

Kate Johnson



The
Twelve
Lies of
Christmas

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Kate Johnson

Dedication

To Sugar and Spike, the best present I ever had.

Prologue

“So what the hell are you going to do when you retire, old man?”

I ignored the “old man” from my partner, who was less than ten years my junior, and said, “I dunno. I figure something peaceful.”

“Like Cornwell? He teaches PE now.”

I stared in horror. “What, are you kidding? I meant, like...alligator wrestling or something. Shark diving. You know, something *tranquil*.”

Luke laughed. “Gotcha. How about lion taming?”

“It’s on my list.”

I stirred my coffee and stared out through the misted window across the square. It was December, and bloody freezing. Dirty, iced-over chunks of snow piled up in corners, against lamp posts and the base of the statue in the center. Some dude on a horse. I didn’t know who. No doubt Luke would and be able to detail the dude’s entire life history, too.

The square was swamped in mist, the freezing kind that turned your eyelashes into icicles after ten minutes outside. Too cold for more snow, the freezing fog just descended and shrouded the whole city in misery.

“I bloody hate Russia,” I grumped.

“Don’t we all?”

I gave him a sideways look. A spy from the old school, Luke was the one who hobnobbed with the big men, the arms dealers and politicians. He looked

perfectly at home in a designer tuxedo, mixed a delicious martini, spoke Russian flawlessly and was a terrific ballroom dancer.

Whereas I look perfectly at home with an AK-47 slung over my shoulder, tend to get assigned as someone's bodyguard, have a terrible accent whatever language I speak—English included—resemble a bouncer whenever I wear a suit and have spent most of my career trying to avoid killing people.

“Anyway, you're going home soon,” Luke lit up a French cigarette.

“Those things'll kill you,” I said mildly, and mostly from habit.

“Well, they can take a number.”

I wafted the smoke away and toyed with my coffee cup. Home. That wasn't to say the mission was over, but being back in a country where it was possible to take a piss outside without getting a frostbitten penis would be a definite plus.

“Looking forward to it?” Luke asked.

“Home, or retirement?”

“Both.”

“Sure,” I said, but I was only telling the truth about one of them.

Chapter One

My name is Nate Kelly.

For years, I was a spy with a tiny British government agency known as SO17. But only until the end of this mission. After that I'd be free. Wonderful freedom—no more lies and plots and politics and guns. I'm tired of getting shot at.

God knows what I'd actually do with my time, though. Maybe I'd take up painting, or, er, read the classics or something. I figured *War and Peace* should carry me well into my fifties.

Right now, I was looking forward to going home. Oh God, was I. For four months, I'd been out in this godforsaken concrete jungle, perpetually cold, pissed off and thoroughly sick of pretending to be something I wasn't. Paddy Murphy, thick-as-shit Irishman, vague allusions to IRA thuggery, great bodyguard and all-round musclehead, just needs orders. Of course, I was here to find out what I could about Anatole Simonov, art collector, football enthusiast and arms dealer.

It wasn't our usual field of operations. SO17 had been set up to protect and observe London's third airport, Stansted, which is a big gateway to northern Ireland. Time was, the IRA posed a continuous threat, and SO17 was a pretty big operation.

Now, the secret services have other things on their minds. Ceasefires have held, and the terrorist threat is coming from a different direction. And while

we were still supposed to be watching the airport, wasn't not uncommon for SO17 operatives, like me and my partner, to be lent to other government agencies.

Which was how I ended up in Russia. Anatole had been on the watch-list for a while, and Luke, with his special skills of being upper class and indefinably brilliant at everything, was sent to infiltrate his organization at a higher level. But since Anatole didn't tell all his people everything or take them everywhere with him, when word got out that he was planning a jaunt to merry old England, I got sent in to accompany him.

Rumor, a little while back, was that Anatole wanted to buy an English football team. My people didn't think this was a very good idea. Especially since the team he wanted to buy was currently owned by an East End dun-good-boy called Darren King, "King Daz" to the tabloids, one of those irritating self-made men who worked his way up from rags to unbelievable riches, mostly through his mobster connections and plenty of illegal activity.

Scotland Yard had been after Daz King for a while. They just needed an excuse. My role? To provide that excuse. And to keep Anatole-the-arsehole out of my goddamned country.

Unfortunately, that was exactly where we were headed.

“London calling, eh, Paddy?” Anatole clapped me on the back as the plane bumped to a landing. “Is good to be back home?”

“Ah, sir, sure it’s not my home,” I said, upping the Irish a notch or two. Why, I wasn’t sure, since neither Anatole nor his right-hand man, Yuri, had any clue what an Irish accent sounded like. Still, the more *t’be sure* I put into it, the thicker they thought I was, the more they let slip when they talked in Russian.

Paddy didn’t understand Russian. But I did.

London was cold, but a normal, bearable sort of cold, not the blood-freezing chill of St. Petersburg, where after fifteen minutes your jaw was locked and your breath had frozen in your throat. A heavy drizzle fogged the tarmac as we stepped off the private plane, and I had to physically restrain myself from crying with joy. All right, crying at drizzle is a little extreme, but come on. It really had been ages since I’d been home.

And now, please God, I was home for good.

Anatole laughed and tossed his fur hat into the air. It skittered away under the plane and I winced, because my basic airfield training—not to mention Luke’s snooty RAF know-how—told me that any foreign objects or debris on the tarmac could destroy a plane’s engine or cause a crash on take-off.

But I kept quiet and plastered a grin on my face. The grin of the stupid. Paddy’s grin.

London was decked out for Christmas, dressed up like a little girl going to a party. Such a different city from St. Petersburg. It felt like a party. People looked happy. Lights twinkled in every shop window, festooned every house, stretched across every street. It was madly tacky, but for once I didn't mind. Christmas cheer and all that. Every time I saw a street sign in English I smiled. Well, until I saw the ones which said "road closed" and had to remember my London geography in a pinch.

"Is very bright, no? London is town with lot of money," Anatole cheered as I made a mildly illegal U-turn.

"Ah sir, does my heart good, it does, to see all the Christmas cheer."

Yuri, whose English was much better than his boss's, said with a sneer, "It's capitalist extravagance. They waste their money on it."

"Is West," Anatole said. "They wasting money on everything!"

I pulled up outside the brashly expensive private members club where we'd arranged to meet Darren King. A valet came forward to take the car from me, but I declined. That car contained some pretty heavy hardware, and I didn't want him running to the police about it.

Inside the club, which had furnishings so up-to-the-minute they were almost unusable, we were shown to a private room where Darren King was drinking vodka and watching his team on a huge

flat-screen TV. With him was a guy who had “accountant” written all over him and a woman wearing a few very expensive-looking inches of pink satin, a pair of high heels, a lot of jewelry and not much else.

One of Daz’s cheap women, I figured, although she sure wasn’t dressed cheaply.

Her gaze flickered over the three of us, cool, assessing. Okay, she was hot, but I wondered how much of that was grooming, and how glam she’d be in ratty old pajamas with bunny slippers on her feet.

The thought made me smile, and my smile made her frown.

She had a pretty sexy frown.

“Anatole, me ol’ mucker,” Daz leapt to his feet and gave the Russian an exuberant handshake. “How was yer flight?”

“My flight, it was good,” Anatole said. He glanced nervously at Yuri, then added to Daz, “My English, is not so good. Yuri translate for me.”

“Right, right, smashin’.” Daz’s gaze flickered over me, dismissed me as hired muscle and moved on to Yuri.

“Lemme introduce Peter, he’s me accountant, top geezer—”

And a crook, I thought, watching Peter’s nervous eyes. A pretty useless crook, but a crook nonetheless.

“And this is the lovely Natalya, treat for you, Anatole, she’s Russian too.”

He said it “Natawya”. *Ugh. It’s called an L, idiot,*

learn how to pronounce it. And your H's too, while you're at it. And Th's, and—

“Told you I'd got a surprise for you, eh, Natalya?” Daz nudged her forward.

Anatole's face lit up, especially when he took in the length of leg and mountains of cleavage Natalya was displaying.

But Natalya, interestingly, looked like a deer trapped in headlights. Only for a moment or two, but it was there. Maybe she'd heard the rumors about Anatole, I thought, appreciating in a purely objective way how her long, glossy dark hair swung over her shoulders and framed her exquisitely made-up eyes.

Then Anatole grabbed her shoulders and kissed her soundly on both cheeks and cried, in Russian, “How wonderful to see another of my countrymen! Where in Russia are you from? How long have you been in London? We must drink to this. Vodka!”

Something about her smile bothered me. Clearly, no one else in the room had noticed, but her lips looked slightly...fixed to me. As if she'd read about smiles, but never actually tried one out before.

“It's very nice to meet you,” she said, and I nearly choked, because she was speaking English with the sort of cod-Russian accent my nan's whiskey-sodden bridge friends would attempt when her fat white cat leapt on their lap.

I nearly expected her to say, “So, Mister Bond,” but of course she didn't. She just smiled that slightly inaccurate smile at everyone and announced, in that

accent of hers, that she was going to the bar for the vodka.

“Nah, nah, love, you sit down, someone’ll bring it,” Daz said.

“I don’t trust the waiters here,” she said haughtily. “They will spit in our drinks.”

So saying, she stalked off on her vertiginous heels, and all four of us watched her go.

Yep, she was gorgeous, but about as authentic as Pamela Anderson’s breasts.

* * *

Somehow, “Natalya” managed to avoid conversation in Russian for the rest of the meeting. Whenever Yuri or Anatole asked her something in that language, she responded that she preferred to talk in English. Her speech was peppered with little Russian-isms, a *da* here, a *niet* there, which were nice touches, and she was a fantastic actress who never once let slip that she barely understood a word the Russians were saying.

But, well. Basically, I’m a suspicious bastard. It’s my job to be a suspicious bastard. And I was suspicious of her.

“Natalya here runs a charity, don’t you, babe?” Daz rattled her golden-tanned shoulders, and she gave every impression that she didn’t mind.

“*Da*. Darren is giving half the money from the football sale to my charity.”

Hello.

“What kind of charity?” asked Anatole.

I bet it’s the kind that involves guns.

“It’s called WarDogs,” Natalya said in her brisk accent. “We rescue and re-home animals who have been left homeless by wars.”

The information was relayed to Anatole via Yuri, who looked put-out that he was having to mess around with this charade when the girl spoke perfectly good Russian.

“Ah,” Anatole said. “Is good charity. Is good for my friend Daz King, for...” He trailed off and asked Yuri how to say it was good for Daz’s image.

Daz, of course, agreed with him, and there was a long, tedious session of one-upmanship where they both tried to out-do the other with their public do-gooding.

I ran my eyes over Natalya and smiled. She blinked at me slowly, then dismissed me from her sphere of attention. Fine, okay. I knew my place. But I also knew when someone’s faking it.

Anatole and Daz sure were. It was nauseating, actually. Both of these men were nasty pieces of work who treated human beings like belongings and thought nothing of gunning them down for minor offences. And yet both of them had cultivated images of philanthropy, giving money to charities and building wings on hospitals and being photographed with small fluffy animals.

My dislike of Anatole had rocketed, irrationally,

when I saw him kick one of those small fluffy animals. It probably had something to do with my nan's aforementioned white cat, who was a whole lot nicer to me than she ever was.

But don't get me started on my childhood. Really.

Eventually Yuri reminded Anatole of his other appointments, which as I understood it, consisted of checking into his swanky hotel, buying some expensive cars, looking at property in Mayfair that cost more than some small European countries and having his hair cut by someone whose hourly wage exceeded my yearly one.

"Yeah yeah, right," Daz said, which seemed to be his equivalent of a conversational segue. "Party on Saturday, yeah? You coming?"

"Of course," Anatole replied. "I will—how you say?—bring a bottle, yes?" He laughed loudly at this hilarious joke, and Daz joined in. So did Peter and Yuri, although I noticed Natalya declined.

I made a mental note to get myself into that party, not only to dig around Daz's personal effects, but to find out what the hell was going on with the delightful Natalya.

Chapter Two

Saturday dawned, as gray and drizzly as any festive day in England. After a day of meeting the football team's manager, coach and star players, we set off in Anatole's newest acquisition, a fully pimped-out BMW X5, for deepest darkest Cheshire and Daz's country seat.

It's a truth universally acknowledged that the average British footballer has the taste and refinement of a dead gnat. Daz, who owned an entire team of such aesthetes, was no exception. The courtyard of his large, ivy-covered house held a statue of three women with enormous breasts, pouring water all over each other and leering. They were surrounded by so many supercars it looked as if they'd been breeding. Whole families of Ferraris clustered together, balefully eyeing up the contingent from Lamborghini.

Inside, the house was the usual footballer's insult to all that is tasteful and elegant. The requisite shag pile carpet squigged underfoot, and I felt absolutely sure that somewhere there would be a library full of unread leather-bound classics.

"Anatole, mate," Daz greeted him enthusiastically. His pupils looked a little uneven. So it was one of those parties, eh?

His eyes wandered over me and he said dismissively, "Servants are downstairs, mate."

Yuri gave me a superior look. I doffed an

imaginary cap and ambled towards the kitchen to find myself some beer.

I wasn't planning on drinking the beer. But it was a hell of a useful prop.

A week or two before, an SO17 operative, posing as a glossy gossip mag journalist, had obtained access to Daz's home and security systems. She'd provided me with a floor plan and computer codes for the system which ran everything from his automatic lights to the burglar alarm.

Beer in hand, I passed a couple of rooms where tattooed premier league footballers danced, shirtless, on tables while their painfully thin, bleached'n'tanned, over-manicured, over-exposed wives and girlfriends lolled about drinking Cristal and gossiping about each others' boob jobs. Daz's office was on the upper floor, which was officially off limits to the party-goers. This rule was enforced by a door hidden by the turn of the grand staircase, which could only be opened by means of a swipe card and keypad code.

But I wasn't headed there yet. Security cameras whirred in every room, and it occurred to me that if I could sell their contents to the tabloids, I could make a fortune.

I made my way into the unforgiving night, breath making clouds in the cold, damp air, to the guards hut at the entrance to the grounds. There were a couple of men on duty there, checking invitations and watching C-list celebs making fools of

themselves on the CCTV. In the corner, a tacky soap opera was airing yet another Christmas special on a TV so small and tinny it was almost unwatchable.

I clinked together a couple of beer bottles. They were unopened, but the sleeping pills in my pocket could be added in the blink of an eye.

“Hey, lads, thought you might fancy a...” I pushed the door open and trailed off. Both men were fast asleep, lolling in their chairs, snoring loudly. One of them was covered in tea from the mug he’d dropped on the floor.

Someone had already been here.

Shit.

I sniffed at the spilt tea, but it didn’t yield any special secrets to me. There was a sweet smell in the air, but it wasn’t anything that had been added to the guards’ drinks. Setting down my bottles, I glanced around for a security camera and saw one pointed at the computer bank.

Well, that was helpful.

Tapping into the system, I started to check the records of the guards hut camera, only to discover that it hadn’t recorded anything for the last half hour...and that the preceding ten minutes had been wiped from the system’s memory.

When I checked the rest of the circuit, I found that while every camera was displaying an image on the screens, none of it was being recorded.

Curiouser and curiouser. I logged into the system memory to see who had switched off the recording.

And discovered that it had been done by Daz King.

Or, at least, someone with Daz's security code.

I sniffed the air again. That sweet smell was a little bit like perfume. Actually, a lot like perfume.

Well, well, I thought. Looks like we have a femme fatale on our hands here, Nate. And three guesses as to who it is.

* * *

Luke thinks it's hilarious that I named my gun, but I know for a fact that he talks to his. Anyway, I like my gun. It's been very helpful to me in tight spots. It's called Belinda, after the girl who helped me pass English when I was sixteen.

I had Belinda—the gun, this time, not the girl—in a brace under my jacket, and my hand hovered ready to draw her as I made my way to Daz's study. But the room appeared empty, the only light coming from the computer screen which made everything look green and rather spooky.

But being a big strong scary spy, I wasn't scared. Much.

A quick sweep of the room revealed no one hiding in a darkened corner, so I set down my gun and checked out the computer. There were no programs open, so if anyone had been here before me, I didn't know what they were looking for. And I wasn't sure I had the luxury of hanging around to find out.

I stuck a USB stick into the computer and started downloading files. I didn't check their contents, just

got everything from the hard drive, as well as an internet cache and list of bookmarks. I could check them all out later. It'd be easier if I could just lift the whole hard drive out, but then Daz might get suspicious.

Drumming my fingers on my thigh—so as not to create any noise that might alert anyone else to my presence, or hide theirs from me—I watched the transfer bar creep up, little by little.

And became aware of a noise.

At first I thought it was heavy breathing and made a face of disgust. No doubt Daz had lured some young lovely upstairs for a quickie. Hopefully, they'd be heading to one of the bedrooms, and not in here.

But I made ready to snatch the USB stick free and leap into the shadows, just in case.

Then I realized the noise was not coming from outside the room. It was coming—I listened carefully—from a small cupboard on the far side.

A cupboard I'd dismissed when I entered as far too small for a person to hide in.

Stupid Nate. I picked up Belinda and crept as silently as possible towards the cupboard, praying that the floor wouldn't squeak. It didn't, and I made it over there without making a sound—at least, not one that could be picked up over the wheezing coming from the cupboard.

It sounded to me like someone hyperventilating. Maybe having an asthma attack. Maybe suffocating. There was a strong possibility that Daz had locked

someone in there on purpose to die. It was a horrible idea, but then he was a horrible man.

I took a breath, counted to three and yanked open the door with one hand while aiming my gun with the other.

And stared.

“Huh,” I said.

Chapter Three

Huddled inside the tiny cupboard, folded up like origami, was Natalya. She was shaking and hyperventilating, her cheeks stained with mascara, her face gleaming with an unhealthy pallor. When she saw me, instead of making excuses or trying to run or hurt me, she threw her arms around my legs and clung to me.

Interesting.

“Uh, Natalya?” I said, and she shuddered and looked up at me.

“I need air,” she whispered, voice trembling. “I need...”

“Yes?”

“I need to get out,” she said and made a lurch towards the window.

I followed, a little uncertain, gun still in hand, but all she really seemed to want to do was gulp in some fresh air. Being December, of course, said air was bloody freezing, and she shivered attractively as she huddled by the window.

“Claustrophobia?” I asked, watching her take deep breaths. The fact that this entailed watching her breasts was of little to no consequence to a professional like me.

She nodded, shuddering.

“In that case,” I said, “I can’t help wondering what you were doing inside a cupboard.”

Natalya rubbed her arms, which were prickled

with gooseflesh. They were bare, like a lot of the rest of her. Her dress was backless, sideless, and very nearly frontless, too. It was long, but there were high slits up each side.

She had great legs. I noticed that purely objectively, in case I should, you know, have to make a description.

“I was hiding,” she whispered, pulling the window shut. “I thought you were Daz.”

“I’m not,” I said, and she gave me an up-and-down so swift I nearly missed it.

“No,” she said softly, “you’re not.”

I didn’t miss the look she gave me this time, however.

When I was a kid, my nan, as I think I mentioned, had a huge white cat. He used to stalk local vermin, mice and birds and things, and when he spotted something he wanted to kill, he’d crouch down low and his eyes would fix on the target, and the most calculating expression would come over his face.

I was seeing that same expression on Natalya’s makeup-streaked face.

“Can I get you a glass of water?” I said abruptly.

“I’m feeling much better,” she said, sliding sinuously to her feet.

“Yeah. But hydration is important,” I said. “I think there’s a bedroom next door. I’m sure it has a bathroom and I can get you some water. Maybe you should lie down.”

She gave me a slow, sensuous blink. “That sounds

like a good idea,” she purred.

Just like the cat.

Her hand slipped into mine and I couldn't help but notice how clammy her palm was. She'd recovered quickly, but it was my guess that the claustrophobia was real.

There was indeed a bedroom next door, and it did indeed have a bathroom attached. Natalya arranged herself beautifully on the edge of the bed, toeing off her shoes and rubbing one bare foot against her calf.

I wondered how far she'd go with this. Seduce me all the way, or just tie me to the bed and leave me there?

I wasn't about to find out. More's the pity. I filled a toothbrush mug with water, added one of the pills I'd earmarked for the guards and handed it over. “Bottoms up,” I said cheerfully and watched her drink.

If she'd knocked out the guards, chances are she'd been planning the same for me. Ah well, good job I wasn't going to let her seduce me.

Dammit.

* * *

Two nights before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring. Mostly because I'd drugged them all. Having slipped a little something into Anatole and Yuri's drinks, I rolled my eyes at the rest of the partygoers and lugged the two Russians

out to the X5. Cuffing them in the back seat, I carefully placed Natalya in the front seat, and we set off back to London.

It was kind of creepy, actually. I wondered idly if Anatole and Yuri had been partaking of the other substances on offer. If so, my sleeping pills might kill them. Yeah, and see me cry about it.

Anatole had rented a swanky place in Belgravia, so I dropped him and Yuri off there, secure in the knowledge they'd be out like lights until at least midday. Nevertheless, I set up surveillance on them while they slept, so if anything happened, I'd know about it.

Then I got back in the X5, checked on Natalya and drove to Hammersmith.

It's a funny thing about London. Geographically speaking, Belgravia and Hammersmith are not that far away from each other. Actually, the London boroughs are right next door to each other. But whereas the pleasant streets of Belgravia are lined with Porsches and Maseratis and every house costs more than the annual budgets of many large multinational corporations, cross into Hammersmith and you'll find it's usually on fire.

Has character, though. And apparently it's "up-and-coming", which means that at least the fires get put out.

I lived there, at least when I wasn't off saving the world and whatnot. I'd been renting nearer to SO17's base, which was a couple of hours away, but the

Hammersmith flat was all my own.

I unlocked the door, carried Natalya inside and tried to figure out what to do with her. Clearly, she was guilty of something, which meant I didn't feel too bad about handcuffing her to the bed. But on the other hand...

I only had one bedroom, and I wanted to sleep, too.

I looked at the delicious handful in my arms. Well, dammit, I couldn't very well handcuff her to the sofa, could I?

Scowling, I stomped into the bedroom, dumped her in my bed and cuffed her hands to the headboard. She could damn well stay in her clothes. The last thing I needed was a naked woman in my bed.

Well, actually, it wasn't the last thing I needed at all. It was probably the first. Dammit.

I lay on the sofa for the rest of the night, and didn't sleep a bit.

* * *

By the time morning arrived, a couple of theories had formed in my head. Well, what with the scantily-clad temptress next door, there wasn't much else to do. At least, nothing I'd be prepared to tell you about.

First up, my theory was that she was a spy, same as me. Well, clearly not same as me, because surely she'd have had better intelligence and would have

known that Anatole was going to figure out her lack of Russian linguistic skills. Besides, who was she working for? Could be American, I supposed, but then I still didn't buy the terrible accent.

Unless...maybe the bad accent was a bluff to put me off. Maybe it was all some elaborate scheme—a double bluff. Maybe she spoke perfect Russian, but was trying to kid Anatole that she didn't. Maybe, like me, she was pleading ignorance.

But that was a little risky, since men like Anatole and Daz weren't known for their sense of humor. They wouldn't find it amusing that she was pretending.

So, back to square one and the assumption that she really didn't speak Russian. That she was pretending, because...what? She'd seen too many Bond films and thought it sounded glamorous? Granted, there were certain types of men who found that sort of thing attractive. There was definitely a market for mail-order brides from the Eastern bloc.

But why was she pretending in the first place? And why was she in Daz's office? How had she got his computer codes?

What was she doing?

Okay, so I lied about having a couple of theories. I decided early on that she couldn't be a spy, which left me with thief and journalist, basically. Since Daz was apparently giving her money for her charity, I figured—

Wait. Her charity.

I booted up my computer and searched for WarDogs and got everything from canine handlers to sports teams. Searching that in conjunction with Natalya's name still didn't get me anything useful. I didn't even have a surname to go on.

I sighed, got some coffee and settled in for a long, long search. About seven a.m., the old lady over the road plugged in her musical Christmas lights, which sure as hell didn't fill me with goodwill towards her. Bingle bong, bingle bong, bingle bingle bong... Bah.

Humbug.

Why don't old people sleep? My nan used to get up about three in the morning sometimes. Drove me mad. Of course, I get up at three in the morning now, but at least I have reason. She used to just stomp around the place, swearing.

I narrowed my eyes. Speaking of swearing, was I becoming hallucinatory from lack of sleep, or was someone inventing new curse words in my bedroom?

I grabbed the pot of coffee, nudged open the door and found my lady twisted up in the covers, showing quite a lot of thigh.

She glowered at me.

"Good morning," I said, leaning in the doorway.

"Is it?"

She looked like hell. Last night's makeup was smudged all over her face, her hair was a train-wreck and her lovely dress was creased and crumpled. Above her head, her hands were still chained to my bedstead. The stretch made her back arch, her

breasts rise.

She looked like hell, but an attractive hell.

She licked her dry lips. “You want some water?” I asked, and she gave me a filthy look.

I smiled.

“Come on, I had to,” I said.

“Did you.” It wasn’t a question. Her words were like slabs of granite. But I’d been hit with harder things.

“What were you doing in that cupboard?” I asked.

“Playing hide and seek. I was about to win.”

“Did you switch off Daz’s security cameras?”

“Someone switched them off?” She widened her eyes in faux innocence.

I ignored it. “Someone did.”

“Is that so.” Once again, it wasn’t a question.

“Are you really claustrophobic?”

“Yes.” A flicker of—fear? revulsion? terror?—crossed her face, then it was gone, and her mask of disdain was back.

“So why were you in the cupboard?”

She gave me a narrow-eyed look. “I don’t like you,” she said.

“Feeling’s mutual, sweetheart,” I replied, which was a lie, because I was starting to like her a lot. I didn’t trust her an inch, but I liked her. I guess that says something about me, huh?

She stretched, which was distracting, and rattled the handcuffs. “Are you going to leave me like this all day?”

“I might. View’s pretty good from where I am.”

“Pervert.”

I grinned.

“Come on,” she said. “My arms are bloody killing me.”

I considered this. Right now, I’d no idea how dangerous she might be. Of course, in that dress it’d be pretty hard to conceal any weaponry, and I’d removed her shoes and jewelry last night.

“Okay,” I said. “But not without Belinda.”

She frowned, watched me leave the room. I ran a glass of water for her, grabbed an extra coffee mug and my gun brace and went back in.

“So where’s this Belinda?” she asked as I knelt on the edge of the bed and unfastened the cuffs.

I tapped the SIG-Sauer hanging under my arm. “Right here.”

She gave a choked laugh. “You’re kidding me.”

I gave her a level look. “I never kid when I’m armed.”

She swallowed, and I smiled internally. Then I saw the genuine fear in her eyes and reassessed.

The gun scared her. Really scared her. I’ve seen fear before, and she wasn’t pretending. Which meant she wasn’t a spook—probably wasn’t even a cop. Your average beat copper in Britain doesn’t carry a gun, and neither does your average citizen. We don’t have the right to bear arms. Well, generally speaking. I personally had lots of rights.

Daz King, on the other hand, didn’t. This didn’t

stop him, however, from bearing lots and lots of arms and handing them out like candy to his friends and followers. It was one of the reasons we were so keen to keep Anatole out of the picture. Any one who supplied Daz with more weaponry was to be discouraged almost as strongly as Daz himself.

The girl on the bed in front of me had seen firearms up close and personal. And seen what they could do. She wouldn't be so scared otherwise.

I kicked some clothes off a chair and pulled it up to the bed.

“What's your name?”

She never took her eyes off my gun. “Natalya.”

“Your real name.”

“I—”

“If you're really called Natalya then my name is Dmitri,” I said.

“But—”

“And didn't you used to have an accent?”

Her mouth opened. Then it closed.

“Crap,” she said.

Chapter Four

I let her go into the bathroom to wash her face, because her eyelids were starting to stick together when she blinked. My bed was a mess from all that makeup, but that was the least of my worries.

I didn't expect she'd try to escape from the bathroom, mostly because the window was the size of a postage stamp, and I'd have been surprised if she tried to commit suicide with anything she found in there. About the most hazardous thing she could do would be to swallow a bottle of shampoo; I kept medication in the kitchen, and my razor was hardly cutthroat.

She emerged, cleaner, fresher, younger without all that crap on her face. Still pretty, in fact maybe more so.

"You know what would be really nice?" she said. "Some real clothes."

I gave her a slow once-over, which she didn't seem to appreciate, then handed her a sweater. She tugged it on, then curled back up on the bed and pulled the duvet over her legs. She looked small and adorable.

"Go on, then," she said, and I sat in the chair by the bed and regarded her.

"Let's start with your name," I said, and she sighed.

"Let's start with who you are before I tell you

anything.”

“I’m the one with the gun here,” I reminded her.

“Yes, which is why I want to know who you are.” She paused, and this time she looked me over. “You’re not working for Daz.”

She sounded like she was convincing herself. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, you’re a lot more pleasant than anyone he knows.”

I smiled. “I thought you didn’t like me.”

“I don’t. But you’re...you’re not like him.”

I took that as a compliment.

“Are you a cop?”

“I work for the government,” I told her, which was true enough.

“Our government?” she asked, shrewdly.

“Yep. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Hah.” She gave Belinda a pointed look.

“I’m probably not going to hurt you,” I amended. “Look. I think you can help me, and I can help you too.”

“Oh yeah, you’ve already been a great help,” she said, folding her arms.

“I can protect you,” I said.

“I don’t need your protection,” she said, and I held my tongue. Her gaze fell to the duvet, and I could almost see the cogs turning in her head.

“It’s Daz, isn’t it?” she said, heavily. “He’s...you’re going to...”

“You already know he’s bad news,” I said quietly.

“Yes,” she nodded without hesitation, “he is.”

Her fingers pulled at the duvet cover. She still didn't look at me.

“When?” she asked.

“Soon,” I told her. “Very soon, if you help me out.”

She chewed her lip. I let her think about it; after all, she didn't know me from Adam, didn't know if I was lying to her or making shit up as I went along. Didn't know if I was going to kill her as soon as I had what I wanted. Didn't even know what I wanted.

“Okay,” she said eventually, and quite bravely, I thought. “What do you need?”

“First off, who are you?”

She picked at a nail. “I'm a con artist.”

“...oh,” I said, and she looked up, smiling for the first time.

She had a knockout smile, and weirdly enough, that revived me. Because a smile like that could only come from a con artist.

“Sam,” she said, holding out her hand. “Samantha Taylor.”

I took it. “Pleased to meet you,” I said.

“This is the part where you tell me your name,” she prompted, and I just smiled.

“Fine, *Paddy*,” she said, losing her smile.

“And you're conning Daz?” I said. She nodded. “Risky.”

“Well, duh.” She stared out the window at the sandwich shop across the street. “I didn't know...not

everything. I mean, I looked into him, of course I did. I'm not stupid. I knew he had some shady deals going on. That's why I decided on him."

"Er, because he was shady?"

"Of course." She looked at me like I was simple.

"You don't think conning someone...straighter... might be safer?"

"No," she said. "First rule, you can't con an honest man. For one thing, it's a shitty thing to do, and for another, they won't let it go. Someone like Daz? Well, he's got so many fingers in so many pies, he can't possibly go crying to the police about me."

"But he could give you concrete boots and introduce you to the bottom of the Thames."

"Well, yes. This was the part I didn't find out until... Well, it was too late." She shrugged. "Anyway, I'm not giving up now. Even if..."

She hesitated, and when nothing more seemed to be forthcoming, I prompted her. "Even if?"

"Even if I probably won't get much. The deal..." Again she hesitated, sighed, but this time she went on. "The deal was he'd give half the proceeds of the sale of the club to my charity."

"Which is, presumably, as fake as your accent."

She glared at me. "Yes, it's fake. Although I am giving some of the money to charity."

"How sweet of you."

She ignored that. "But the thing is... Well, you were getting stuff from his computer, didn't you find it out?"

I gestured for her to remind me. It was a gesture I'd perfected, more facial than anything. In a nutshell, it meant "I *could* know this, but basically I'm far too busy to remember it." Truth was, I'd spent so much time thinking about "Natalya" last night, I hadn't really even given Daz's files much thought. Christ, that was bad of me.

"Anatole isn't paying Daz in cash. He's handing over a couple of grand in stocks and investments, legitimate stuff, so Daz can pretend to the world it's all coming in installments."

"And how is it really coming?"

She was silent a while, then she nodded miserably at Belinda.

"Guns?"

"Of all shapes and sizes. Weapons and armaments—stuff like body armor and boatloads of ammunition. Armour-piercing bullets. Explosives. And Daz is setting up buyers in the Middle East."

Yeah. We knew that. Knew Daz's contacts went outside London. We also knew that these days, everyone was selling weapons to everyone. Daz probably wouldn't be such a problem, but the suspicion was...

"I think he's selling them to terrorist groups," Sam said in a small, frightened voice, and without really thinking about it, I went over to the bed and put my arms around her.

She shivered, then relaxed against me, soft and warm, her cheek against my neck. *I could get used to*

this, I thought, and then she brushed against Belinda and stiffened. Pulled back.

“Speaking of guns,” she said, and the moment was lost.

“I’m not a terrorist,” I said, firmly.

...a spray of bullets, a screamed order, blood spattering the street...

“I’m really not,” I repeated, perhaps a little more vehemently than I needed to.

Sam nodded, warily. “Who are you?”

“I...catch bad guys.”

“So you *are* a cop.”

“Not exactly. Look, Sam. I need to know anything else you can tell me.” When she hesitated, I said, “I can protect you. I swear it.”

“Can,” she said, “or will?”

“Will,” I said. “I promise.”

There was a silence. She was still very close, and I could feel the heat coming from her skin.

“I don’t trust you,” she said, and I thought, *I don’t blame you.*

* * *

Natalya—damn, I mean Sam—took a shower, and I jammed the USB stick into my computer and downloaded it all, sending it to the office, and to Luke, too. Idly, since she was spending so much bloody time in the shower, I Googled Samantha Taylor. I didn’t find anything—or rather, I found a million

some things.

Google was all decked out for Christmas. Today was Christmas Eve, I realized with a jolt. Damn, if I had any kind of life I'd have known that.

Next year, I promised myself. Next year, Christmas Eve will be a happy, cheerful day filled with last-minute decorations or shopping or whatever the hell it is people do the day before Christmas. Sing carols or whatever.

On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me...three pieces of info, two arms dealers and a con-artist in my shower.

Yeah. The original words worked better.

Sam emerged, wet hair brushing her shoulders, still in last night's dress.

"You can keep the sweater," I told her, because she was mighty distracting in that tiny scrap of fabric.

"Thanks," she said. "I was going to."

She asked me to call for a cab, but I wasn't falling for that. "I'll drive you," I said and ignored her protests. I needed to see where she lived. Needed to know.

She directed me to Mayfair, which I was pretty sure was a lie, but then she got a key from the tiny bag she'd been carrying last night and unlocked a door in a swanky townhouse.

I followed her in.

"I didn't invite you," she said.

"I know."

She glared at me, and I smiled back. I wasn't leaving until I was sure this was her place.

Inside was a communal hallway, where she collected her mail and sifted through it as she climbed a wide staircase, muttering, "Bill, bill, junk, bill... How do I get on these mailing lists?"

"Forgot to tick a box," I said.

She stopped at a door painted red and fitted a second key to the lock. "I swear, the other day I got a 'Save The Trees' leaflet in the mail, and I was like, 'How many trees were felled to print that, huh?'"

I smiled, so distracted that I almost—almost missed the large packet in her other hand.

It was addressed by hand, and the stamps were stuck on with tape.

"Ooh, someone likes me," she said as she pushed open the door, and I snatched the packet from her. "Hey!"

I ran my hands over it. Large, padded envelope, festive stickers on it. Uneven contents. Bumpy. Soft spots. Oil stains on the wrapping.

Postmarked three weeks ago.

Time seemed to crystallize for a moment. Then I recovered.

"How long has this been there?" I said.

"Why is that any of your business? And why are you still here?"

"Answer me, Sam," I said, pushing the door closed behind me so the neighbors wouldn't hear. "Was this here yesterday?"

“I don’t know, I went to Cheshire early—”

“Has it been here three weeks?” I demanded.

“Three—? No. Look, Paddy—whatever the hell your name is—”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, feeling under the envelope flap. Yeah. Wires...triggers... “You need to get out.”

“What?”

“Is this your flat?”

“No, it belongs to a friend. What, you think I could afford a place like this?”

“Do you have neighbors? Are there people in the other flats?”

“Yes, I think—”

“Get them out. *Now.*”

That same gun-shy fear flashed across her face, but she held steady. “Not until you explain—”

I waved the package at her. “This,” I said, “is a bomb. Triggered to go off when you open it.” I wasn’t a hundred percent sure, but ninety-nine was enough. “I don’t know how big the explosion will be. I don’t know how much of this building it’ll destroy. So I’d advise you to get everyone out. *Now.*”

Sam had gone pale. “Or,” she said, “we could just *not* open it.”

No. Whoever had sent this wanted Sam dead, and I was pretty sure I knew who that someone was. And that if he failed, he’d try again until he succeeded.

No.

“If this doesn’t kill you,” I said quietly,

“something else will. Now go. Get everyone out of this building. Tell them... Hell, tell them anything, but it has to be something that means you’ll be back inside. It’s very important they believe you’re inside when it goes off.” I checked around for cameras, anything that might be watching us. Nothing, and my automatic scan of the hallway had revealed nothing, too. Which meant there was a person out there, watching the place.

“Is there a back door?”

“Yes, but—”

“Good. Now go and talk to all your neighbors.”

“But what if they don’t answer?”

“Break down doors if you have to.”

“With what?”

I hesitated. “Okay, I’ll break down the doors,” I said. “But go now.”

She fled, and I stared at the package in my hand.

“Daz King,” I said, “I bloody hate you.”

Chapter Five

In the end, it wasn't a huge explosion. Sam, clever girl that she was, had told the only other residents of the building still in their homes—a young mother and a rather louche gentleman of means—that she had to fix the drains in her flat, which meant that the smell of sewage would be coming from all the sinks and toilets in the building. She advised them to go out, which they did, hurriedly. When I asked her if she'd checked the other flats, she said, "Yes, but don't ask me how."

I figured that meant she'd used a lock pick, and kept quiet.

The package wasn't big, probably not enough to do a lot of damage. We probably hadn't needed to evacuate the building, but I wasn't taking any chances.

"Any animals?"

"It's against the lease," she said, "but I checked anyway. There weren't any."

As soon as the young mother had strapped her baby into her Range Rover and driven off, Sam and I slipped out the back door and climbed a tree in the leafy shared garden. From here I had a view of her living room, and the trigger I'd rigged up.

The package was taped to the top of her CD player. Very carefully, I'd attached the envelope flap to the CD drawer.

“If this turns out to be mittens from my mother, I will laugh so hard,” Sam whispered.

“Me too,” I said and aimed the remote control at the window.

I pressed *eject*.

The bomb went off.

It set off car alarms all down the street as bits of plaster, glass and things flew out the broken windows of Sam’s friend’s flat. Not a bad explosion, bit of redecorating and it’d be all right, but if anyone had been standing near that CD player when the bomb went off, they’d have been the ones redecorating. In little pieces, all over the room.

As it happens, there was a bit of mess, gore and blood and things, courtesy of the meat I’d hurriedly defrosted in the microwave and put on top of the package.

I called the fire brigade as we ran. By the time they arrived, we were on the Tube rattling west.

“How did you know?” Sam asked as we changed lines at South Kensington.

“Years of training,” I replied grimly.

“I mean—did it smell funny or something?”

“No.”

“So how did you know it was a—”

I grabbed her hand, tight, and said in a low voice, “Do you really want me to explain about bomb disposal on the London Underground the day before Christmas?”

Her eyes widened a little and she shook her head,

forcing a smile.

“Where are we going?”

“Hotel,” I said. While I rigged up the bomb, Sam had packed a bag. She’d assured me she had several fake IDs, and I’d told her to take them all, plus some real identification should she need it.

I didn’t let go of her hand. I don’t know why.

We emerged into the daylight and Sam disappeared into the Ladies in a small café while I bought coffee. Right now, I needed it.

By now, the news should have reached Daz that the bomb had gone off. Whoever was watching the place—and I was sure someone had been—would have seen us going in, and then twenty minutes later, the bomb going off. The firemen would find bits of flesh and cloth all over the place, nothing big enough to identify. The police would have to wait for lab tests before they found out the only biological matter in that flat had been bought in a supermarket.

It didn’t give us much time. I called Luke while I waited for Sam, but got voicemail.

Then I called my boss at SO17, known just as One, and told him to read the files I’d emailed him. “Get some people in place right now to bring down Daz and Anatole,” I said. “But don’t make a move until I’m there.”

When Sam emerged, I almost didn’t recognize her. I was beginning to see how she’d make a great con artist. She had one of those chameleon faces that could be anything from ugly to stunning, and

everything in between.

Right now, with her hair loose and straggly, her complexion dulled, spectacles perched on her nose and her shoulders hunched, she looked older, dreary, boring. Not ugly, just not...noticeable. She'd swapped the dress and heels for loafers and baggy cords, and my sweatshirt, acres too big for her. Over this, she wore a shapeless mac.

"Nice," I said, and she gave me a bland smile.

"Watch," she said.

And I did watch. I watched in awe as she called up and made a reservation, then checked into a large chain hotel in Kensington as a Dr. Anna Miller, asked which was the quickest way to the British Museum and went up to her room without anyone giving her a second glance.

I followed, at a distance, having eavesdropped while browsing some tourist pamphlets in the lobby. But as I waited for the elevator, my phone rang. It was Luke.

"Damn, it's nice to be in a country where you don't freeze the second you walk out the door."

"You're back in England?"

"Just stepped off the plane. What's all this about going in tonight? Can't it wait until after Christmas?"

"Why? Have plans, do you?"

I knew full well that Luke had as much loving family as I did, i.e., none. He didn't form relationships, none of us did. We couldn't afford to.

Christmas was a time for work, same as any other day of the year.

“I could have plans,” he sulked. “Listen, can you talk?”

“Not really,” I said, because I wasn’t safe until I was out of the public eye. The hotel lobby was too crowded. “I’ll call you later. One can fill you in.”

I paused outside Sam’s room. What I wouldn’t give to go in there and get some damn sleep! Actually, if it was me, Sam and a bed, I could think of other things I’d rather be doing.

But while I procrastinated, trying to dredge up my professionalism, my phone rang. It was One.

“Nathaniel,” he greeted me cheerfully. One’s supposed to call us by our call signs—numbers, like his—but he can never remember them. He’s terribly tally-ho, sounds like a dimmer version of Prince Charles, but he’s a good guy, much smarter than he sounds, and a decent boss. “What ho?”

“Hi,” I said. “Have you read those files?”

“Well, I’ve read enough to indict your friend Anatole. Best bring his henchman in, too.”

“Yuri?”

“That’s the blighter. I take it you’re not with them now?”

“No. They’re—” I glanced at my watch. “They should still be tranq’d.” But I’d have to get a move on before they woke up.

“Think you can handle it by yourself?”

“Yep. Sure. What about Daz?”

“Daz? Oh, Darren King. Yes, I haven’t got that far. But I suspect we may need to get confirmation of all the shipments from Anatole before we can make a move on Mr. King. And I’d rather have them all in first.”

Shit. “When are they due?”

“Should be today, I think. Christmas presents, hah.”

“Hah,” I said, grimly.

“Let me finish going through these files. I’ve got Luke on his way, shall I send him to take charge of the shipments?”

Why was he asking me?

“Yeah. Good plan. I’ll go and fetch Anatole, let you know if I need back-up.”

“Of course, but you won’t get any from me. Maria’s tied up watching some money launderers and Luke’s not even through customs yet. Call the police, or call Five if you need them.”

Five was MI5. I’d prefer the police—just one of those interdepartmental things. Rivalries. SO17 could handle this without Five’s backup.

“Right. I’ll keep you posted,” I said and signed off.

I tapped on Sam’s door, and she opened it too quickly. She’d been eavesdropping. Well, I couldn’t blame her.

“I have to go,” I said, which was a pretty stupid thing to say seeing as she’d just opened the door.

She nodded. “Work?”

“Yeah. Got a mobster to bring down.”

“Good luck.”

I opened my mouth, wanting to say more. Wanting to tell her I'd get the bastard who'd tried to kill her, wanting to say I was sorry she'd been tangled up in this, wanting to tell her my real name and that as soon as we'd got Daz, I was out of the spy game.

But instead all I said was, “You should stay here. I'll get the hotel to send up some books and magazines or something. Whatever you need. Charge it to the room.” I winced. I was giving a con artist carte blanche. “Don't go outside. It wouldn't do for someone to see you when you're supposed to be dead.”

She was quiet a moment.

“As soon as we've got Daz and this is all sorted, then you can be alive again,” I told her and tried to smile.

Sam nodded and gestured to the TV in the hotel room, which was showing silent news footage.

“It's already out,” she said. “The news. Not my name or anything, but the news of the explosion is out.”

“Good,” I said. “Daz won't be looking for you.”

“My—” she began, then stopped. “Can I call my parents?”

There was a long moment during which I felt really horrible. Sam had parents, of course she did. And it was Christmas Eve, and the breaking news all over the country was that a bomb had gone off in a townhouse in May fair. They must be going crazy.

And I was about to make it worse.

I remembered, when I was very small, one of the few occasions my grandmother mentioned my mother. “Bastards didn’t even telephone me,” she said. “I found out from the bloody telly. My daughter’s face on TV, just another casualty. Bloody terrorists.”

Damn.

“Not yet,” I said. “Not while Daz is still out there. I don’t want him tracing the call or anything.”

Panic flared in her eyes. “You don’t think he’d go after them?”

“No,” I said, although I was lying. “But give me their address, and I’ll get someone to watch the place. Just to be on the safe side.”

Sam watched me warily. “How can I trust you?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “You can’t,” I said and walked away, feeling like hell.

Chapter Six

Christmas, as I may have previously stated, was not exactly a fun-filled time for me, but this particular Christmas Eve really took the biscuit. I spent most of it interrogating a belligerent Anatole and whinging Yuri, receiving sporadic updates from Luke and from One and worrying about Sam.

There was a pretty strong chance Daz didn't believe she was really dead. After all, he could have had someone watching the back of the house, not the front, and then he'd know everything.

I don't know why I was so desperate to protect her. Yeah, I'd promised, but why had I promised?

She was trying to embezzle money. I ought to be turning her over to the police.

By the time it had turned dark, I was ready to drop dead. I was tired. I was dirty. I was coated with blood, some of it mine, because when I went to pick up the Russians, Anatole was out cold but Yuri was awake, and he had a gun. His sprays of automatic fire had missed me, but the foot he kicked at my nose hadn't. It had spread to a nice black eye and hurt like hell.

I left the station, walking into a winter wonderland of excited children and twinkling lights, and thought about going home to just sleep until I got the call from Luke to move in on Daz.

But there was something I had to do first.

How can I trust you?

I got in the car One had arranged for me, went to West Kensington and found myself standing outside Sam's hotel room, wondering what the hell to say. Hi, my name's Nate, and I'm a spy. Yeah, fantastic. She'd love that.

I paced up and down, working it out in my head. Christ, I was supposed to be good at thinking on my feet. It was my bloody job. And here I couldn't even tell a girl my name, what was wrong with me?

I banged on the door before I procrastinated myself to death and the hotel billed me for the groove I was pacing into the floor. There was a pause before it was opened, and then Sam was standing there in a hotel bathrobe, a fork in her hand, raised to stab. Her skin seemed quite dark against the whiteness of the robe, and very smooth. Her dark hair was loose and her face was bare of makeup. She smelled like roses.

"Oh, it's you," she said and lowered the fork.

Me. Nate.

"Yes," I said, "it is."

I hustled her inside and shut the door behind me, leaning on it for a second, my eyes closed.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked. "You look—you've been hurt..."

I opened my eyes, looked straight into hers.

"Nate Kelly," I said.

This clearly wasn't what she'd been expecting. She gave me the same facial gesture I'd given her that morning. It said, "What?"

“Nathaniel Kelly. Nate. My name,” I added.

Sam looked at me for a moment, her eyes slightly narrowed.

“I’m a spy,” I said. “I work for the government. The British government. This is my last assignment. I’m retiring soon. I-I was born in Northern Ireland. My mother was killed by the IRA. I used to be in the army. I..”

I ran out of things to say. Sam was still silent, still watching me, still smelling gorgeous, still looking so incredibly desirable.

“I have no idea why I’m telling you this,” I confessed, and then she smiled.

“Nat and Nate,” she said, and her eyes sparkled. “We sound like fucking cartoon characters.”

I’m really not sure what happened next. Well, that’s a lie, I’m totally sure of what happened next, it’s imprinted in my brain forever and ever; but what I mean is I’m not sure how it happened. One minute we were standing there looking at each other and trying not to laugh, and the next we were kissing.

She tasted like everything I’d ever wanted. Maybe it was the festive season making me sentimental, but there it was. Sam Taylor, con artist, the opposite of what I *should* want.

We broke apart when her nose hit mine and I winced, nearly biting her tongue off.

“Ow,” she said.

“Right back atcha,” I replied, gingerly prodding

my injured nose.

“What happened?”

“I hit Yuri in the foot with my nose.”

Her eyes widened. “Anatole’s Yuri?” I nodded.

“Are they ...did you...?”

“They’re in custody,” I said.

“And...Daz?”

“Tomorrow,” I said. I glanced at my watch, for the first time wanting to hide under the covers instead of going out there and nailing the bad guy. Of course, that might have had something to do with who else might be under the covers with me. “Maybe sooner.”

“Shouldn’t you be...somewhere else?”

I touched her face. “Yes.”

Sam took a deep breath, and I watched her chest rise and fall with interest.

“I’m glad you’re not,” she said, and proceeded to demonstrate to me why.

* * *

She lay soft and warm in my arms as the clock ticked over past midnight. The best Christmas present I ever had.

“So,” I said into the quietness, “what’s your excuse?”

She turned to face me. “Excuse?”

“For...not living like a moral and honest citizen.”

“Hey, I’m moral.”

“But not honest, Natalya.”

She smiled lazily. “I do what I do to get by,” she said.

“Have you ever considered, I dunno, getting a job?”

She shrugged. “No. I’m not trained for anything. Being a grifter’s the only thing I know how to do.”

“But why?”

She was silent a while and then she shifted position, turning on her side and leaning her head on her hand, looking at me earnestly.

“My parents,” she said. “They’re decent, honest people. They’ve always done everything by the book, just the way they’re supposed to. Always paid every bill on time, taxes and mortgage payments and everything. And now they’re both approaching retirement with nothing to live on, unless they sell the house and give up everything they’ve ever worked for.”

“No private pensions plan?”

She snorted. “My dad was supposed to have one, but his firm went bust. Just like he was supposed to have an endowment mortgage that’d pay the whole thing off for him and give him cash in hand. But that went south too. They filed a claim and all, but you know how it is. Story of their lives. They do everything they’re supposed to and get stung.” She sighed. “You know what they say, if you want something done properly...”

“Don’t rely on the state to do it for you,” I filled in,

and she smiled.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“So you decided to con your way to riches, is that it?”

“Look,” Sam said, “I figured out when I was a teenager that no one ever got a penny ahead by being honest. When I was fourteen or fifteen, my school organized a trip to Russia, and I really, really, really wanted to go, but of course my parents couldn’t afford it. So I did the honest and decent thing and tried to get sponsorship, did odd jobs, you know, and I raised about thirty quid, which wouldn’t have even got me to the airport.”

“So you started scamming?” I pictured a fourteen-year-old Sam, all skinny legs and big brown eyes, conning money off people. The image was kind of adorable.

“I did. And I got my money, and I went to Russia—which, incidentally, is why I picked that for Natalya—and that was it. And after seeing what happens to you when you work like a dog all your life and never get a penny ahead, I decided that wasn’t going to happen to me.”

“That’s very touching,” I said. “Let me guess, you’re saving up to buy your parents a decent retirement?”

“I’m saving up to buy their house off them,” she said, “so they can live in it for free.” She paused and looked embarrassed. “And yes, set up a retirement fund too.”

“And not a penny will ever go in your pocket?”

She gave me a knowing look. “I’m not stupid,” she said.

“I never for a moment thought you were,” I said, which was almost true.

I pulled her back into my arms, where she felt safe and warm and right, and enjoyed feeling her skin against mine, her heart thumping in her chest, the scent of that rose shampoo filling my brain.

“Are you really retiring?” she asked.

“Yep. Soon as this is over. Last mission, bosh, I’m out.”

“What will you do?”

The prospect of long, empty, boring days stretched ahead of me.

“I’ll think of something.”

“Go back to the army?”

“God, no.”

There was a silence, during which I could almost feel Sam working up to ask me something.

“Nate...”

“Yes?”

“Was it... Did you become a spy...because of your mother?”

I closed my eyes. “No,” I said. “And yes. That’s partly why I joined the army, but then I also joined up because the kids’ home was kicking me out and no one else was offering me three squares a day.”

Then I heard what I’d just said and winced, bracing myself for the wave of sympathy.

“Kids’ home?”

“Yeah. My nan died when I was nine, and since some trigger-happy terrorist had already shot my mother, there wasn’t any one else.”

“Your father...?”

“Buggered off before I was born.”

Another silence.

“Wow,” Sam said. “You must think I’m such a brat wailing my parents have been badly treated.”

“They have,” I said. “At least they were smart enough to stay away from terrorists.”

My heart beat. I sighed.

“And the army,” I said. “It’s easier to blame the IRA, but no one really knows who shot her. Wrong place, wrong time. Let’s just say I have a strong dislike of people who kill other people to make a point.”

“Like Daz?” Sam asked softly.

“Yeah,” I sighed again. “Like Daz.”

I listened to her breathe a while longer. The night before could be really rough, no sleep, nerves, the sure and certain knowledge that there was a really big chance you might die in the morning. And you know, right now, that bothered me way more than it ever had done before.

“I don’t want to talk about Daz,” I said.

“When are you going in? Tomorrow?”

“Whenever they call me.”

“Like a dog.”

“Yep,” I said. Dogs get put to sleep if they bite.

Cheerful thought.

“Will you have to kill him?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know.” Probably. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Sam snuggled closer. “Hell of a way to spend Christmas,” she said, and I could only agree.

Chapter Seven

Luke called me just before dawn to say the last shipment had arrived and that he'd got several of Daz's men in custody.

"Time to move in," he said, "before King Daz hears his shipment has been confiscated." He hesitated a tiny second. "You don't have to come—"

I thought of the letter bomb and said, "I do. I'm on my way."

I rolled out of bed into the cold air, away from Sam, and started pulling on my clothes. Shirt with bloodstain on it. Kevlar. Gun brace.

Sam was still in the bed where I'd left her, all warm and soft and deliciously rumpled. She watched me silently. When I slotted Belinda into her holster, Sam's gaze never left the gun.

"I—" I began, but she shook her head immediately.

"Don't," she said. "You can't say anything that won't sound like goodbye."

I held her gaze for a moment. "Merry Christmas," I said, and she just said, "Is it?"

So I turned to go, feeling like hell, hating Daz and my job and the world in general, and when my hand was on the doorknob, Sam's voice called out to me.

"Nate. Come back, okay?"

I glanced back at her, saw the fear in her eyes and nodded. And left.

Daz's London pad was only a short drive from Sam's hotel. At least, it was in the early hours of Christmas morning. Parked down the street, out of sight of Daz's building, were a couple of vans containing, I guessed, big men in black body armor with very large guns.

"Merry Christmas," Luke greeted me sourly as I got out of the car.

"Yep, season of goodwill, blah blah. Must be a quip there somewhere but I'm really not in the mood," I said as we moved towards the apartment building.

"Time to find out who's naughty and nice?" Luke suggested.

"Yeah, that'll do."

Behind us, the black ops teams spread out and did that commando thing they do. Luke nodded to a few of them; he used to be SAS. Probably went to boarding school with them, played rugby or something.

The security guards were taken care of with tranquillizer darts as we passed through the silent lobby and took the stairs to Daz's penthouse, whereupon the early-morning silence died a death.

The black ops teams crashed into the apartment and immediately took it over, scattering like a swarm of bees. There were thumps and yells as we followed them in and made for Daz's bedroom. He kept a staff, plus various shady types, living with him. For

protection, I guessed.

They weren't protecting him much. Shouts of "Clear!" rang from every room—including the bedroom where Daz ought to have been.

Luke and I glanced at each other, swore inventively and moved in to see for ourselves. The bedroom was empty, the sheets thrown back, the curtains billowing in the breeze from the open balcony doors.

"*Shit*," Luke said.

"Yeah," I agreed. I turned to the black ops guy behind me. "Seriously, was no one watching the back of the place?"

He looked as sheepish as one can while wearing a helmet with visor.

"Laptop," Luke said, seeing it open on the desk. I went out to the balcony, just to check if Daz was hanging from the fire escape, but he was nowhere to be seen. Fresh, cold air blew in my face, a breeze straight off the river, and across the way I could see into an apartment decked out with a very tasteful and expensive-looking Christmas tree.

"Been checking phone records," Luke called. "Had a tap on a line in... Lincolnshire. Call received five minutes ago from a central London number, a networked—Nate? Where're you going?"

"South Ken," I yelled as I skidded out of the apartment. "*Sam*."

If I'd driven fast on my way to Daz's, I was going at warp speeds on the way back. Dammit, dammit,

dammit! How could I have not realized he was tapping their phone? Why didn't I get anyone to check? What the hell was Sam doing calling her parents in the middle of the sodding night, anyway?

As soon as I turned my back...as soon as I went after Daz. Dammit, couldn't she have waited until I got back?

The hotel lobby was deserted apart from a sleepy clerk who watched me fly by with vague interest. The elevator took bloody *years* to arrive. Thoughts, images, horrible fantasies of blood, Sam's blood, flickered through my brain like a hideous zoetrope. By the time I lurched along the corridor to her room, my heart was hammering in my throat and my head was light with fear.

I'd never felt like this before. I sure as hell never wanted to feel like it again.

Her door was open. Just standing open. The frame was splintered and broken. I said a swift prayer to every god I'd ever heard of and swung round into the room, Belinda first, ready to shoot Daz on sight.

But I had absolutely no need to, because Sam had already stabbed him in the crotch with her trusty fork, wrapped the phone cord around his wrists and was standing over him, aiming Daz's own gun at his head.

I stood. I stared.

She was completely naked.

I stood. I stared.

"I asked Father Christmas for a pony," Sam said,

kicking Daz with her bare foot. “I got an ass.” She turned to look at me. “Guess I should have been nicer, huh?”

I stood. I stared.

“Nate?” Sam said, and I slowly put Belinda away, shot Daz with a tranquillizer—I’d have preferred a bullet, but they get really pissy about that sort of thing when you’re giving evidence—and stepped over him to Sam.

Then I kissed her, long and hard, lightheaded with relief.

“Merry Christmas,” she said against my mouth, and I smiled.

“You know,” I said, “it actually might be.”

Epilogue

“You still haven’t told me where we’re going,” Sam said, scanning the departures board.

“It’s a surprise,” I repeated for the hundredth time.

“A surprise like you being a spy?”

“You said you’d already worked it out!”

She cut her eyes at me. “Please, I was bluffing.” She looked back at the board. “Ooh, Tel Aviv.”

“You *really* want to go to Tel Aviv?”

“Hell no. But I don’t know, you spies are weird. You named your gun.”

A woman passing by gave me a very nervous look.

“That’s a euphemism,” I told her, and Sam convulsed with laughter.

In actual fact we were going to Verbier in Switzerland, where I’d booked a luxurious chalet at great expense for New Year’s Eve. I’d never taken the time to learn to ski—despite what they tell you in those Bond films, it’s not actually compulsory—and the thought of cozy nights in by a log fire while snowflakes whirled against the dark sky appealed very much. Especially if Sam was there too.

And it hadn’t escaped my notice that Verbier was the resort of choice for an awful lot of very rich people, many of whom had ever-so-slightly-shady reputations. Sam would be in her element.

“So have they found a replacement for you yet?” she asked as we stepped onto the transit train to take us to the gate.

“You make it sound so easy,” I complained, and she laughed.

“I’m sorry. Have they begun the long and difficult journey that may one day end with the incredible reward of finding someone, a special someone, worthy of filling your manly shoes?”

“Watch it,” I said, trying hard not to smile. And failing. “Actually, they started when I handed in my notice. But nothing so far. Pay’s not great, anyone who’s qualified wants to work for the big guys.”

“Can’t they get a newbie and train them up? Great value for money.”

“I think that’s the plan.”

I knew my way around the airport pretty well and had considered the various ways of getting Sam on the plane without her finding out where we were going. If I still had my security pass, it’d be much easier, but I’d handed it in, happily, a few days ago.

This meant, unfortunately, that she’d undoubtedly find out before we got there, unless I blindfolded and gagged her. Which the airport authorities usually frown on.

Sending Sam off to the coffee shop, I sidled up to the blonde girl at the nearest departure gate and gave her my best smile.

She gave me a suspicious look.

“Hi. I’m flying to Geneva with you, and I’m just

wondering if it's at all possible to get my girlfriend on the plane without her finding out where it's going to?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"It's a surprise," I explained.

"Well, we have to make announcements relating to the actual destination," she said. "People tend to get confused otherwise."

"Right. Could we pre-board? You know, before everyone else? Before you make the announcements?" I upped my Irish a little bit and smiled again, but she seemed to be charm-resistant.

She sighed. She looked tired, her hair had mostly escaped its clip and her scarf was crumpled.

"Sorry," she said. "We have to make an announcement when the inbound plane lands. It's company policy."

Dammit. "Okay." I gave her another smile, which she returned this time, reluctantly. "Never mind. Thanks for your help."

I retreated, thought for a minute and got out my phone. Maybe Luke could smuggle her through; he had just enrolled undercover at the airport on the trail of some forger or something. I should have thought about this more in advance, but Sam'd had me...shall we say, preoccupied.

Luke turned up while Sam was charming free biscuits out of the waiter, who rushed away, moon-eyed, to bring back platefuls of them.

"You must be Sam," Luke said, and she turned

her smile on him like a searchlight. He blinked, but was otherwise impervious. Like the blonde gate agent.

Hmm. Interesting thought. I glanced over at her, boarding a flight to Prague complete with two hen parties and a lairy group of lads off in search of severe drunkenness. She was being assisted by a swarthy trainee who kept making eyes at her over the crowd, and a guy who was so limp-wristedly camp I was amazed he managed to hold onto the bundle of boarding cards.

Pulling my attention back to my former partner, I introduced him as, "A friend of mine, Luke Sharpe."

"When you say *friend*," Sam said, looking him over, "you mean you were in the...civil service together?"

"Yep."

"Ah. Okay. So you're the guy who has to find a replacement for Nate?"

"Can't be done," Luke said smoothly. "He's irreplaceable."

"See, he got the hang of it," I said to Sam.

"But I give you so much more," she said, and Luke rolled his eyes.

I handed him the French cigarettes I'd bought in Duty Free, as a bribe for helping me out.

He waved them away. "Don't tempt me."

"You've given up?"

Luke stared moodily out of the window. His gaze rested briefly on the blonde girl. "Apparently they're

bad for you.”

I raised my eyebrows at Sam, who shrugged and offered Luke a free biscuit. I watched the blonde agent finish her gate report, then turn to her two colleagues.

“Time for a break,” she said. “I really need coffee. You guys want a drink?”

They looked at each other in horror, Neanderthal to Fairy. The blonde sighed.

“Okay, how about *you* having a drink with me, and *you* having a drink with me?” she said instead.

I smiled into my coffee.

“What?” Sam said, and I indicated the blonde, who was gathering up a pile of boarding cards. She attempted to shuffle them like playing cards, and then as Luke turned back to look at her, she dropped them all over the floor.

Luke has that effect on women.

“You should hire her,” I told him, and he stared at me as if I’d just suggested he had sex with a chicken.

“*Sophie?* Are you *nuts?* She’s a maniac. She can barely walk in a straight line, let alone think in one. And you should see her drive, it’s like a comedy sketch...”

He stopped abruptly, perhaps aware he was protesting too much.

“But on the upside, she is hot,” Sam said.

“She’s a maniac,” Luke repeated, but he was watching Sophie’s butt as she picked up the boarding cards. “Come on. You have a plane to catch.”

We gathered up our stuff and Luke stomped off ahead, scowling.

“Did you really mean that?” Sam asked as we trailed behind.

“About the girl?” I glanced back. “Be fun, wouldn’t it?”

“It’d be a disaster movie,” Sam said.

“It’d do him good,” I said. “Get a woman who’d give him a run for his money, stop him thinking about work twenty-four/seven, he might lighten up.”

“Hmm,” Sam slung her arm around my shoulders, “that sounds familiar. By the way,” she added absently, “did you remember to book ski equipment?”

I stared at her.

“Come on,” she said, “you know you’re not the only one who can hack into a computer system.”

I shook my head. Then I smiled. Then I laughed.

Luke was holding open the door for us. “Have a nice trip,” he said. “And try not to con anyone.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I told him.

I may have been lying.

Well, you wouldn’t want me to be bored, would you?

About the Author

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Look for these titles by Kate Johnson

Coming Soon:

I, Spy?

Ugley Business

A is for Apple

The night before Christmas, a deadly blizzard traps a lawman and a madam with a price on her head in a deserted town with a sadistic outlaw hell-bent on revenge.

Christmas Showdown
© 2006 Janette Kenny

High-class madam, Katherine Winter, caters to wealthy men and vows nobody in her Kansas bordello will suffer the abuse she endured in the horrific marriage she'd escaped. She can choose her lovers, but longs for one who can match her in bed and out. Her senses tell her Daniel Creed is the man she's longed for—a man with a dark secret like herself, a man who'd do anything to protect what's his. But he's a lawman, and dallying with him is playing with fire.

Sheriff Daniel Creed has known Katherine Winter is the husband-killer on the wanted poster since she came to his town. The reward he'd get for turning her in would make him rich, but something about the aloof beauty stirs longing inside him. But there's no future for a half-breed gunslinger hiding behind a badge and a wanted woman except life on the run. So he keeps his mouth shut, figuring the most he can ever hope for is to love the lady from afar—and protect her.

He never banked on the bounty hunter from his

past hunting down Katherine, then setting the town ablaze to force Daniel into a fiery showdown.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Christmas Showdown*.

“This is the first time you’ve visited me,” she said. “Why is that?”

Daniel met her gaze, respecting her too much to feed her lies. “None of your ladies appealed to me, and I never could afford you.”

Hell, Katherine’s price was too high for most men in these parts. She was the queen of her castle, and Daniel was nothing more than a lowly servant. Even her piano player Fin was a step above him, sharing a familiarity with Katherine that most men could only dream of.

Katherine sashayed toward him, and Daniel held his breath. The light from the fire gilded her hair a vibrant red and kissed the creamy bosom that swelled above a black lace corset. God help him if she touched him —

“Ah, but I’m no longer in business and it is Christmas Eve. Stay, Sheriff, and we’ll celebrate together.”

Daniel couldn’t recall ever taking part in Christmas, and the making merry he’d dreamed of doing with Katherine sure as hell didn’t include the piano man. “I don’t know.”

“I made stew,” Fin said, as if the promise of a hearty meal would tip the scales in Katherine’s favor.

Daniel didn't need any more encouragement on that score. But they were right, and there were three people in this house. Wasn't like Katherine was aiming to get cozy with him.

The town was deserted, and Katherine was offering food, shelter and company. He'd be a fool to turn that down in favor of scorched beans.

He nodded once. "Much obliged for the invite, then."

"Excellent. Now let's get you out of those wet clothes. Fin can hang them by the fire to dry."

"Don't aim to sit here in my drawers, ma'am." Though there wasn't a stick of furniture in the parlor.

She laughed and motioned to Fin who scampered off. "As if I haven't seen my share of naked men. But as you wish, Sheriff. Hang your coat to dry and join me upstairs where it's warmer."

"Daniel." He blurted his name out as he hooked his sopping wet coat on a peg and propped his rifle by the door.

"Daniel." She smiled, and the oddest jolt of satisfaction shot through him. "Please, call me Katie."

"Katie," he said, testing it. "I like it." It didn't fit a painted lady, or a murderer.

"My pa called me that when I was young."

He nodded, wondering if the nickname took her back to a time when her life had been good. If thinking of herself that way took away what she'd

endured with Dowd.

Whatever the reasons, the way he saw it, the only thing against Mary Kaye Dowd was a price on her head. The bounty he'd get from turning her in would make him a rich man. Maybe even make him a hero.

Yep, if Daniel had believed Katie was as cold-blooded as that wanted poster claimed, he'd have locked her up years ago. But he hadn't, so he'd done the only thing he could do these past two years—protect her.

Daniel mounted the steps behind Katie, aching to step into the circle of light cast by her lone candle and knowing he had no right. But it didn't stop the longing. The wondering how it'd feel to love a fine woman like her.

She glided into her room with unhurried grace to the small table and chairs set up by the cast iron stove. He broke out in a sweat the second he stepped over the threshold, and it had nothing to do with the warmth radiating from the fire.

Nope, Katie heated him in ways nothing else could. Being alone with her just put more thoughts in his head, ideas that centered around that big bed with her and him in it. Damn, what was keeping Fin?

“Do join me, Daniel.” She took his hat and hung it on the bedpost, bringing another dream to life for him. “It's been a long time since I've shared a dinner with a gentleman caller.”

That dredged a laugh from him. “Don't recall my

name ever being tied with gentleman before, and don't reckon I'll hear it again."

"You do yourself a disservice." She sat at the chair nearest the stove, which was fine by him since he was smoldering inside.

"I know my place."

"As in the social ladder? Women of my repute reside at the bottom rung, perhaps lower." She adjusted the shawl around her, and he envied it wrapping around those silken shoulders and grazing her ripe bosom. "Would you look at the crystal doilies the wind has crocheted on my windows?"

He tore his gaze from her. "Can't see out." Or in.

Like being caught in a silky web, and that got him thinking about black widows. Dammit, why couldn't he forget that wanted poster?

"It's as if Mother Nature is burying Campaign under a blanket of white while the wind mourns its death."

"Never thought of it that way."

"Do you suppose folks will settle here eventually?"

"Don't know. You thinking of staying?"

"No, it's time for me to move on. I liked Campaign, and I believe we could have weathered Prohibition, but the day they stopped driving cattle through here to the railhead in Abilene is the day this town started to die. Tell me, Daniel, what will you do now?"

Damn if he knew, which was why he was still here. Like her, Campaign had been a haven for him,

too.

“Head west, I ‘spect. What about you? Where are you going?”

“California. I’ve heard it’s warm there year-round.”

“Long way off.” From here, and the past hanging over her head in Illinois. He folded his arms on the table and leaned forward. “Is that where your girls are headed?”

“I don’t know their plans. Some will find a new house to ply their trade, some will marry, and some will do like me and quietly retire.”

“You got someone special waiting for you in California?”

“Not a soul.”

“Don’t you have any family?” Like the little boy she’d run off with after she’d killed her husband.

She slid him a sad smile, and this time he knew he wasn’t imagining grief flickering in her eyes. “No.”

Damn, had the child died? Or had he been wrong about her and she’d killed her son as well?

*When she breaks free from the bondage of her past, he'll
be waiting*

Understood

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Jake Turner committed the ultimate mistake of falling in love with his best friend's wife. The distance he puts between them costs both him and Ellie Matthews dearly. Jake will never forgive himself for not seeing what a bastard his friend was. Now that Ellie is free from her nightmare, Jake waits, needing and wanting. He'll be there when Ellie is ready to spread her wings.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Understood*.

Jake Turner glanced around at the gaudy Christmas decorations adorning the interior of Zach's Bar and Grill and suppressed a grimace.

He motioned for another beer and ignored what his buddy next to him was yammering about. Things were always lively at Zach's close to Christmas. Jake could never figure out if people were getting out to celebrate the season or if they were all just lonely and looking for another human being to connect to.

"Earth to Jake. Come on, man, you're in another world over there."

Jake blinked then scowled at his friend, Colin. "What the hell do you want?"

Colin nodded toward the door. "Isn't that Ray's ex coming in?"

Jake's pulse quickened, and he yanked his gaze toward the entrance. All his breath left his body in one hard rush. What the hell?

His gaze came to rest on Ellie Matthews as she stood just inside the doorway. Only it wasn't Ellie as he was used to seeing her.

She took a hesitant step forward then stopped and scanned the room, her eyes wide. Her bottom lip worked between her teeth, a sure sign of her nervousness.

Long soft curls spilled over her shoulders, hair that a man would itch to thrust his fingers into as he thrust into other parts of her body.

But what had his blood pressure soaring was her get-up. Despite it being the middle of December, she wore a top barely held up by the spaghetti strings over her shoulders. The neckline plunged, and the material cupped her breasts in all the right places.

Her mini skirt, if you could call the scrap of denim barely covering her ass a skirt, rode so high up on her thighs that Jake knew if she moved wrong, the entire bar would get a glimpse of her pussy.

She had a "fuck me" ensemble going on complete with "ride me hard" shoes. He'd never seen her in high heels once, and yet she teetered unsteadily toward the bar in three-inch, fire-engine red heels.

"Jesus, I had no idea she was so damn hot," Colin muttered.

Jake rounded on Colin with a ferocious glare. “Shut the hell up,” he growled.

Colin raised an eyebrow in surprise but remained silent.

Jake turned his attention back to Ellie, who stood at the bar. The bartender plunked down a shot which she promptly drained before motioning for another.

There wasn't a single male eye that wasn't riveted on her. Two men sauntered up to the bar and stood close to Ellie. She smiled at them flirtatiously, and Jake was struck with a sudden realization.

She was taking the plunge.

A surge of red hot jealousy spilled over into his gut. She was finally breaking free of the hold Ray had on her, only this wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. Jake had waited a long time for her. He'd thought she needed more space. He was supposed to be the one she came to when she was ready to take that leap.

He gripped his beer bottle until his knuckles went white. What the hell did she think she was doing? His eyes narrowed when she downed another shot. When she turned her attention back to the crowd of admirers at her elbow, he saw the fear in her eyes.

It was then he understood what it was costing her. This whole “take me home and fuck me” was all a brave act. She was scared to death, and the only way she had a hope of carrying through with it was by getting thoroughly drunk.

Over his dead body.

He was striding across the room even before he realized he'd gotten up from his table. In two seconds flat, he shoved by the group of men all panting over Ellie and stood beside her at the bar.

She turned unfocused blue eyes up at him, the fear that shadowed her gaze disappearing as she realized who he was.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Ellie?" he demanded.

Panic flitted across her face, and the fear returned.

Without waiting to hear what she had to say, he bent slightly, pushing his shoulder into her belly. He stood back up, slinging her over his shoulder. His hand rested possessively on her ass.

He turned to glare at the men who'd surrounded Ellie. "She's mine," he said in his most menacing voice.

They backed off quickly.

He started for the door, Ellie's upper body swinging against his back.

"Jake?" she said in a small voice. "Where are we going?"

God, he hated that sound. The fear in her voice. The uncertainty. It made him want to put his fist through the wall.

"Home," he bit out.

He walked outside, the brisk air raising goose bumps on her bare legs. Legs he ached to touch, spread and get between. His hand lingered over the

swell of her ass, just where it belonged. His cock was ready to burst out of his jeans at the mere idea of cupping her sweet behind as he fucked her nice and slow.

But he'd waited, and by the looks of things, he'd waited too long.

He carried her out to his truck and promptly deposited her into the passenger seat. He carefully buckled her in before circling around to the driver's seat.

When he glanced over at her, she was staring out the window, but he saw the tear that rolled down her cheek. He swore under his breath and started the engine. Seconds later, he roared out of the parking lot.

He clenched and unclenched his hands over the steering wheel as he headed for her house. Damn Ray. Damn himself for never seeing a man he'd counted as a friend for who he really was.

Jake carried a lot of guilt for never seeing the warning signs, for allowing Ellie's horror to go on while the rest of the world saw what Ray wanted them to see. A nice, successful guy with a gorgeous wife and a perfect life.

The night Jake had found out the truth was a night he'd spent in hell.

He pulled into the driveway of the small house she rented and turned off the ignition. Ellie reached for her door handle, and Jake put his hand out to stop her.

“Stay there and don’t move.”

She trembled against his fingers but obeyed.

He got out and walked around to her side. He opened the door and reached for her.

“I don’t trust you not to kill yourself in those damn shoes,” he muttered.

She didn’t protest when he curled his arms underneath her and lifted her from the seat. He stalked to her door and fumbled with the handle. Damn woman hadn’t even locked her door.

He shouldered his way inside but still didn’t put her down. He flipped a switch, flooding the small living room with light. His gaze focused on the coffee table and the bottle of liquor, the half *empty* bottle of liquor, sitting there and swore again.

“Just how much have you had to drink tonight, Ellie?”

She went still against him. “Jake?” she asked.

He sighed. “Yes, sweetheart?”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

He spit out several more curses as he ran for the bathroom. He threw open the door and managed to deposit her in front of the toilet before she started retching.

The sounds she made were god-awful as she rid her stomach of all the alcohol. He cringed and hovered as he waited for her to finish.

He busied himself wetting a washcloth then gently wiped at her forehead as some of the heaving subsided. She let out a low groan of misery.

“Bet you’ll think twice before pulling a stunt like this again,” he chided.

She opened her eyes and stared up at him. “Don’t lecture, Jake,” she pleaded.

He softened. He couldn’t help it when she stared up at him with those baby blues. He cupped her cheek in his hand and stroked lightly over her skin with his thumb.

“What did you think you were doing?” he asked.

She looked down and a tear splashed onto the toilet seat. Then she bent her neck until her forehead touched the rim.

He reached down to pull her to her feet. Sitting here next to a commode full of mixed alcohol and only God knew what else wasn’t his idea of a good time. He reached back to flush the toilet then swung her back into his arms.

She hiccupped softly against his chest. “Where are you taking me?”

“To bed,” he replied.

He walked into her bedroom and deposited her on the bed. As her head fell back, she moaned and closed her eyes.

“Ellie, don’t you pass out on me now,” he warned. “Ellie?”

He ran a hand through his hair and swore for the hundredth time since she’d walked into the bar. Hell of a note. Passed out cold.

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