

## CHAPTER ONE

"I feel sick," Scarlett Stone warned in a sharp undertone to her lifelong best friend, Angelina LeMay. "They don't know who you are," Angel responded with a pat on her arm. "Relax and enjoy yourself for a change. I can't believe you actually came with me, but I love you for it."

Her friend wouldn't be quite so understanding if she knew what Scarlett had hidden in her panties. She took a gulp of champagne. This was a stupid idea. Who did she think she was—James Bond?

The thought shot fear through her bloodstream. Too close to home. Too real.

But this wasn't spying on State secrets. She was investigating an old crime, looking for the truth before it was too late. No one would help her. God knew, she'd begged every one of them over the years and they'd all refused. Now it was up to her.

The reception room where the Russian Ambassador to the United States was hosting his annual Christmas party looked like the inside of a palace, with fantastically high ceilings, icy white walls inlaid with gold detail, and two huge chandeliers shining like a galaxy of tiny stars. A grand piano off to one side was being played quietly in the background. The subtle scents of pine mingled with perfume and the spice of mulled wine—the effect cloying, yet oddly nostalgic. The place was crowded. The sense of opulence and history, staggering.

Until 1994, the ambassador's residence had been the Russian Embassy and reeked of a rich clandestine history of secret power struggles. Fitting under the circumstances. Her father had told her the KGB used to operate out of two trailers in the back yard, in the shadow of the huge Washington Post building. She didn't know where the KGB's modern-day equivalent, the SVR, was secreted and she hoped she never found out.

Angel's parents—her father was Congressman Adam LeMay—had received an invitation to tonight's Christmas party but hadn't wanted to attend. Angel had begged Scarlett to take the place of her sister who was hiking in the Mojave Desert. Considering the new ambassador was Andrei Anatoly Dorokhov, Scarlett hadn't been able to refuse, no matter how dangerous and desperate her plan might be. She had no choice.

She took another drink. She needed a little Dutch courage, maybe even a sedative.

"Scar, don't look now," Angel's voice dropped to low and breathless, "but I think my future husband just walked in the door."

Angel LeMay fell in lust on a regular basis.

"I hope you'll be very happy together," Scarlett said without turning.

"Navy dinner dress blues and a gold cummerbund." Her friend fanned herself with her free hand. "I am in love."

"I thought you were only getting married for money?" Scarlett teased.

Angel flashed her dimples. "I'll make an exception for a war hero, and anyway, he might be loaded."

Angel might be her best friend, but it didn't mean Scarlett was blind to her flaws. Her parents indulged her every whim. She "worked" on Capitol Hill in her father's office, doing God only knew what—answering the mail if tonight was any indication. Scarlett figured brain atrophy explained most of Angel's poor choice in men. Not that hers was much better. Lab rats and academics were the only

guys she dated, and “dated” was an optimistic term. “Grabbed coffee with between experiments” was probably more accurate.

Over Angel’s shoulder, Scarlett watched another guy wearing a black tux making his way toward them. His intense coal-eyed gaze never left her friend’s butt. Angel was wearing a little black dress, with the emphasis on “little.” Few men could resist and fewer tried. He looked up and caught Scarlett watching him. A dimple appeared in one cheek and ebony eyes twinkled. No remorse that she’d caught him ogling her friend’s ass. Just that sense of entitlement that if he wanted to stare, no one was going to stop him. Confident and powerful. Somewhere in his late twenties, early thirties, the man had player written all over his handsome face.

He walked up and introduced himself. “Welcome to the home of the Russian Ambassador to the United States. May I say it is a pleasure to welcome such beautiful young ladies. My name is Sergio Raminski, the ambassador’s personal assistant.” His Ws sounded vaguely V-like, but apart from that his accent was perfect.

He looked more like a bodyguard than any personal assistant she’d ever seen, but maybe she was paranoid. Actually there was no maybe about it. A shiver of unease hummed over Scarlett’s skin. If ever there was a candidate for foreign intelligence agent, Raminski was it.

According to her dad, a portion of the embassy staff here were actually agents for the Kremlin, the same way some of the Americans in Moscow did more than stamp passports. Angel introduced herself and then introduced Scarlett as her sister, Sarah. Scarlett’s nerdy appearance had been overhauled by a pro, something Angel had been doing at every opportunity since kindergarten. She and Sarah looked vaguely alike now that Angel had plastered her with makeup and pulled back her hair. Scarlett had borrowed a strapless, silver gown that shimmered in the candlelight. The skirt had a net petticoat and double layers of gathered silk which flounced around her knees. Four-inch heels meant she was almost chin-level to most of the guys in the room.

Sergio bowed first over Angel’s hand, then Scarlett’s. When she tried to let go, he surprised her by holding tight for a moment, making her pulse skip a beat, though not in a good way. A blush heated her cheeks and she pulled firmly away.

“Your father was unable to attend?” Sergio asked.

Scarlett’s mouth gaped.

Angel stepped in. “After the Vice President’s funeral today he felt a little unwell. He sends his apologies.”

Scarlett swallowed the knot that had formed in her throat. Her father was the real reason she was here.

“Nothing serious, I hope?” Black eyes were alight with interest.

Insider knowledge is always of interest to Russian officials no matter how seemingly mundane—her father’s warnings flashed through her mind.

“Just something he ate at lunch.” Angel smiled. She was a pro at lying and manipulation to get what she wanted. From the hard light in his eyes, Scarlett bet money Raminski was better.

“You were lucky you did not all succumb to the sickness.” Raminski cranked up the warmth of his smile. “I would have missed out on the best part of the evening—meeting two such lovely, young ladies.”

Gag.

It wasn't only Raminski's cheesy lines that made her queasy. She was about to do something that could get her arrested. The idea made her stomach cramp. Once in a lifetime opportunity, she reminded herself. And once in a lifetime might be an overstatement. Fate. Serendipity. Seize the moment. What is the worst that can happen?

They could lock her up and throw away the key.

Crap.

She swallowed more champagne.

Angel—born flirt—smiled an electric smile and smoothed her hands over her concave stomach, as if more attention needed to be drawn to her goddess-like figure. “I wanted to fit into my dress tonight so I was a good girl at lunch.” The expression in her eyes suggested she wasn't normally a good girl.

“Your efforts are much appreciated, Ms. LeMay.” Raminski inclined his head courteously to Angel, and then to Scarlett.

He was so not her type. She liked men who appreciated a woman's brain at least as much as her body. Not handsome, muscle-bound jerks who only wanted a bout of hot, sweaty, mindless sex.

Gotta get over that, an inner voice complained.

And then it clicked. This was her chance. Angel and Sergio Raminski were all distracted and flirty with one another. She just needed ten minutes alone. “Actually,” she touched her own stomach, “I don't feel so good. If you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to visit the powder room.” She took a step back and jostled the elbow of someone behind her.

“Fu...udge,” said a deep male voice.

She whirled and came face-to-face with Angel's future husband. She could tell it was him because she'd made him spill champagne down the front of his dress blues.

“I'm so sorry.” She grabbed a white, cloth napkin off a nearby waiter and dabbed at the man's white shirt and gold cummerbund. “I'm such a dork.”

“That wasn't my first thought.” His expression caught her off-guard. It contained a very male look of admiration. She blinked. He took the napkin from her hand and she felt a shiver of something that was definitely not repulsion.

The guy looked...like... Well, he looked fabulous. And hot. Tall enough she had to tilt her head way back even wearing these ridiculous heels. He had military-short, dark blond hair that shone brightly under the chandeliers. A lean face, firm jaw, pale hazel eyes that twinkled with obvious humor and a mouth that tried to suppress it. She resisted the urge to fan herself the way Angel had earlier. Her eyes drifted lower, taking in broad shoulders and a chest-full of medals that jerked her out of her perusal. He was an American hero and not for the likes of her.

Sergio Raminski tried to step in. “Allow me to help.”

“Yeah, no thanks.” The guy held up his hand firmly as if to ward the Russian off. Captain America meets the Dark Prince. “Not a big fan of champagne, anyway.”

“You're going to be all sticky.” Scarlett grimaced apologetically.

“Sarah LeMay!” Angel's laugh got dirty and loud and Scarlett flushed with embarrassment.

She opened her mouth to insist she hadn't meant it as a double entendre, but snapped her jaw closed. The sparkle in the sailor's gaze intensified and Raminski's smirk became a full-blown grin. She rolled her eyes. Great. Just great.

"If you'd like to get properly cleaned up I can take you to one of the guest suites, or..." Raminski tilted his head to one side and slipped into silky hospitality mode. "Miss LeMay was just going to find the restroom. Perhaps you can accompany one another?"

The American held the other man's gaze so long Scarlett began to feel uncomfortable. Then he turned to her and held out his elbow in a courteous move. "Sure, let me escort you. We can get lost together." "I know who I'd like to get lost," she muttered quietly, cutting a glance at Raminski as they walked away.

The sailor flashed her a grin. The last thing she wanted was an escort, especially the kind people noticed with good looks and glittering medals, but she needed to get out of here and making a fuss would garner too much attention. Scarlett Stone might run away and hide, but the congressman's daughters had been raised in wealth and privilege. They expected to be treated like society princesses. Outside, in the hallway, a waiter directed them down a long stretch of dimly lit corridor. According to the blueprints she'd studied, this was where she needed to go.

Her heels clicked off the parquet flooring, her footsteps echoing loudly in the relative quiet of the empty hallway. He moved silently, but she was very aware of the man at her side—his size, his looks, and warm body next to hers. They stopped when they reached the men's room and she quickly disengaged her arm. "I'm really sorry about the champagne."

"Accidents happen." He shrugged easily and held out his hand. "Matt Lazlo."

She shook his hand, his skin warm and dry; grip, strong but not crushing. Her mouth formed her real name for a split-second before she remembered who she was supposed to be. "Sarah LeMay. I'm here with my...sister, Angel." She couldn't hold his gaze, but she could hardly confess the truth just because he had pretty eyes and looked good in uniform. Some secret agent she'd make. She resisted rolling her eyes at herself.

His lips tightened and his expression turned serious. "I'm sorry they made you uncomfortable back there."

Her gaze flashed to his in surprise. She'd spent a lifetime being uncomfortable and few people noticed. She rubbed her bare arms where goose bumps raced over her skin. "It's okay. It was my fault for knocking champagne all over you. I tend to be clumsy unless I'm working." Then her hands were steady as lasers and they needed to be.

"So what is it you do?"

Crap. "Oh, nothing very important," she said vaguely. Sarah worked for an advertising agency but Scarlett didn't want to expand on the lies she'd already told and, under the circumstances, she could hardly tell him she was an expert in solid-state physics.

"Pretty earrings." He tapped one of the sparkling danglies Angel had lent her. Scarlett touched it self-consciously, not used to wearing anything flashy.

She pointed to his medals. "That's some impressive silverware you have there yourself. Thank you for your service." The words made her uncomfortable—not because she wasn't sincere, but because if he knew who she really was, he wouldn't want her thanks. She hunched her shoulders at the thought,

folded up a little on herself. America thought her family was the ultimate in treacherous backstabbers and betrayers. Unless she could prove otherwise, they always would.

She noticed a pair of tiny holes in the material where a pin must have sat on his uniform jacket. She reached out and brushed her fingers over the rough edge of the material. "What did you have there?" She raised her eyes to his and watched his pupils flare in surprise.

"Nothing."

She withdrew her hand. "So why'd you take it off?"

One side of his lips kicked up. God, he was pretty. "Take what off?" Sharp intelligence spiked those hazel depths, making them a million times more attractive, sending a jolt right through her system. The timing was a death knell to any possible relationship—and wasn't that the story of her life. She took a step back.

The thought of what she was about to do crowded out the pleasure of meeting a guy who had gorgeous eyes and a keen sense of humor. "I suppose I better hurry up and get back to Angel."

He pulled a face, obviously as keen to return to the party as she was.

"Why did you come tonight?" Scarlett asked, suddenly curious.

"A direct order from my boss. What about you?" He stood with his legs braced apart, watching her as if he had all the time in the world.

She didn't have all the time in the world—she had this one brief moment to try and right a terrible wrong. Even then it might not be enough. "My parents made me," she told him.

It wasn't a lie.

They stood there staring into each other's eyes, and Scarlett forgot to breathe. It was one of those rare moments when you met someone and wanted to spend the whole night getting to know them better. She finally broke the connection. It could never be. She turned and walked to the entrance of the ladies' room, and when she glanced back, Matt Lazlo had disappeared.

Matt Lazlo was not the man for her, no matter how much she might want him to be. His uniform should have served as warning enough.

Scarlett's father's favorite quote had been, "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance," but he'd still ended up in a supermax prison serving multiple life sentences for treason. Now Scarlett was about to take the concept of vigilance to a whole new level and God help her if she got caught.

Inside the restroom, she held the door for a woman who was just leaving. From her position half-hidden behind the large oak door, she spotted the Russian Ambassador coming out of a room across the hall, a room her research suggested was his office. She recognized his face from official photographs—shaggy blond hair and craggy forehead. Short, stocky, but good looking in a blunt, powerful way. Fourteen years ago he'd been the diplomatic attaché here in Washington. He'd returned to Moscow shortly before her father had been arrested.

Coincidence? Scarlett didn't think so.

Her father had always been suspicious of Andrei Dorokhov, but he hadn't found any concrete evidence of espionage. He must have gotten too close, and somehow the Russian had figured out a way to frame him—Scarlett was hoping to discover exactly how and exonerate her father.

The ambassador straightened his fancy white jacket and strode along the hallway in firm strides. Another man left after him, moving in the opposite direction. Scarlett eyed the slowly closing door to

the office. Her plan had been to plant her device inside a cleaning supply closet around the corner that shared an inner wall with Dorokhov's office. The technology should be good enough to pick up conversations, but it wasn't ideal. Taking a chance, she dashed across the hall, caught the door just before it latched and darted into the office, closing it gently behind her.

It was dark and she flicked on the overhead light to make sure no one else was in the room. Easier to plead ignorance at the start than to snoop around and find someone sitting in the dark, watching her commit a crime. The room was beautiful in its old-fashioned opulence. A marble fireplace with a large gold-framed mirror above it formed the focal point of the room, and heavy red, velvet curtains shut out the rest of the world. A massive desk made of some dark wood with a satin finish sat to her right.

If she was caught here she didn't know what they'd do to her, but it wouldn't be good.

An ornate brass lamp on the desk was perfect for her needs. She hitched up her skirt and reached inside her panties, removed a small plastic bag. Carefully she laid the lamp on the desk and removed her tiny expandable screwdriver from the bag. It was fiddly, but after only a few seconds she'd removed the base of the lamp and peered inside.

A wave of icy horror swept over her bare shoulders and down her spine. Inside the lamp was another electronic listening device. A sophisticated one. Not a remnant of the Cold War. Crappity crap. She wanted to scream but clamped her lips shut. Sweat bloomed on her skin and her palms grew damp. Someone was already spying on Andrei Dorokhov, or his predecessor. And that someone might right now have her under surveillance.

This isn't happening.

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut. Then pulled herself together. It was happening and she needed to get out of there. Fast.

Quickly, she reassembled the lamp and wiped off her prints. There was every chance whoever was spying on the Russians had just witnessed her attempting to do the same thing. Or maybe they only had audio... Please, only have audio.

She stuffed the small plastic bag of equipment down her bodice, turned off the light before opening the door a few millimeters. No one was in the corridor so she slipped quickly across the hall into the bathroom. She flushed the transmitter down the toilet and dropped the screwdriver in the garbage.

Her chance was gone. Maybe it had never truly existed—just another fragile hope to keep the illusion alive. She leaned her forehead against the wooden stall door as her heart slammed into her ribs. Adrenaline made her dizzy. Skin clammy. Her body alternated between hot then cold as her reaction shifted from panic to despair. She needed to get out of here. She couldn't believe she'd been so stupid and naïve as to think she could pull this off, but maybe that's how her father had been framed in the first place. Stupid and naïve must run in the family, along with gullible and unlucky.

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FBI Special Agent Matt Lazlo watched Sarah LeMay hightail it across the plush carpet back to her sister. She intrigued him. Less confident than her sister. Not as obviously beautiful, but certainly more attractive—to him, anyway. Deep thoughts lurking beneath the surface—thoughts he'd like to explore

and, come to think of it, a surface he wouldn't mind exploring either. She even smelled good—tangy lemon that was both sweet and fresh.

She wasn't his usual type, all big dark eyes and waif-like figure. He liked lush curves, long hair and a good time smile.

The sister had curves but for some reason it was Sarah who held his attention. They'd shared a connection earlier. He'd have had to be dead not to notice it, and despite many close calls, he wasn't dead yet. He was tempted to ask for her number, though the idea of taking a politician's daughter out for a night on the town did not mesh with his tight budget.

Everyone had to live a little, right?

"A friend of yours?" the Russian Ambassador's wife asked.

Damn. He shouldn't have let his attention wander. She'd cornered him when he walked back into the reception and Matt's survival instincts had kicked in. FBI agents should not hang with beautiful women from the Russian Embassy. If anyone other than Assistant Special Agent in Charge Lincoln Frazer had asked him to do this he'd have wondered about the guy. But Frazer was the rock star of the FBI—he could probably form his own division if he wanted. The guy had received an unexpected invitation to dinner with the President of the United States and had asked Matt to step in at the last minute. Matt would rather be back on his boat drinking beer, but it was hard to refuse Frazer, especially on the day they'd buried the Vice President. The latter had died from a heart-attack at his home in Kentucky. It had followed a series of events that had gotten one of Matt's best friends shot, and the president almost killed. Attending a Christmas reception in Frazer's stead seemed like a small favor under the circumstances.

Matt had joined the FBI for peace and quiet, and a more regular work schedule. The last six weeks had been anything but. He was looking forward to a little R&R over Christmas.

The Ambassador's wife was looking at him expectantly.

"No, ma'am. I only met her earlier when she spilled champagne down my shirt."

Natalie Dorokhov had inky-black hair and ruby-red lips—more Wicked Witch than Snow White. The woman sipped her champagne and eyed him thoughtfully. "She looks about fifteen." Her eyes were pale blue and looked a hell of a lot older than fifteen.

Matt smiled politely. Sarah LeMay was not a little girl. She just had that youthful wholesomeness that defied years. Pointing that out to this woman would go down like a case of VD so he changed the subject. "Are you enjoying Washington, ma'am?"

Natalie smiled smugly. "I enjoy meeting new people. My husband was stationed here years ago, before we met, so he knows the city and has friends here." Her bare shoulders rose and fell. "Though I do dislike being treated like an agent for the Kremlin every time I go to 'tea'."

"Comes with the territory, I guess." No way was he talking Russian security with her, ever.

Sarah was whispering urgently into her sister's ear before she began physically dragging her toward the door. Sergio Raminski looked pissed. Matt didn't trust the guy and was glad the LeMay women were putting some distance between them and him. Matt had wanted to talk to Sarah again, but she didn't even glance in his direction. So much for the connection he'd imagined.

Too bad. He turned his attention back to Natalie. "Your English is excellent, ma'am."

“Thank you.” Her smile grew wider, as if she was hiding a secret. “I had some very good teachers.” Her expression changed. “Ah, my husband is trying to get my attention.” She put her hand on his bicep and squeezed. It sent a bolt of get-me-the-fuck-out-of-here straight through him. “It was nice to meet you, Matthew.” Because he introduced himself as Matt, people made assumptions he rarely bothered to correct. “I hope we will meet again sometime soon.”

He hoped not.

“Natalie.” He inclined his head. First name terms with the Russian Ambassador’s wife...? His old buddies on the teams would laugh their asses off, not to mention his colleagues at the FBI. God help him.

Matt checked his watch, figured he’d fulfilled his duty, and handed his glass off to the nearest waiter. He was dog-tired after pulling a series of fifteen-hour days trying to help get monsters off the streets. Sarah LeMay and her sister were nowhere to be seen. He gave a mental shrug. Not the sort of woman he should be pursuing anyway. Sarah didn’t seem like the no-strings, fling type and he was too busy with work and figuring out his mother’s care regime to fit in a relationship. He texted Frazer’s driver and headed downstairs. The limo was just pulling along the curb when he stepped onto the sidewalk of 16th Street.

There stood Angel and Sarah LeMay arguing on the pavement. Angel was obviously not happy with her sister. He couldn’t hear exactly what was being said but she was shaking her finger in Sarah’s face and cursing like a senior chief. The urge to step in and protect the slighter woman was almost overwhelming.

Frazer had hijacked his evening and told him to enjoy himself. “Can I offer you ladies a ride?”

Angel’s furious expression immediately cleared though Sarah grabbed her arm and tried to hold her back.

“You sure can, handsome.” Angel shrugged off her sister’s grip and sashayed toward him. He almost swallowed his tongue when her coat gaped and he noticed where her hemline hit her thighs. Holy cow. The fact he hadn’t noticed earlier was astonishing because the woman had legs. It pissed him off. He was a trained observer and he’d been distracted. What else had he missed?

Angel slid into the limo and began searching for a bar. Sarah stood on the sidewalk staring at him with haunted eyes. Her chin lifted a notch and her throat rippled. Angel was a flirt but her sister was a different creature entirely.

“Coming?” he questioned.

Emotions raced behind her eyes and she looked like she wanted to bolt.

“Are you okay?” He took a step forward.

She pressed her lips together and nodded quickly. “Yes, thank you.” But her voice was small, all laughter gone. Not the same woman who’d teased him earlier. There was something fragile about her. Considering the cynical nature of his job, he was surprised it attracted him so much. He didn’t do fragile. He did tough and feisty. Women who gave him shit and knew the score. Women who didn’t get upset when he didn’t call them the next day, or ever. Sarah LeMay looked like the exact opposite of his usual type and he had no idea why she drew him so completely.

“Want to get in the car?”



Her eyelids closed for a moment and then blinked wide as if afraid to drop her guard. She moved toward him, bunching her skirt to climb in beside her sister.

“Where to?” he asked, getting in beside them.

“A club.” Angel looked frustrated by the lack of alcohol in the vehicle. Welcome to the Bureau.

“Home.” Sarah’s voice trembled. “I’m not feeling well.”

It would explain her rapid change in demeanor.

Angel eyed her sister narrowly. “Scar, I swear to God...”

“Scar?” Matt queried.

“Nickname.” Sarah said quickly. “Can you drop us at one-forty-five 19th Street, please?”

Matt gave the driver the address while he watched the interaction between the two sisters.

Something was squirrely. Angel’s lips were pressed firmly together, index finger tapping impatiently on her exposed knee. Sarah stared fixedly out the window. The short hairs on the nape of his neck went taut.

None of his business.

Angel turned back to him and broke the tense silence. “So where are you going next, sailor?”

Sarah shot her a glare.

“Home.”

“And where is home?” She tossed her blonde locks over her left shoulder.

“Virginia.”

When he didn’t elaborate Angel went back to her impatient tapping.

If Sarah had been the one asking would he have answered differently? Maybe. Would he have offered to bring her home? Definitely maybe. The more he looked at her the prettier he realized she was. Darker brows, dark lashes, perfect lips. Gold streaks amongst mid-brown hair that was pinned messily to her nape. Angel was gorgeous—as was the ambassador’s wife—but neither of them had that...what the hell was it? Sweetness? Vulnerability? Smarts?

But the woman was practically vibrating in her seat. He resisted the need to reach out and squeeze her hand in reassurance.

They arrived at the women’s house in awkward silence. He got out and held the door. Angel stalked up the stone steps of her parents’ home in heels that could be used as lethal weapons. Killer heels, killer dress, killer face. All of which left him cold.

Sarah climbed out of the limo more slowly. “Th-thank you for the ride.”

“You’re welcome. I hope you feel better soon.” Matt stared at her intently, wishing she’d meet his gaze, wanting to ask her out. She turned away and followed her sister up the steps.

Frustrated because cowardice was not something Matt usually tolerated in himself, he climbed back into the limo and the driver pulled away from the curb. He turned to look through the rear windshield.

Sarah LeMay was standing on the top step staring after him as if she had regrets of her own.

Dammit.

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