whispered sharply, "And you won't tell anybody, right? By God, if you do, I'll..."

"No need for threats, ma'am. I don't kiss and tell. Or lick and tell. Or..."

"*Cade, dammit!*"

Raising a hand in polite protest, he said, "Yes'm. I'll shut up now. No need to get all fuzzed up and rowdy. Yet. I'll try to make it worth your while later, though."

Beth looked at the ceiling and let out a soft, exasperated, "Ah, hell!" then grabbed her new beer and finished it.

"Enough of this," she said, setting the glass firmly on the table. "Let's go now."

Draining his own beer, Cade said, "Yes'm. As you say. By your command, milady."

He stood up and went to pay the bill, then held the door for Beth and followed her to the sidewalk. Yup. She had *real* nice legs and it was going to be a true pleasure to...

"You're doing it again," said Beth, without turning around.

"What's that, milady?"

"Staring at my legs."

"Oh. Yup. Sure was. Just planning my route north."

That made her turn to face him. "Your what?"

"My route north. I intend to memorize you, Beth. I'm gonna taste you from your ankles up. Hope you don't mind."

She came to stand a few inches from him and quietly said, "After all this talk, you'd better be worth it, mister."

"Money back guarantee, ma'am. I'll be doing my best down there. And everywhere else, too, of course."

"And you won't tell a soul? Not anybody? Ever?"

"Nope. This is strictly between you and me."

Beth held his gaze for a long moment, then nodded and started them walking back to the hotel.

"Okay, then," she said, "I'll go in first and leave the door open for you. You'll follow me a few minutes later."

"Better synchronize our watches, huh?"

Her glance was narrow. "Just do what I tell you, okay?"

"Yes'm. You got it. Going into sneaky mode now."

She said something nasty and slapped his arm.

"Ow! Okay! Sneaky mode later, then. No pain stuff, lady."

Beth started giggling, then had to stop and lean on the wall as her giggles turned into laughter. A cop car slowed and looked as if it would stop near them, but Beth laughed even harder as she shook her head and waved them on.

The passenger side cop looked at Cade and asked, "Have you people been drinkin'? What's so funny?"

"She just realized something, I think."

"What?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure. It's business related, I think."

Nodding, the cop waved the driver on as he said, "Uh, huh. Well, it's late, so hold the noise down, okay?"

"Sure. No problem."

Beth suffered another spate of laughter as the cops drove away. Cade went to stand by her and waited for the laughter to abate, thinking she must have been strung pretty tight to be so thoroughly amused by so little.

She levered herself off the wall and began walking again as she caught her breath.

"You okay?" asked Cade.

"Fine. You were right. I realized something."

He waited as she took a breath and seemed to collect herself a bit.

"Cade, were you trying to make me laugh?"

"Nope. Not really. I was just trying to make you feel a little more comfortable about dragging me back to your cave."

"I'm not dragging you anywhere. You conned me."

Hand over his heart, Cade said, "Never. Not me. No way. Nuh-uh."

"Bullshit."

"If I don't agree with you, will I still get laid, ma'am?"

"Of course you will. I want laid and you've got the duty."

"Ah. Well, then, okay. I conned you. Just a little, though."

"Just enough."

"Oh. Yes. Of course. Just enough, then. Yes, ma'am."

She smacked his arm and said, "Stop that."

"Yes, ma'am."

"That, too."

"Yes, ma... Okay. You caught me. Now what?"

"Now you'd better be the best lay I've ever had, that's all."

"No problem. I'm very motivated, ma'am. Are you still worried about getting caught having a legal good time?"

Beth stopped just outside the hotel doors and said, "No. Well, not like I was. I see no reason to advertise our business, but I also see no reason that I can't have you."

Giving her a small salute, Cade said, "Roger that, milady. We're both adults and we're on separate teams."

"Exactly right."

"You betcha." Indicating the doors, he asked, "Ready?"

Leading the way, Beth said, "Ready. Let's do it."

Pointing at the bar, Cade asked, "Want a another couple of beers for later?"

Beth looked toward the bar and said, "You get some beer. See if they have any white wine coolers."

"Okay. Why don't you go on up and take a few minutes for yourself before I get there? I'll tap on the door when I come in. Good?"

Nodding, Beth said, "Yeah. Good. Don't be all night," and turned to go. A few steps later, she turned and said, "Thanks," without explaining why before getting underway again.

Thanks for the laughs? Thanks for setting her up to get laid? Thanks for allowing her some time to herself, or for letting her go on ahead so they wouldn't be seen entering her room together? Mix and match the answers?

Whatever. Didn't matter. The idea was to make Beth happy while making himself happy.

A sense of being watched caused Cade to rub the goosebumps off his arms. Someone from one of the teams? As likely as not; sometimes they were ordered to follow each other around just to keep skills sharp. Cade drank a beer at the bar and stalled ten minutes, then followed Beth upstairs.

The fourth floor hallway looked clear, but that didn't mean anything. It was highly unlikely that Carter hadn't installed some security cams in their floor's hallway.

Cade felt Mandi's presence in his room as he passed it, ambling along until he reached Beth's door, which he shouldered open on his way into the tiny hallway beyond.

Closing the door, he tapped on it as he'd said he would and Beth answered, "In here, Ed."

He found her sitting in the chair by the desk, flipping channels until she found an old movie. She turned the sound up a bit and turned to face him.

"Your white wine, milady," he said as he set the bottles on the desk and opened one for her. "I'll get you a glass."

Putting a hand on his arm, she said, "No. Don't bother," and stood up. After kissing him soundly, she turned around and said, "Unzip me, please." He did so, then helped her slither out of her dress. As she went to hang it up, he opened a beer and leaned on the desk to watch her. Eyeing her tall form from the ankles up, his eyes met hers and she smiled. Nice. Very nice, indeed.

"Cade," said Beth with a short laugh, "You look like a kid on Christmas morning."

"That's because you look like an unwrapped present." Going to her, he took Beth in his arms and said, "In fact, you look delicious. Mind if I have a taste now?"

Kissing her, he let his fingers trail down the backs of her arms and finished the motion with a reach for her bra strap. Beth giggled when he licked her shoulder, then nibbled. As her bra came loose, she bit her lip and waited for his reaction.

Inhaling the scent of her hair, he whispered, "Ohhh, yes. You taste great, ma'am. You smell great. You look great and you feel great. I'm really going to enjoy nibbling on you."

Stepping back, Cade used a finger to pull the bra free of her and hung it on one of the hangers as he leaned to kiss her shoulder again.

Leading her back to the desk, Cade handed Beth her open wine and openly admired her as she took a long sip of it. She started to snicker again and choked a little on the wine. Some few drops of it trickled down her chest.

"Hm," said Cade, "Guess we'd better wash that off, huh?"

Smilingly nodding, Beth took another sip as Cade stripped off his clothes and set them on the desk chair. The hackles on the back of his neck were up and a light coating of goose bumps formed on his arms as a response to a strong sense of being watched, and not just by Beth.

As he draped his pants so that nothing would fall out of the pockets, he glanced around the room and wondered whether his instincts were being triggered by a hidden camera. If so, screw 'em. He'd order eight by ten glossies unless Beth had any objections.

Should he mention anything to Beth? No point. They were both naked. They'd been drinking and smooching. If they were being filmed, it was too late to give a damn about it.

Then he realized that the watcher might be Mandi. After all, she'd watched him deal with Nassir. And she was watching? Same answer. Too late to matter. He looked toward his room as he sipped his beer.

On general principles, he nodded slightly as an acknowledgement and tipped the bottle to her, then sipped again and rubbed his forearms to quell the goosebumps. Setting his beer down, he rubbed his neck, as well, then moved to accompany Beth to the shower. A few moments later, his sense of being watched winked off abruptly.

Mandi had returned to the room after an hour or so of unsettled boredom aloft. She'd heard the door to Beth's room open and had glanced that way through the walls. Seeing Beth alone had puzzled her, and she'd scanned the hotel for Cade.

Finding him standing at the bar drinking a beer puzzled her further. Had something gone wrong? Mandi glanced toward Beth's room to see if she appeared upset at all and saw Beth hurrying about, tidying up the room. A few moments later, Beth swilled some mouthwash and checked her face and hair in the bathroom mirror.

Hmm. Not the actions of a despondent woman.

Looking back down at Cade, Mandi saw the bartender put some bottles in a bag and hand the bag to him, then saw Cade head for the elevators.

Uh, huh.

As far as Mandi knew, Cade wasn't that fond of booze. Unless she was mistaken and he was bringing the drinks to her, he and Beth were going to party.

A few minutes later, Mandi heard Cade's almost inaudible footsteps approaching in the corridor. He wasn't sneaking; the sounds of his striding steps were no different than usual.

She watched him glide past their door and on to Beth's door, then open it and enter, after which he used a knuckle to tap softly on the door. Beth



answered, "In here, Ed."

The way Beth kissed Cade after he delivered the wine let Mandi know that there were definitely no difficulties between them. She watched a few moments longer, mostly just to see how Cade would proceed.

In a rather gentlemanly manner he soon had Beth down to her panties and was removing his own clothes by the desk when something about his demeanor changed in some barely perceptible manner.

Cade straightened up, turned slightly to face Mandi's direction and sipped his beer, then he nodded slightly and tipped his bottle toward her. Sipping again, he rubbed his forearms before rubbing the back of his neck as he set the bottle on the desk and walked with Beth to the shower.

Mandi sat down in her desk chair in openmouthed amazement. *Cade knew! He actually knew she was watching him!* But how? And did he *really* know, or was he just assuming..? But he'd looked right at her. Not toward the bed area or anywhere else. Straight at her. Just a lucky guess?

Somehow Mandi didn't think so. Switching her vision to normal, she lay back on the bed to think and fell asleep sometime before Cade let himself into the room.

Although he moved as quietly as ever, Mandi came awake and watched him through the darkness. Almost as if he, too, could see in the dark, he went to the desk, stripped, and headed for the bathroom, where he didn't turn on the light until he'd closed the door.

Hm. Considerate of him, anyway.

After a quick shower and the use of his toothbrush, Cade padded across the room to the bed, slipped under the sheets, and went to sleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Cade snapped awake Sunday morning for no good reason that he could imagine. The phone wasn't ringing, nobody was knocking on his door, and the TV was off.

He sat up and glanced around the room and saw no Mandi, but her luggage was still by the desk. His travel alarm clock -- set not to go off at all -- read almost eight o'clock on the nose. Hm. What the hell had wakened him?

Feeling ravenously hungry, Cade visited the bathroom and drank several glasses of water to fill the void. That took the edge off his hunger as he cleaned up and dressed, then headed for the restaurant for breakfast.

As he left his room, he saw Ray Lewis enter the ops room across the hall and headed that way to see about some wake-up coffee and a general situation report. Tony answered the ops door and let him in, and as Cade entered the room, he saw Beth by the coffee pot.

Beth looked up from stirring her cup and saw him. She paled slightly and bit her lip. Aw, hell. Was she having morning-after recriminations or was she just worried that he'd say something about last night?

With a smile, Cade said, "Leave me some of that stuff, lady," as he approached. He snagged a cup and filled it, then tossed in a few small ice cubes from the nearby ice bucket.

To the room as a whole, he asked, "Anybody seen Mandi?"

Tony said that she'd gone to breakfast with John.

"Breakfast," said Cade, taking a donut from the tray by the coffee pot, "Yeah. My next stop." Turning to Beth, he asked, "You had breakfast yet? If you aren't on duty this morning, we can snag a free paper at the luggage check-in and read the funnies over pancakes."

Beth seemed to consider the offer, then said, "Sure. I haven't eaten yet, either. Give me a minute to check my messages," and headed for her desk.

Cade parked his rump on the corner of somebody's desk and sipped his coffee as he snarfed another donut and waited for her. Beth's hands were trembling a little, he noted. Well, he'd reassure her that he wouldn't tell anyone. That was about all he could do, really.

When she stood up again, Beth made a production of searching her purse and the top of her desk, then went to Cade and said, "I need to get something from my room on the way," before she led the way to the door.

Cade topped off his coffee and snagged another couple of donuts before following her. Both donuts and the coffee were gone before he caught up with her a few doors down the corridor. He used his jeans to dust the sugar off his hand and followed her into her room.

As soon as the door had closed, Beth spun to face him and asked in an angry tone, "What the *hell* did you tell Mandi about last night? About us?"

Shrugging, Cade said, "Nothing. She was already in bed when I got back to the room. She was gone when I woke up this morning. We haven't talked at all since just before I gave you that 9mm ammo last night."

Obviously not convinced, Beth said, "When she came into the ops room a while ago, she had to wait for John. She chose to do her waiting by *my desk*, Ed."

With a chuckle, he said, "Well gee, ma'am, that does sound pretty ominous. You were probably the only other woman in the room, Beth, and..." "She just sat there and *stared* at me," Beth interrupted, "Just sat there and stared at me for about five full seconds before she gave me one of those fakey smiles and said '*Good morning, Beth. Did you sleep well?*'"

Again shrugging, Cade said, "I didn't tell her a damned thing, Beth. I swear it."

As she again studied his face for signs of perjury, Cade asked, "Um... and did you? Sleep well, I mean?"

Beth's eyes narrowed to gunsight slits. She growlingly snapped, "Yes, as a matter of fact, I did."

Grinning, Cade asked, "Was it because you were dead tired or because you had a great time?" As she opened her mouth to respond in what looked like a snappy manner, Cade raised a finger and prompted, "Honest answer only, please."

Smoldering a bit, Beth sighed and answered in a rather grudging tone, "Yes. I had a good time, Ed. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Of course that's what I want to hear. Don't you think I was busting my ass to please you last night? You sure seemed to think so at the time, ma'am, especially when I..."

"*Never mind when*," snapped Beth. "Yes, dammit, I had a good time. A *great* time, in fact. Now, what about Mandi?"

"What about her? She's got no right or reason to say anything about who I play with. Or who you play with. Are you sure you're not just having some morning-after regrets, Beth? Is that what this is all about? Or are you worried I'll brag around the office?"

"No! I mean... No. No regrets. And you *said* you wouldn't say *anything*, right?" She stepped forward until she was almost nose-to-nose with Cade and repeated insistently, "*Right?*"

Cade took Beth in his arms and said, "Beth, I promise. Not a word to anyone. And I *haven't* said anything to Mandi or anyone else," and then he kissed her.

Beth stiffened for a moment, then gradually responded to his kiss. Cade used a finger to sweep a few wisps of her hair out of her face, then let the finger continue down behind her ear and along the line of her throat to her exposed shoulder.

Leaning slightly, he kissed her shoulder and trailed his lips up Beth's throat to her jaw, then kissed his way back to her lips as he again held her close.

When the kiss ended, he said softly, "You aren't on duty this morning. Let's go back to bed. Breakfast can wait. In fact, you can be my breakfast. Would you like that, ma'am?"

Beth's lips were slightly swollen, her face and shoulders were turning pinkish, and her pulse was pounding slightly. She looked almost ready to say 'yes', but still a bit hesitant.

"Beth," he said, "This job ends today. It could be a long time before we get a chance to play again. I *really* want another taste of you before you

go. Do you know that feeling?"

She nodded slowly before she softly replied, "Yes. I know that feeling."

Kissing her again, Cade asked, "Well? Are you going to let me please you at least once more before you escape? Like last night? Can the pancakes maybe wait a little while?"

Snickering softly, Beth smilingly nodded and said, "Yeah. The pancakes can wait," and pulled him into a kiss.

After the third time Cade had helped Beth climb her personal mountain to its summit, she lay limp and winded on the bed for some moments, then she drowsily asked Cade to get her a glass of water. He kissed lips, then her breast, and then her thigh as he slid past her off the bed and stood up.

Saluting her, he said, "Yes, ma'am. One water coming up," and headed for the bathroom, where he quickly drank several glasses himself before taking hers to her.

Beth seemed barely awake enough to drink half the water, then she handed him the glass and let her arm fall to the bed as she sighed deeply.

"I'm gonna take a nap," she said, almost slurring the words. "You?"

Cade's stomach rumbled at him, prompting him to say, "Can't. I'm starving. How about I come back in an hour or so? Think you'll be up to another round by then?"

Giggling softly, Beth nodded and said, "Sure. Maybe by then. Take my keycard. If I'm asleep when you get back, just get into bed and snuggle up."

Leaning to kiss her, Cade said, "A lady with a plan. I like that. Yes'm. I'll climb in and snuggle."

Beth giggled again, pulled the covers up, and mumbled, "I feel so incredibly, absolutely *used*..."

"Excellent," said Cade, putting his pants on, "That's exactly what I was shooting for, milady."

Laughing softly, Beth adjusted her pillow and said, "It felt like you were shooting me. From the inside. We have these rooms all day, Ed. I have to catch a nine o'clock flight, so hurry back. We aren't through yet."

"I'll bring you something from the restaurant."

Nodding, she said, "Thanks. Doesn't matter what it is. God, I haven't felt like this in ages..."

He kissed her again and trailed his fingers down her blanketed form to her knees, picked up the keycard, and buttoned his shirt on the way to the door.

Cade stepped out of Beth's room feeling as if he hadn't eaten in days. Instead of waiting for an elevator, he took the stairs down two flights and entered the con suite to see what was on the buffet.

The black guy who seemed to be in charge of the con suite every year saw him coming and waved from behind a serving table as he picked up a large aluminum tray that still held half a dozen sliced sandwiches.

"Hi, guy!" said Cade. "Still wearing red, huh? Don't you know that's an unlucky color in Starfleet?"

"No sweat. Ever notice how they never send the cooks on away teams? Crucial bridge personnel, medics, scientists, security types, and even family members and practically any-damned-body else who wants to go, but never the cooks."

Grinningly shaking his hand, Cade said, "Good point, indeed. Seems to me, though, that anybody that valuable oughta be wearing gold and have the keys to the ship."

The guy laughed, "Damned right, but it'll never happen."

Cade reached for a sandwich, but the guy moved the tray away and said, "Nah, these have been out there all morning, man. They're stale as hell. I'm supposed to pull them."

"Got any more behind the bar?"

"Not yet. In an hour or so it'll be time to set out the lunch snackies, though. Can you hold on that long?"

"No," Cade said firmly, reaching for the tray again and getting a grip on it. "Stale is fine; I'm starving. I'll bring you the tray in a few minutes. It won't leave this room."

Sounding a bit like Jim Carey, the guy raised his hands clear and said, "Well, all righty, then."

"Fanks," Cade said around some ham and cheese.

"No problem. I thought they fed you guys. Or paid you enough to afford food, anyway."

Swallowing the last of the first sandwich, Cade said, "Special circumstances," and started on the next sandwich.

Someone reaching for potato chips nudged his arm and the tray tilted sharply. Cade righted it quickly enough to keep the sandwiches aboard, but there was a loud '*wunk*' sort of noise and the black guy's eyes got big as he looked at the tray.

Cade's gaze followed his and he thought, 'Oh, shit,' as he saw that his thumb had heavily dented the edge the heavy aluminum tray, squashing the ridge around it flat and warping the metal for several inches.

"Um. Sorry," said Cade.

He stacked the remaining sandwiches on a napkin and turned the tray over to push the damaged area flat, then handed the tray across the table, gathered up the sandwiches, and said, "Sorry. Really," and turned to go.

"Hey," said the black guy, "Wait."

Turning to face him, Cade indicated the tray and asked, "Would ten bucks cover it?"

"I buy 'em used. Seven would do it, but that's not..." He waited until another table-grazer moved away and continued, "How'd you do that? I ran over one of these trays with my truck once and didn't much more than scratch it a little."

Setting the sandwiches down, Cade fished ten bucks out of his money clip, laid it on the tray, and said, "I've had a real workout this morning. That's why I'm so hungry. Thanks again," and headed for the door with the sandwiches, detouring to the drink dispenser for a cup of Dr Pepper.

One of the sandwiches disappeared on the way back to the stairwell. The rest vanished only in a few minutes as Cade sat on the third floor landing and considered what he'd just done to the heavy aluminum tray with his thumb.

Damn. Mandi hadn't been exaggerating at all. He considered his time with Beth and shuddered. One wrong move... one unrealizing squeeze while he'd been... Oh, hell.

He'd been wrong when he'd said to Mandi that he expected to be dangerous to women in a week or so. But she hadn't corrected his estimate. Because they'd been arguing, or because she'd figured about the same amount of time?

Was he ahead of schedule or something? Reaching for the bent-pipe safety railing of the stairs, he squeezed. At first nothing happened, so he squeezed a little harder. The tubing crumpled in his hand.

Staring at the damaged pipework, Cade knew he couldn't continue with Beth. He'd been extremely lucky not to have hurt her this morning, no damned doubt about that.

Then it struck him that he hadn't mashed any of the sandwiches and he remembered Mandi having mentioned the same phenomenon the night before. She'd said, '*You didn't squash your burger, did you?*' Or something like that.

Maybe he could continue with Beth. If he was very gentle, very careful... Wait one. He was describing all but a very few moments of their time together the night before. And this morning had been one long, easygoing, session. No hard riding at all, except when she'd been on top.

"That's it," he softly said aloud to himself. "Slow and easy unless she's on top. That ought to work."

He'd been so preoccupied that he hadn't noticed Mandi's presence descending between the stairwells until his last thought had essentially

seemed to solve his dilemma.

As he sipped the last of his Dr Pepper, she floated to a stop directly behind him and cleared her throat with a grin, obviously expecting Cade to jump out of his skin.

Cade drained the cup and said, "Hi, Mandi," without so much as a flinch.

Annoyed as hell that she hadn't startled him and determined not to let him see her failure, Mandi concealed her irritation as she flitted upward enough to clear the handrail, then settled to the steps just below the landing so they'd be more or less eye-to-eye.

Glancing around, she asked, "Is there some reason you're sitting in the stairwell?"

He pointed to the crumbs on the napkin and said, "I've just been having a private snack before I head down to breakfast. Care to join me?"

"I've already eaten, but I guess I could stand another coffee." Grinning, she asked, "What was that '*slow and easy unless she's on top*' all about, Ed?"

Stuffing the napkin into the paper cup, Cade stood up and walked downstairs past her as he said, "Just a kind of safety lecture about dealing with unconverted women."

Turning to follow him, she asked, "'Dealing' with them, huh? Sounds to me as if you plan to be doing more than 'dealing' with them. Anyone in particular?"

"Could be. I know some unconverted women. Wouldn't know them very long if I let myself get clumsy with them."

Chuckling, Mandi said, "Likely so, but in a few days it will be better if you don't play with them at all."

Glancing back at her, Cade asked, "Why's that?"

Raising an eyebrow at him, Mandi grinningly said, "Think about it. A normal man can squirt about how far? Three feet? Once you're fully converted, you'd kill your unconverted lady."

Cade stopped on the stairs and looked at her. Mandi's face was -- 'dead' serious, you could say -- and she made sense.

To confirm, Cade asked, "You're saying that a week from now, you'll be my only sexual option?"

Mandi's face turned glowering. "Should I slap the hell out of you now, or let you explain what you really meant?"

Shaking his head, Cade said, "Sorry. Poor choice of words. But you know what I mean. No unconverted women, right?"

Not terribly mollified, Mandi answered, "Right."

After a moment, Cade asked, "How many converted women are there at present?"

"Two."

"And where are they?"

"Las Vegas. One's a cop. The other runs her own business."

"And there's another woman like you on Earth?"

"Yes. In California."

Some moments passed before Cade said, "Nope. I don't buy it," and continued down the stairs to the lobby.

In a sharp tone, Mandi called after him, "Just *what* exactly don't you buy, Cade?"

Stopping again, Cade said, "In all this time on Earth, you've only converted *two* women? She's converted *no* women? That's what I don't buy, Mandi. It may be true, but I don't believe it at this very moment. Later."

With that, he opened the lobby door and left the stairwell. Cade wanted to eat and haul his ass back up to Beth's room for what might be his last sexual romp for a long time, the way things seemed to be going.

In fact, he did believe what she'd said about soon being too dangerous for unconverted women. But he *didn't* for a moment believe that a woman who admitted converting two other women would have any hesitations about converting more if they qualified and were needed.

Mandi had tapped the President for money and a place to train people and she'd felt it necessary and justified to convert him without asking how he felt about it, so there was a definite need for convertees. It was as simple as that.

She'd need them in both genders, too, if she were training enough of them to justify requesting a place to train them. The sense of total alienation would be too much for many of the convertees, otherwise.

Nope. Either there already were more or there would be more convertees reasonably soon, and about half of them would be female unless Mandi planned to spend a great deal of her time servicing all her male convertees herself.

Choosing a booth, Cade told the waiter to bring him one of the lunch specials. As the waiter left, Mandi came to stand by the booth.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Have a seat. Want me to call the waiter back?"

Shaking her head as she sat down, Mandi said, "No. I'll order a coffee or something when he comes back."

For long moments, the two of them simply matched gazes across the table, then Mandi said, "There are only two in Vegas. There are a few others elsewhere around the country."

When Cade said nothing, Mandi asked, "Since you didn't ask about male convertees, I'll..."

"I don't give a rat's ass about the men," he interrupted, "I want to know about the women. Got any in Florida?"

"No. Georgia. They work with the Center for Disease Control and other agencies. In fact, they've been working with another NIA branch this weekend. As backups, you could say, in case more happened than I could handle at once. One of them was even in the look-alike contest."

Sipping his water, Cade said, "Fascinating. Did you convert any of them without asking first?"

With a sigh, Mandi said, "NO, and you said '*done is done*', as I recall. I'm sorry and that's all I can say. I thought someone your age would be..."

That rankled Cade a bit. " '*Someone my age?*' Would be what? That someone any other age wouldn't be, that is."

Gazing hard at him across the table, Mandi said, "I'd *very* much appreciate it if you wouldn't interrupt me when I'm speaking, Ed. I *thought* you'd be considerably happier about being chosen for conversion."

"That's your word for it. '*Near-total alienation*' is what I'm calling it for the moment."

The waiter buzzed up to the table and asked Mandi what she'd like. She ordered a coffee and the waiter told Cade that his lunch would arrive shortly, then he buzzed away again.

Mandi sat back and said, "You crushed that steel rail in the stairwell. If that's an indication of your progress, you'll be able to stop a tank round with your bare hands in a week. You'll be bulletproof and no Earthly disease will be able to touch you. You'll be stronger and faster than you can possibly imagine and you may develop some of my other powers to a degree."

Pausing, Mandi sipped the water the waiter had brought her and added, "And there's one more little thing. Our cells replicate, but they don't degenerate with every copy. Do you understand what that means?"

"Sure. It means I may have time enough to write another few thousand books."

"You don't seem very impressed with virtual immortality."

"Of course I am. I'm just not letting it overshadow the fact that you're forming teams, which means that something more than you can handle alone is headed this way, and if it's bigger than you, it'll be able to squash a convertee in a heartbeat."

## Chapter Twenty-two

Tossing her hands up, Mandi softly exclaimed, "Okay. I give up. What the hell can I *possibly* do to make this terrible thing I've done up to you,

Ed?"

"Nothing, really," said Cade. "If something that big is coming, being as much like you as possible will probably increase my chances of survival. I just wanted you to know how I felt before you pulled the same 'oh, he won't mind' trick on someone else."

The waiter arrived with food as Mandi sat staring at Cade. When the waiter finished placing food on the table, Cade told him to bring another lunch special. The waiter thought he meant for Mandi and smilingly nodded at her. Cade then told him to also pack one to go.

"To go, sir?"

"Yup. It's going upstairs with me."

"Yes, sir. One more to the table and one to go."

"You got it. Thanks."

When the waiter had left, Mandi smilingly asked, "Why didn't Beth come down to lunch with you?"

Digging into his food, Cade said, "She needed a nap. Why were you watching us last night?"

Startling imperceptibly, Mandi thought, 'He DID know!' then she said, "When you didn't come back to the room, I thought maybe you'd gotten into more trouble."

Around some steak, Cade said, "Uh, huh. Glad I'm wearing boots, ma'am." He cut another piece and said, "Got a question. Am I just processing mass into energy?"

"Partly. You're being restructured, which requires quite a bit of both mass and energy."

"So I could probably just drink a lot of water or eat a phone book and it wouldn't matter a damn to the process?"

Mandi snickered and asked, "A phone book?"

"Bulk. Mass. Something to convert. It doesn't necessarily have to be food, right? Just a steady supply of mass."

"I suppose so. Will you want gravy on your phone book?"

"Probably wouldn't be a bad idea. You seemed surprised that I squashed that rail in the stairwell. Why? Am I ahead of schedule or something?"

Nodding, she said, "It would seem so. A little, anyway."

"Why would that be?"

Mandi shrugged. "Your system is accepting conversion easily and you're having sex with Beth."

"What does sex have to do with it?"

Filching his tomato slice, she said, "All human bodily functions are closely tied to the reproductive system. Stir things up and the process can speed up considerably."

"Speed up only, or also enhance the process? Could I wind up being a bit more... 'super'... at the other end?"

"Yes, you could. Others have, for the same reason."

With a nod, Cade met her gaze and asked, "Do you want optimum conversion, or would plain old average do?"

"Optimum would be nice, of course."

Cade sliced off a chunk of meat and ate it, then said, "I think so, too, also of course. There's nothing quite like knowing your support people are as good as they can possibly be. Beth is good for another few hours, then she'll leave for D.C. or I'll become too much for her. Doesn't matter which; that'll be the end of it. If we're going to try to optimize me, I'll need someone to take her place."

"Her name is Andrea. I've already talked to her."

"Why not you?"

Mandi sighed and said, "Sorry. You're still several days away from being able to make love to me, Ed."

Another chunk of steak later, Cade asked, "So this Andrea -- who's never even met me -- is willing to take over for Beth in my bed, huh?"

"If she likes you. She's very fond of sex. If she doesn't like you enough, she'll simply supervise your normal conversion."

"I'll need supervised? It won't just happen on its own?"

Sighing again, Mandi said, "Yes, of course it would, but there are ways -- that don't involve sex -- to heighten the effect a bit."

"What ways?"

"Hard exercise and energy infusion can help."

"Energy infusion?"

"Direct transfer from one of us to you. That couldn't happen for another day or two, though. It would kill you."

Filching his other slice of tomato, she said, "Andrea is taking a week off to help you through this. John says you have a three-bedroom house."

"It would be if I threw out two rooms'-full of ceramic molds and computer gear."

After a pause, Mandi said, "Oh."

Cade chuckled. "Yeah. Oh. The place is a factory, too. But don't worry about it. If we don't get along well enough to sleep together, I'll take the couch for a week. Think she'd like to go to Disneyworld and some of the other tourist traps?"

Smiling, Mandi canted her head and said, "I really don't know. I do know she shoots pool fairly well."

Returning her smile, Cade said, "Well, that's a plus."

He'd just put the last bit of steak in his mouth when Mandi said, "Slide your plates over here. John's coming."

Shoving everything to her side of the table, Cade asked, "Why doesn't he know about this, Mandi?"

Giving him a firm look, Mandi said, "He's not in the loop."

"I've known him for ages. He'd be cool with it."

"Okay, he probably would be, but you weren't supposed to happen for a while yet. Quiet. Here he comes."

As John walked up to the table, Cade thought, 'Not supposed to happen for a while yet? What the hell?'

"Hi, all," said John, taking a seat beside Mandi. "Good news. They found Kahlil this morning. The company is saying this op is finally over."

More strangeness. John had referred to 'the company', which the NIA most definitely wasn't. Only the CIA was referred to as 'the company' by anyone who knew the difference, and John definitely knew the difference.

Cade said nothing and gave John a slightly puzzled look as Mandi agreed that it was good news, indeed. John gave Cade the old-days hand sign that meant 'later' and talked to Mandi as the waiter brought the other steak dinners Cade had ordered and asked John if he'd like anything. John ordered coffee.

'Great,' thought Cade. 'Settle one problem and up pops a new one. Get through one puzzle and another one will fall into your lap pretty much instantly.'

He started in on the second dinner as Mandi and John chatted and talked about wrapping things up in the ops room. Cade kind of hurried through his steak and John asked him why he was in a rush. Pointing at the 'go' bag, Cade told him that was for someone upstairs and that he didn't want it to get cold.

"Would it maybe be for Beth?" asked John.

"Can't let her starve. She's NIA property."

"Thought so. Carter says you've been spending a lot of time in her room."

"Someone was using my room." Meeting John's gaze, Cade cautioned, "Beth doesn't know -- or maybe she just doesn't want to know -- that anyone else knows, you know? I don't really know why it matters to her, but it does."

Mandi grinningly crossed her heart and zipped her lips like a schoolgirl taking a pledge of silence. John chuckled and nodded as he spoke.

"No sweat. Like it or not, she knows we've been monitoring the hallways, so this has to be a personal preference. I'll mention to Carter to keep it quiet, okay?"

"Thanks. Word'll probably get out sooner or later, but it doesn't have to happen today."

As he finished up his steak, Mandi said, "I'll see you later, Ed. Give me a call around seven or drop by the room."

"Seven. You got it." Cade stood up and picked up the bag and the bill, then said, "Later, all. I'll tip the waiter when he makes my change," and headed for the register.

After paying the bill, Cade took the stairs to save time and reached Beth's room in moments. He let himself in, put the card on the desk, and went to the bed. Beth seemed to be in deep sleep, but as he turned away, she spoke.

"Hi, there."

"Hi, yourself, lady. I brought you some food."

Smiling drowsily up at him, she said, "Such service. Maybe I should keep you, Cade. What do you think about that?"

"I think you'd be disappointed, ma'am. I turn into a plain ol' inconsiderate, garden variety man on weekdays and I get downright mean on holidays. Hope you like steak for lunch."

Sitting up, Beth said, "Steak is fine, Ed. I'll bet you don't change at all, really. I'll bet you're like this all the time."

He shrugged. "Maybe so. Doesn't matter. You have to fly back to D.C. tonight and I'll be in Florida by tomorrow. Let's just play some more and make the best of our time together."

Tossing the sheet aside, Beth stood up. Cade eyed her nakedness as she walked over to him and embraced him for a moment, then kissed him.

"You're a nice man," she said quietly. "You're good in bed, too. I could do a lot worse, I think, if you were up for it."

Kissing her, Cade said, "Thanks, milady, but you're still too young and beautiful to settle for less than you deserve. Try me again in a few years if you can manage to stay single."

With a sardonic chuckle, she said, "Well, hell, I've managed this long, haven't I?" and opened the restaurant bag to begin unpacking it on the desk.

As she sat down to eat, she eyed Cade and asked, "Am I going to be the only naked person in this room?"

Pretending vast surprise, Cade said, "Oh! Yes'm, I'll get right to that. Very sorry, ma'am. I was so wrapped up in eyeballing your gorgeous bod that I just completely forgot. You know how it is, don't you?"

Laughing, Beth said, "Yeah, sure. I know how it is," and dug into her food.

A few bites later she asked, "Hey, Cade. If I'm so gorgeous, how come all the other guys don't act like you?"

"Simple ignorance, ma'am. They don't know how."

"So how did you become so knowledgeable?"

"I had a good teacher early in life."

"Who was she?"

"One of my teachers in high school."

Glancing up incredulously, Beth asked, "*Really?*"

"Yup. I was sixteen. She was twenty-six and kind of pushy, just like you. I learned a lot at that lady's knees."

Beth nearly choked with laughter. "*At her knees...?* Uh, yeah, well, I suppose... That's where you'd have been..."

Patting her back, Cade said, "Yup. Most of the time, too, as I prefer to recall. Just try to breathe for now, Beth. Talk later."

Beth managed to eat most of her steak and Cade finished what she couldn't, then they spent the rest of the afternoon like newlyweds on a honeymoon.

At six-forty-five her ride to the airport pulled up at the front doors and -- to Cade's surprise -- Beth hugged him and kissed him long and hard.

Holding her close, Cade whispered, "Somebody might see."

Snickering, she said, "Screw 'em. There were cameras in the halls, anyway. Everybody who doesn't know now will know by tomorrow. I'll deal with it."

"Would saying 'thank you' sound trite, ma'am?"

"Not if I say it first. Thanks, Cade."

Then she made a show of glancing at her watch, making an apologetic face and an excuse about long check-in times these days, and hurried into the waiting car.

They waved good-bye as the car rolled down the ramp, then it turned left at the street and she was gone. Cade sighed once, then turned to go back upstairs.

A tall, thirtyish, brunette woman in a sharp, shades-of-green skirt and jacket business ensemble asked, "Your wife?"

Stopping to meet her gaze, Cade said, "No. A friend." After a short pause, he added, "A very nice lady."

The woman had ice-gray eyes like fine gemstones that were nearly on a level with Cade's. Her face at first seemed rather plain, or perhaps she simply wore no makeup, but her strong character shone through her features like a beacon. A very impressive woman.

Her full lips parted and Cade realized she was speaking again as she said, "Are you all right?"

Shaking off her spell, Cade said, "Uhm. Yes, ma'am. Sorry. You have... unique eyes. They're a color I don't see often enough. Very lovely." With a grin, he added, "I guess they kind of shorted out my little brain for a few seconds. Excuse me, but I have to be somewhere shortly."

Taking his cell phone out of his pocket as he left her, he dialed Mandi's number, even though he'd felt her watching since Beth and he had left her room with her luggage.

Mandi answered, "Hi, Ed. Andrea's here. I've filled her in. Come on up to the room."

"On my way, milady."

A toddler on a leash managed to get loose and came running Cade's direction as his mother tried to call him back. When the kid neared him, Cade's arm flashed out and snagged the kid's collar. He constrained the thrashing little beast at arm's length as he continued talking to Mandi.

"Gimme an extra few minutes, ma'am. I have to return something to someone down here."

Laughing, Mandi said, "So I see. Good collar, Officer Ed."

The woman arrived to collect her child and Cade got underway again. On the fourth floor landing, he thought he heard voices and looked up and down the stairwell. Nobody either way.

He turned a bit and listened a little harder. Some guy was trying to arrange a rental car. The other voice he heard was apparently that of a rental agent on a phone, and the voices seemed to be coming from the other side of the fourth floor hallway door.

No, not the door; to one side of it. Cade stepped that direction and clearly heard the agent tell the guy that the kind of car he wanted would have to be brought in from the airport.

The agent's voice was much fainter than the other one, so he probably wasn't on a speaker phone. That seemed to mean that Cade was listening to both sides of a conversation over a regular phone or a cell phone.

"Look, I'm in a hurry," said the guy. "I'll head down to the lobby and get a cab. You just tell me who I have to see what all I have to do on the way, okay?"

Cade instantly opened the landing door and stepped into the hallway. The door to the room on his left opened and a guy with a suitcase in one hand and a cell phone to his ear hurried out of the room and down the hall.

*'Damn,'* thought Cade, suddenly far too aware of a myriad of sounds in the hall. *'What other changes could he expect?'*

Mandi's idea that he might need supervision made more sense as he tried vainly to filter out some of the useless noise around him. *Training* was what he'd need.

As he approached his room, he stopped walking as he heard Mandi say, "Ed has been a bit difficult, Andrea. More than a bit difficult, in fact. I hate to say it, but converting him may have been a mistake."

A familiar woman's voice responded, "Oh, he didn't strike me as being all that terrible. You heard what he said about my eyes, didn't you? And the way he said it? And he was so *polite* when he excused himself and moved on. He called me 'ma'am'. Jerks don't act like that, Mandi."

"Uh, huh. He'll call you 'milady', too, but don't let it go to your head. You know that horse you call a 'hardmouth'? The one who sometimes decides to go where he damned well pleases? You may come to think of Cade as a hardmouth, too."

With a snicker, Andrea said, "Well, if I do, I'll be sure to let you know. But if he's no worse than what I've seen so far, he'll max out just fine, 'cause I'll bang his brains out all week."

Laughing, Mandi said, "Yeah, sure. More likely he'll tickle yours loose first." She took a breath and intoned solemnly, "Be warned," then burst out laughing again.

Laughing with her, Andrea said, "If he's that good, more power to him. What's keeping him?"

*'Uh-oh,'* thought Cade, getting underway again just as he felt Mandi's gaze locate him.

A few steps later he tapped on the door as he used his keycard and let himself into his room.

## Chapter Twenty-three

From long habit, Cade stood somewhat to one side of the doorway as he pushed it open with his left hand, then pretended to take a moment to put his keycard back in his jacket pocket rather than walk straight into the room.

The door swung gently open all the way to the wall before he entered the room, blocking the door's return swing with his right boot as he glanced around and continued his entry with almost no pause.

Mandi sat on the bed, Andrea sat in the desk chair. A bottle of champagne nestled in an ice bucket on the desk and Mandi's bags had been moved nearer the door because two blue suitcases had taken their place by the desk. There were no other people in the room and both women were staring at him.

"Well?" asked Mandi, "Are you coming in or not?"

Andrea chuckled as Cade replied, "Have you ever seen me just waltz right into a room, ma'am?"

Snickering, Mandi asked, "Not even your own room?"

Cade walked over to Andrea as he said, "I'm old enough to have old habits because I earned them the hard way. Your own room is the first place to expect an ambush. Especially on birthdays in military service. *'Surprise!'* and all that."

Mandi snickered again, but her glance went to Andrea as if to confirm something.

As Andrea stood up to take his hand, he met her gaze for a long moment, and said, "And you are definitely a surprise. Hi. I'm Ed, and I hope to Goddess you're Andrea, ma'am."

Her smile continued, but she asked, "*Godde*ss?"

"I'm a pagan. We mostly prefer goddesses if we bother with deities at all."

Andrea glanced at Mandi, who nodded and grinned as she said, "That probably wasn't a line, Andrea. He has a pagan website where he sells stoneware and pewter jewelry."

Returning her gaze to Cade, Andrea said, "I'll have to see it sometime. Yes. I'm Andrea. Are you at all disappointed?"

Shaking his head, Cade said, "Not even a little. Are you?"

Grinning, Andrea said, "Mandi and I have been talking about you. I've decided that youth may not be everything. Could I have my hand back now?"

Pretending to notice that he was still holding her hand, Cade released it with a calculated *'Oh, I kinda forgot'* shrug.

Laughing, Mandi said, "I think you've got his attention, Andrea. Let's have some champagne. Cade?"

Reaching to open the champagne, Cade said, "I'm on it."

The wire on the bottleneck broke when he twisted. Cade reached for his beltknife, flicked it open, wedged it under the wire, and twisted. The wire broke and he pried it off, then slapped his knife shut and slipped it back into its belt pouch.

In the mirror above the desk he noticed both Mandi and Andrea staring at him. Oh, well. Had Mandi somehow missed the fact that he'd been wearing a belt knife all this time?

He decided that was unlikely and finished opening the champagne, then poured some into each of the three plastic cups Andrea silently lined up on the desk. In truth, he detested champagne, but he'd only ever met one woman who felt the same way about it.

Handing glasses to the ladies, he picked up his own and said, "Mandi, you're the honcho here, so you make the toast."

Andrea snickered and Mandi laughed, "Gee, thanks. Okay. Let's keep it simple. Here's to all good things. May there always be many and may they never end."

After clunking their cups together and sipping, Mandi sat back down on the bed and said, "I talked to John this afternoon; he now knows you've been converted." Noddingly indicating Andrea, she said, "Andrea's your instructor. That's all he knows and that's all he needs to know."

She sipped again and said, "We have time for dinner before I leave for Vegas. Any suggestions about where to eat?"

"Yes," said Andrea. "A buffet steakhouse just opened near my neighborhood. Since Ed's got a converttee appetite, we may as well go there."

"Works for me," said Cade. "Andrea, what do you do?"

"As in work? I'm a research scientist with the CDC."

"That sounds a lot more important than selling jewelry on the net and writing science fiction. Would you rather I call to make arrangements for my cats and stay up here with you this week? It wouldn't be a problem."

Shaking her head, she said, "No way. I haven't had a whole week away from that place in over a year. You're stuck with me, Ed. You have cats?"

"Three. You like cats?"

She nodded. "Oh, sure. I'd have one if I were home more."

Turning to Mandi, she said, "I think I like this guy already. He has cats." Returning her gaze to Cade, she asked, "How do you feel about horses?"

"Had one until I was fifteen. Didn't use a saddle most of the time. He especially liked bubblegum and mulberry leaves."

Andrea's grin widened. "Yeah, we'll get along fine, Mandi."

A quick knocking at the door made Cade put his drink down and go answer it. Cody Barnes from the ops room entered the room to stand by Mandi's luggage.

"Ma'am," he said, "John sent me for your luggage."

"It's all right there, Cody. Thanks."

"Oh, no problem, ma'am. I'll have it UPS'd tomorrow."

He grabbed the bags and headed for the door. Cade let him out and came back to lean against the desk.

When he didn't ask, Mandi said, "UPS is easier. Safer for the stuff in them, too."

Nodding, Cade said, "Figured that."

She parted a finger from her cup to indicate Cade's cup and asked, "You don't like champagne?"

"Nah. I'm more of a beer person. Or Dr Pepper. Or gin and bitter lemon."

Andrea's snort almost startled him.

When he looked at her, she said, "I just don't believe this, that's all. Gin and bitter lemon? Me, too. I didn't think anyone else drank those."

"Hm," said Cade. "Horses, cats, gin and bitter lemon, and gorgeous eyes. That's a damned good score so far. Will you be very surprised if I propose to you later, ma'am?"

"No, probably not. Will you be very surprised if I accept?"

Cocking his head, Cade said, "Oh, yeah. I'm pretty sure I would be. You can't look that delicious and not be married if married is what you want to be."

"Maybe I'm just waiting for Mr. Right."

Shaking his head, Cade said, "Nope. Doesn't seem to fit. Can't say exactly why, but I don't think that's the answer."

Mandi laughed and asked, "Did I tell you he seems to be fairly smart, too?"

"Yes, indeed you did. Notice how he mixed that compliment with undeniable logic before he stated an intuition?"

Standing up, Mandi said, "Sure did. If nobody's going to drink any more champagne, I think it's dinnertime."

Andrea and Cade agreed and they trooped out of the room and down the hall to the elevator, which was moving with a bit more alacrity since the convention crowd had begun thinning.

Cade had expected Andrea to produce a car and simply drive them to the restaurant she'd mentioned, so it surprised him a bit when Mandi poked the button for the top floor.

During the ride up, he considered a few things. Mandi had likely spent some time discussing him with Andrea. Call it a briefing of sorts. She'd known about his cats and his preference for gin and bitter lemon was in his records.

Horses were another matter; he couldn't remember having mentioned his childhood horse to Mandi, but John knew about Cloud and knew Cade had owned part of a riding stable in Germany back in the seventies; after all, the agency had used the place as a meeting point dozens of times.

Andrea was nearly six feet tall and had striking eyes. John might also have mentioned Giselle, who'd had similar features and a place in Cade's heart, and how Cade had considered leaving the agency when she'd been killed during an arrest that the system had refused to prosecute for diplomatic reasons.

Or maybe he was just being a bit paranoid. Could be she truly just happened to be a tall goddess with ice-gray eyes who liked cats, horses, and the same booze as Cade. He wondered what the other converttee in Atlanta looked like and whether Andrea had 'volunteered' or been 'chosen' to coach him.

On the other hand, the conversion was underway, like it or not, and he'd been issued a goddess. Cade glanced at Andrea and decided that things could most definitely be worse.

From the top floor they took the stairs to the roof and Mandi retrieved her flattened can from its hideaway under the eaves. After she put it in place to keep the door from locking, she turned to Andrea and Cade and put her hands on her hips.

In a dead serious tone, Mandi said, "I'm afraid it's time to choose, Ed."

A trick? A trap? For what reason? No point in trying to escape, in any case.

"Could you be just a bit more specific?" he asked.

Noddingly indicating Andrea, Mandi said, "You have to choose which of us will carry you."

Hm. He hadn't known that Andrea could fly. Cool. Maybe that meant that flight was one of the powers he'd have later.

"You mean you aren't going to fight over me?"

Andrea snorted and groaned softly, "Oh, yeah, right."

Cade glanced at her and said, "Hey, it was just a thought."

Shrugging, he told Mandi, "Whoever wants to haul me may do so. I know better than to choose between goddesses. Need a coin to toss?"

"Oh, never mind," said Mandi, and she wrapped her arms around Cade and lifted them into the evening sky.

After two minutes of flying eastward they landed among some trees near a very new-looking restaurant. It was a bit crowded, as is normal for new places, but Andrea opined that the crowd would act in their favor because nobody'd notice the number of times Cade visited the serving lines.

Almost two hours later Cade felt pretty much full for the first time in two days. Andrea had been right, for the most part. Only one of the waitresses had noticed that Cade seemed to be packing away inordinate amounts of food, and while she watched with a certain amount of amazement, she apparently said nothing about it.

On the way back to the hotel, Andrea suddenly dropped away from them like a stone falling toward the ground and Cade almost lost the dinner he'd spent all that time consuming when Mandi followed her in the same manner. Looking down, he saw where Andrea was going.

A tanker truck had maneuvered to refill a local gas station's underground tanks and a yellow pickup truck in the alley behind the station was heading straight for the truck at about fifty miles per hour. As they neared the ground, they could see the driver slumped on the steering wheel.

As Andrea flew to deal with the pickup, Mandi landed to set Cade down and flew to join Andrea. Everything seemed well in hand, but an unanticipated wild card in the form of a blue Ford sedan entered the parking lot behind the tanker truck.

The driver couldn't take his eyes off the two flying women and didn't have sense enough to stop the car. The Ford hit a light pole and one of the wires above snapped with a sound like a rifle shot, then swung down and touched the concrete, where the current made it dance crazily around the car.

When Cade saw the woman on the passenger side open her door, he ran toward the car yelling for her to stay inside it. She stared at him dazedly for a moment, noticed that the man beside her was bleeding, unconscious, and slumped between the steering wheel and the driver's door, and freaked out.

The power line was slapping itself frantically around the car as the woman screamed, opened the door wider, and got out of the car, but she couldn't run. Her gashed and bloody left leg gave out and she tried to crawl, but chances were just too good that the power line would hit her.

Cade saw a stave from a broken pallet and grabbed it on the way to the car. It was one of the spine boards; hard wood with half a dozen slats still stuck to it.

He almost dove over the front of the car and managed to bat the power line aside from the woman twice as she continued crawling, unaware that he was there.

Then the power line slapped the side of the car and rebounded so quickly that Cade had no chance to swing at it. He could only brace the stave crossways in front of the oncoming power line and hope things would go well.

The heavy line smashed through the wooden stave and hit Cade's chest like a baseball bat, knocking him flat and slapping him twice more across the chest and legs.

With each smashing slap, the line sent massive amounts of electricity through Cade to the ground. He was barely conscious enough to see Mandi grab the cable and wrestle with it to prevent it from slamming him again, then he passed out.

Someone was patting his face and calling his name. He opened his eyes to see Mandi kneeling beside him. Behind her he saw the power line knotted around the broken pole.

"Hi," he said. "Thanks. It was gonna get me again."

"Everything's okay now. How do you feel?"

Cade gave that some thought, then flatly said, "Ow."

Chuckling, Mandi asked, "Can you move?"

"Damned if I know. Gimme a minute and I'll find out."

Although his arms and legs were still jangling from the electricity, they shakily lifted and moved a bit on command.

"Guess so," he said, trying to sit up.

That didn't work the first time, but he was able to roll over and lever himself swayingly upright in front of her.

"I've been better, but I think I'll survive."

"Great," said Mandi, "We need to get moving," and without ceremony she picked him up and launched into the sky some distance before he heard

Andrea ask, "How is he?"

"Just barely alive, ma'am," said Cade. "Nice of you to ask, though."

Mandi snorted a short laugh as Andrea came into view and peered down at Cade.

"Did anybody get a good look at us?" she asked Mandi.

"I don't think so," said Mandi. "The pickup driver was dead, the car driver was unconscious, and the girl was halfway across the parking lot by the time I secured the power lines. Nobody came near the car before I lifted with Cade."

"Sneaky angels," said Cade. "I don't know why, exactly, but I like that concept."

"You said you were a pagan," said Andrea. "Do pagans believe in angels?"

"Angels. Goddesses. Same things, different labels."

When Mandi set him down on the roof, she didn't let go of him immediately, which was just as well. The electricity had apparently scrambled his circuits a little and Cade had to try twice to get his legs to function properly.

"Damn," he said. "How much juice do those lines carry?"

Andrea said, "No idea, but it's enough to power everything for blocks in a commercial zone. We were kind of surprised to find you still breathing, Ed."

As Mandi slapped dust and dirt off his clothes, Cade said, "So was I. Maybe the lines grounded out as they hit me. Maybe I didn't get a full dose?"

"No," said Mandi. "I saw the end of that cable hit you twice. It didn't touch the ground either time."

Shrugging with a bit less grace than usual, Cade said, "Well, then, I guess we don't have an answer. Let's head for the room. I could use a coffee."

Andrea said, "Actually, so could I, I think."

*'I could use a coffee,'* Mandi repeated Cade's words in her mind as they headed downstairs. That was exactly what he'd said to Carter after dealing with Nassir, and he'd said it in exactly the same tone.

She checked his heartbeat and respiration and found them ranging about normal, even as he descended the stairs to the top floor. To Cade, the incident was completely over, just as he'd completely closed the Nassir matter with those words.

Were those words his... with a mental shrug, she inserted the word 'mantra'. Were they some sort of self-developed ritual or key phrase for closing the door on an incident?

Cade offered to make the ladies some of his instant coffee as they entered his room, but Mandi opted for another glass of champagne and Andrea said she'd see what was in the fridge.

"Ed," she added as he took his cup and his jar of instant to the sink, "I'm a research scientist, not an M.D., but I'd like to check you over for damage."

Shrugging, Cade said, "Thanks, but if I have anything more than a few big bruises, it'll be there later. Right now I just want to sit down with a coffee and try to relax."

Mandi read his pulse and respiration again and nearly laughed aloud. If he became any more relaxed, he'd be asleep. Cade saw her grinning at him in the mirror above the sink and she gave him an innocent look, to which he responded with a mildly puzzled look as he turned on the hot water.

She checked her watch, swore softly, and looked at the alarm clock on the desk.

## Chapter Twenty-four

"What's the matter, Mandi?" asked Andrea.

"Oh, I think my watch has been fried," said Mandi. "Its screen is blank."

"Open it," said Cade. "If the battery isn't swollen, it may just need to be taken out and put back in to reboot the watch."

"Would that really work?" asked Andrea.

Tapping his own watch, Cade said, "It might. It does when a computer power supply's field blanks my watch."

Mandi fussed with the watch for a few seconds, then said, "There's a notch on the back, but I can't get my fingernails under the edge."

Cade stirred the instant coffee as he walked toward her, then he put the coffee on the desk, reached for her watch, and looked at the back.

Flicking his knife open, he used the tip to pry up the back of the watch and tickle the battery out of its holder, then he slid the battery back into place and checked the front.

Showing it to Mandi, he said, "There you go, ma'am. You've got numbers again," then he handed her the watch and its back and said, "I'm afraid to squeeze it back on. You do it," and slapped his knife shut to return it to its belt sheath.

"Thanks," said Mandi. "I never would have thought of that. I thought the battery was dead."

"May I see that knife?" asked Andrea.

Cade handed it to her closed. She took it and looked it over, then -- holding it rather gingerly, he thought -- unfolded the blade until it locked open with a loud 'whack' that seemed to startle her a little.

She looked up and asked, "Why didn't it sound like that when you opened it?"

"I was holding it like a tool. You're holding it like a delicate antique. Things make more noise in a light grip."

Mandi snickered as Andrea studied Cade as if wondering if she were being teased, then her eyes fell back to the knife. She still held it rather gingerly as she studied the brass bolsters, the wood between them, and short serrated region on the stainless blade.

"It looks as if you must have put those serrations on the blade yourself. Why?"

"They're better for cutting rope and thick stuff and I can use the last two notches to strip insulation off wires."

She glanced up again and said, "They make the knife look mean. Nasty."

Leaning on the desk, Cade sipped coffee and said, "Only if you're viewing it strictly as a weapon. Do you feel that way about serrated kitchen knives, too?"

Andrea shook her head. "No. I guess I don't. How long have you been carrying a knife?"

"Since I worked on a ranch when I was a kid. This knife or one much like it. Back then oil came in cans and beer cans didn't have pull-tabs. I had to be able to dig things out from under horseshoes, pound wire staples back into fence posts, and cut rope and leather. Got a wild dog with it once when he came at me by the barn, and I got to where I could throw it and nail rats in the feed bin."



Making an 'eeewww' face, Andrea handed the open knife back to him as Mandi laughed and Andrea asked, "I trust you clean it *really well* now and then?"

Nodding with a grin, Cade said, "Yup, sure do," and put the knife away.

Mandi was poking buttons on the watch, setting the time and date. She looked up at the alarm clock, then pushed a button a few more times.

"Done," she pronounced. "Only time will tell if it'll still tell time. I need to get moving, people. Cade, I'll turn you over to Andrea now and drop in on you next weekend if I can't find time during the week. Andrea, he's all yours if you're sure."

'Sure?' thought Cade. He'd thought it was a done deal.

"I wasn't absolutely sure before," said Andrea. "I'm sure enough now, I think. Enough so to deal with him for a week, anyway. Besides, if I have to, I can always dump him back on you and come back to Atlanta."

With a short laugh, Mandi said, "Oh, no. He's yours. I have to get an antique missile base ready to receive guests."

She stood up and held out her arms. Andrea got to her feet and Cade did likewise as she went to Mandi and hugged her.

"What?" asked Mandi, looking at Cade. "I don't get a hug from you, too?"

Going over to her, Cade said, "I just wasn't sure you'd want one from me. I've been a bit difficult about things."

After she hugged him, Mandi held him at arm's length and met his eyes for a moment before speaking.

"Ed, I was worried about having made a mistake by converting you right up until you grabbed a stick and tried to save that woman. You kill people a little too easily to suit me, but you're just as quick to put yourself in harm's way for them. We'll work something out, I think."

Pulling him close, Mandi kissed him, then released him and turned into a blur for a moment. The blur became mostly red and white before she solidified wearing her uniform.

"You two stay put," she said with a grin. "I can find my own way out," then she blurred to the door, opened and closed it in a split second, and was gone.

"It still amazes me how she does that," said Andrea.

"Yeah, she's quick," said Cade.

As he picked up his coffee and moved to sit on the bed, bolts of agony coursed through his shins and thighs. When he leaned to rub them, more agony shot through his chest. He froze for a moment to let the sensations pass.

Moving to stand in front of him, Andrea said, "I saw that. I'm not asking you now, Ed. I'm telling you. I want to see how badly you were hurt."

Cade looked up into her eyes and got momentarily lost in them, as before. She reached for his shirt buttons and he leaned to set his coffee on the night table, then stood up and started undressing.

"I think I'm probably just bruised a bit," he said, opening his shirt.

Andrea gave him a mildly exasperated look and said, "As if you'd know," then sucked in her breath as she saw his chest.

Her reaction made Cade turn to see himself in the mirror and he saw the bruising that covered nearly all of his chest.

"Well, damn," he muttered. "It got me good, didn't it?"

"Mandi said it hit your legs, too," said Andrea. "Off with the pants, too. Do you know what electricity does to muscle tissue? It forms a cone of damage below the skin and..."

"Yes'm," said Cade. "I know. I was a medic once."

He toed off his boots and unbuckled his pants, then let them drop and stepped out of them. Andrea studied the livid bruising on his legs, reaching to touch his thigh.

Cade asked, "Um... Will you be getting naked, too, anytime soon, do you think?"

With a small smile, Andrea said, "I want to check you out first. Does that hurt?"

"No, but it probably won't hurt for a while, anyway. I expect to really start feeling them later tonight or tomorrow, when I'm on the road back to Florida and don't have anything else to think about."

Andrea's gaze narrowed slightly. "You drove here?"

"Yup. Thought I might need my car and I don't want to go through the anti-terror hoops and barrels at airports."

She seemed to consider matters -- particularly the matter in the middle of Cade that was stiffly pointing at her by that time -- for a few moments, then she said, "We could stay here another night or two. I'd rather not take you home with me because the neighbors... well, I'd just rather not take a man home with me."

Shrugging, Cade said, "Yeah, here's good. Or I could drive halfway back and get a motel room, then finish the drive Tuesday. That will get the car and me home and still give us plenty of time to work on enhancing my conversion."

"Why use euphemisms?" Andrea asked irritably.

Cade stopped in mid sip and looked at her as he said, "I didn't. Isn't enhancing my conversion the reason she called you in on this? You don't know me from Adam, so..."

"Yes," snapped Andrea. "Sure. You're right. That's why she called me." Striding to the desk chair and sitting down, she continued, "But it isn't the only reason I'm here now."

She leaned to reach in the fridge and took out a soft drink, opened it, and eyed Cade as she sipped for a moment before speaking again.

"You see, Cade, I like having sex. I mean, I *really* like it. Finding ways to get enough of it is a problem, because none of the converted men are near enough to just drop by when I'm horny and unconverted men are a waste of time. My women friends do more for me than unconverted men."

"Ah..." said Cade with a nod. "Okay. Gotcha."

"No, not yet, you don't. When Mandi told me that you'd -- achieved conversion -- and all on your own merits, as it were -- I was instantly interested; interested enough to take a week off and take over supervising your conversion for that reason alone. Then I met you and you gave me reasons to like you immediately. That doesn't happen all that often, either."

"Um. Andrea, I still don't quite understand what happened in that shower. How did I get converted? I mean, I realize it had to be from nibbling on Mandi, but... then what? How?"

"She didn't tell you?"

"I'm asking, aren't I?"

Grinning, Andrea sipped her drink and simply gazed at Cade for some moments, then asked, "You really brought her off all by yourself? No... *'help'*... from her?"

Tiring of the delay in receiving a useful answer as well as being the only naked person in the room, Cade said, "Yeah. All by myself. It's Standard Operating Procedure, ma'am: get 'em all wet and wound up and then lick 'em 'till they holler '*stop, please stop, I've had enough!*'"

For a moment Andrea's face was somewhat stern, then her small smile became a small grin and she snickered. The snicker became a giggle, then an outright laugh.

"I'll bet that last part can take a while sometimes."

"Yeah," said Cade. He shrugged. "Some women never seem to wind down. Can't tell you how many times I've damned near sprained my tongue trying to get to a woman's very last one."

Laughing again, Andrea said, "Tenacity. I like that."

"Great. If you aren't going to tell me what happened or at least get as naked as I am any time soon, I think I'll head for a hot shower."

"A shower might help those bruises. I'm getting to the answer, Ed."

"So what happened to me?"

"You triggered the release of a retrovirus. All women like Mandi have a small special gland that produces the stuff."

"Converted women, too?"

"Yes. We develop the same gland."

"So when I nibble you off I'll get another dose. What then?"

Shaking her head, Andrea said, "Nothing then. You've already been... dosed, as you called it."

"Then why will having sex make the conversion better?"

"Energy, Ed. Sex seems to help a converttee soak up energy and makes the process better somehow. A converttee who just sits on his ass during the first week will end up with maybe half the ability of one who screws his way -- or her way, of course -- through that crucial first week."

Cade decided that he'd waited long enough for her to join him in nakedness and said, "Thanks for the info." He thumbed toward the bathroom and added, "See you in a while, unless you want to come get wet with me."

Setting her drink can on the desk, Andrea smilingly said, "Sounds good. I'll be right there," and took off her jacket to hang it on the chair. Her skirt came next, then her blouse, then her half-slip and stockings, then her earrings and watch.

"You women sure do wear a lot of stuff," said Cade.

Mandi stood on the roof and watched Andrea poke Cade's bruises as she asked if her activity hurt.

*'They seem to be getting along fairly well,'* she thought.

Leaving them to their own devices, she lifted upward at barely subsonic speed until she reached fifty thousand feet, then she poured on the coal. A scant few minutes later she backed her speed down to subsonic again for her arrival in Las Vegas and had a good look around the city as she landed.

*'Well, nothing seems to be missing or broken,'* she thought as she landed on the roof of a friend's office building and changed into the dress she'd been wearing in Atlanta.

A woman without a purse doesn't look out of place in an office building. People tend to assume she works there and is just out of her office for a few minutes.

Mandi strode to the elevators, rode it five floors down to Lew "Jackie" Jackson's office, and waved as she entered.

"Mandi!" said Jackie. "You're back!" then he muttered, "Not to mention your *front*..."

Grinning as she sighed at the remark, Mandi said, "I heard that. Been watching old Groucho Marx reruns again?"

"Are there any other kind? The guy hasn't been on TV for quite a while, y'know. How was Atlanta?"

Reaching into the fridge, she said, "It's still there."

"All because of you, according to WNN."

"Oh, there were a few others involved."

"They didn't show anyone else hauling cars into the sky. Hey, some guy called me about setting up a Mandi Steele look alike contest. Was that your idea?"

"No, but it worked in Atlanta. You'll meet the guy who thought it up in a week or two. He's busy converting, and I'm going to call him out here to help with fixing up our new digs."

"Converting, huh?" He shook his head. "Shoulda known. Let you run off to Atlanta and you meet some young cutie and..."

Sighing again, Mandi said flatly, "He's fifty-three, Jackie."

Shrugging, Jackie continued, "Okay, then, some old cutie. How many is this one? Six?"

"Only five. Don't try to make me sound easy, you putz." She sipped her drink and said, "Anyway, if he doesn't develop flight, I'll fly him out here and we'll get things started."

Indicating the 'in' basket on his desk, she asked, "Any messages for me in that pile?"

"Oh, all of 'em. Of course. Nobody ever calls for me."

"You poor thing. But if I recall correctly, they aren't supposed to call for you."

"Still... It'd be nice, just once in a while, y'know?"

Parking her butt on the edge of the desk, Mandi began pawing through the pile of pink 'While You Were Out' slips and said, "Pooor Baaaby. Being my secretary isn't enough for you anymore, huh? Don't I pay you enough?"

The phone rang and he answered it, then held it out to her as he said, "John again. I'll see you later, Mandi. It's closing time and I'm shooting league tonight."

Nodding, she said, "Thanks, Jackie. Have a good night."

Grabbing his coat as he headed for the door, he grinningly said, "Always do."

Perching the phone on her shoulder as she rifled through the messages, Mandi said, "Hi, John."

"Hi, Mandi. Alan's in charge of the Mandi contests now. You'll be hearing from him soon."

"Already have, John. Thanks."

"You talked to Cade?"

"I did, and he's in Andrea's hands until the conversion is finished."

"That woman can handle him, Mandi. Cade's a sucker for eyes like hers."

"I saw how you looked at her, John." She snickered and added, "Sucker."

Laughing, John said, "Yeah, all right, she got me, too. Any hitches or glitches?"

"A few, but I think they'll work out. Unless you need him for something, I'm going to bring him out here to work on the base in a couple of weeks."

"You know us. We don't always know if we'll need somebody 'till we need him. Or her. Thanks again. Oh, and I covered your butt about those melted video tapes. The report now says a machine malfunctioned and overheated."

"You didn't have to do that, John. Those tapes were a message to some people."

"Oh, your message got through, Mandi. I just fixed the official report so there couldn't be any official flak later. Is there anything else?"

"You called *me*, John. That's my line."

"Ah, so it is. Well, there's nothing at this end of things. Keep me posted about Cade, will you?"

"Will do."

"Thanks, Mandi. Later. Bye."

Before she could say 'you're welcome', he'd disconnected.

Mandi tossed the handful of messages back in the basket and left the office to return to the roof. A quick change later she was in uniform and lifting into the sky again for a cruise around the city before going home for the evening.

At the intersection of Las Vegas Boulevard and Lake Mead Road she dropped out of the sky to push a stalled truck to the side of the road and half an hour later she helped a Cessna land in one piece when the pilot passed out.

When nothing else seemed to require her attention by one in the morning, Mandi headed home to see if a certain someone she was rather fond of had finished tweaking her website.

-- End, "An Encounter in Atlanta" --

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