

That's one good thing about the big cities. You don't have to work the niceties to get what you want. You storm your way in, get what you want, kill them if you need to and disappear. The way I operated, rarely would anyone notice the death. I generally did the job in a quiet place, with no chance of anyone coming up on me. But occasionally, I'd liked to push the buttons and kill someone right out in the middle of a mass of people. The more people, the better. When you had the thrill of killing in plain sight, the job became more like a game.

MAN
IN THE
MOON

LINDA BOLTMAN

Jigsaw Press

Sun River Valley, Montana

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MY LIFE LAY OPEN AS A BOOK

*Sometimes I wish my life were a book
And I could skim ahead a few chapters
Just for a sneak preview of the ending.
I'm only afraid of the disappointment
In learning that it definitely
Was not a best seller.*

This book is dedicated to my children, David and Erin, my family, in particular my sister, Sandy and my best friends Trisha and Linda, Mari Bushman who gave me a chance, my writing group and all my friends who believed in me. This is the support system I needed to truly believe in myself and my talent. They were instrumental in making me realize that I had many wonderful chapters of my life ahead of me and the incredible life I'd led was already a best seller. But most of all, this is dedicated to my Mom, who isn't here to witness my dream come true.

Chapter One

As I looked down at Marc Damon's final fifteen seconds of life, it seemed inappropriate that his last memories would be those of a dank alley with the feel of old grease and rat droppings pressed against his cheek.

I stared at his lifeless body, empathetically reaching out to his last sensations before he slipped away. I'm sure that's not what he imagined his death would be like. Weren't your final seconds supposed to reflect your life? Do you take to the grave those milliseconds of sights, smells and touches that are hapless reconstructions of the life you've lived?

I glanced about to be sure I wasn't seen before I reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out the flash drive. Predictable to the end, the small drive was there, close to his heart. I slipped the drive into a small leather case that I tucked into the inside pocket of my jacket.

Rolling the body slightly, I fished his wallet out of his back pocket. I could use the extra time it would take the New York police to ID a body without identification.

"Sleep well, my little friend," I murmured, stuffing the wallet in next to the leather case.

My heart racing, I moved away from the body, glancing swiftly from side to side.

I had little time to reflect, or my last sensations would mirror those of my adversary.

I crept from the shadows of the alley back into the side street, searching for anyone that may have responded to gunfire. The sidewalk was eerily vacant. That's what's nice about New York. The denizens by and large just mind their own business. I hurried from the quiet street to a main thoroughfare and hailed a cab.

"Where to, buddy?" the driver called over his shoulder.

I gave him the address and directions, then leaned forward and scanned the crowd of commuters jostling and pushing their way along the street. I needed to make sure no one was following me. Relieved to see only waves of indifferent people move along the sidewalk, I settled back on the torn seat cushion while the cab edged its way through the late Friday afternoon traffic.

How did we get to this point, Marc Damon and I? He was a good chap. Ambitious and perhaps a bit greedy, but a good chap. I presume he started out with the best intentions. The last few months had provided plenty of time and opportunity for me to learn excerpts of his life's history.

Marc wasn't much more than twenty the day his life changed forever. The idea had come to him while he was doing research for a term paper. He was a smart kid, perhaps too smart for his own good, but he was bored with college. The courses didn't challenge him enough and he knew he was smarter than most of his professors. Consequently, he needed more than regular college courses could give him.

Marc turned to his wits and natural born talents. He soon had a thriving business, hacking into the school computer for tests and writing papers for classmates. The extra money he made was just a bonus. He loved the thrill.

During the last few months of Marc's junior year he stumbled on a newspaper article that piqued his interest. He'd been

sitting in the basement of an old house on Thorne Street doing research for a friend determined to get into Yale grad school. The article, obscurely tucked into the back section of the newspaper, outlined research being done by a little known computer programmer named Brian Dermish.

Brian Dermish. The name rolled off Marc's tongue like a joke. Yet he had a gut feeling that Brian was on to something. Luckily, Marc was smart enough to trust that natural instinct.

In the article Brian mentioned he was creating a program that would modify data from the Human Genome Project. The reference was so vague, most people would have overlooked it, but that article haunted Marc. Immediate research into the project only made him more convinced he was right. Brian Dermish's program soon became Marc Damon's obsession.

Marc left college before the end of his junior year, shortly after reading that article. Three months later, after sending numerous emails and maximizing his hacking skills, he tracked down Brian Dermish. He found the undiscovered genius tucked away in a small dairy farm outside of Elroy, Wisconsin. An email of introduction led to a steady flow of correspondence between the two boys. Toward the end of that summer, Marc booked a flight to Madison, rented a car and drove through the farmlands of southwestern Wisconsin to meet Brian. The two clicked immediately. Before long, Marc had Brian convinced he was the only one with the know-how and sales skills necessary to sell Brian's program once the project was done. Brian felt he'd found a kindred spirit in Marc. He was everything Brian wanted to be, cocky, out-going and self assured.

Marc had been working on this project with Brian ever since. More accurately, Brian had been working on the project with Marc in the background, urging him on with promises of riches once he had the project complete.

Elroy was an hour-and-a-half from Madison. With only about 1,500 inhabitants, the town's main claim to fame was the intersection of three main bike trails, built on discontinued railroad lines. The framework of the community were farmers and small shops that catered to the biking community. Elroy was a small town lost amongst a hundred other small towns just like it. Living there fit Brian perfectly. He spent his days engrossed in his computer, locked up in the old farm he'd inherited from his parents. Born and raised in the area, Brian knew everyone in town and the community easily accepted his strange lifestyle. Brian seemed to prefer the anonymity. I often wondered how such a place could have given birth to such a brilliant mind.

The day Marc knocked on the door of that farmhouse changed both of those boys' lives. Marc was right. Brian was definitely on to something. For the next two years, with Marc's urging, Brian uncovered a whole new computer programming code that would revolutionize the scientific world. Marc wooed him with grandiose plans for farming the product out to the highest bidder. But a naïve kid from Wisconsin and an ambitious, but inexperienced kid from Montrose, Colorado hadn't a clue.

"That next step," I murmured under my breath, "from discovery to application, turned baby steps to the fall of their lifetimes."

"You say something, buddy?" the cab driver said, eyeing me in the rear view mirror.

"Just talking to myself," I responded, moving into the recesses of the back seat.

Damn, I hadn't meant to draw any attention to myself. With no communication, chances were better that the cab driver would never remember me.

The cab turned a corner and came to a stop in front of a row of townhouses. I paid the driver, stepped from the curb and moved discretely down the street, looking for any cars that might have

followed. There were very few vehicles passing by for a Friday night. I walked three blocks, continuing to check behind me. I couldn't afford to be careless.

The night was silent.

I hailed a second cab and gave him an address. This time I didn't talk or even think, but instead pushed myself into the darkest corner of the backseat for the duration of the ride. Fifteen minutes later, on a quiet street of classic brownstones, I waited for the driver to leave.

The street was eerily empty and quiet. That's why I'd chosen this neighborhood. I looked up at the brownstone. I love these old buildings; so much character. Almost like they were breathing. I walked casually up the stairs to the front door and turned the key.

Moving quickly through the front door, double locking the bolts behind me, I didn't reach for the light. Instead, I went down the hall, touching my fingers along the wall to find my way, listening intently for anything out of the ordinary. At the end of the hallway, I felt for the wall sconce and paused momentarily, listening again. Tilting the sconce slightly to the right, I heard the familiar click and waited for the bookcase to slide to the right. Making my way into the hidden room, I closed the panel before reaching for the inside light. I heard the sconce latch back into place.

I waited for my eyes to adjust to the light, the small office space sparse, but functional. This safe room was my refuge. I smiled to myself. *Ah, Betsy.* My heart quickened just that little bit. *Betsy would have said the room lacked feng shui.* I brought my emotions back into check.

Betsy told me once that each of us is profoundly affected by the people, places and things that surround us. She said that in order to move forward, I need to be very clear about what I

desire, then use feng shui to meet my goals. Nothing in my safe room was arranged to have an effect on my health, wealth and personal relationships. *Perhaps I'm developing my own style of feng shui to help me achieve my goals*, I rationalized.

My gaze traveled over the laptop and two desktop computers on the desk. The safe in the lower drawer of the desk was meant to be a diversion, in the rare possibility that anyone could possibly breach my space. A very rare tapestry, rolled and covered in plastic, stood up against the back wall, one of a matching pair. Rumor had it that a Saudi owns the twin. There's another goal to keep in mind. Several paintings, including "Harbor Scene" by Willem Van de Velde and "Tres Personajes" by Rufino Tamayo, two vases from Sotheby's and a worn leather high back chair waiting in the corner like an old friend completed the decor.

I strode to the desk and fired up one of the computers. Time seemed to drag while I waited for the desktop screen to pop up. My pulse quickened. I reached into my jacket pocket for the leather case, removed the flash drive and slipped it into the computer's card reader. Moments later, the data popped up on the screen. I leaned over the desk in anticipation, scanning the information for a long time. My heart sank.

"Damn!" I called out into the small room. I kept staring at the data, almost willing the screen to blink and continue unraveling code. The screen remained the same. I shook my head and looked away in disgust. I'd screwed up and screwed up badly. I had underestimated them.

All right, I'll give those two boys credit. They may be naïve young kids from the heartland, but they were bright enough not to put all their eggs in one basket. The file was incomplete. Only half the data was there. Splitting the formula between two drives made sense. Marc would hold one half of the program code and Brian the other. That way, if anything happened to either one

of them, the code was not lost. I was gaining a little respect for Marc's methods. Smart move. How had I missed that?

In all my years of doing this job, I'd never been this lax, this stupid. Was I losing my touch? I'd let myself believe the youthful inexperience of two kids from rural towns of mid-America would make the picking easy. I had focused all my attention on Marc, knowing he was the con man of this operation. I figured he was leading poor old Brian around by the nose. I was late into the game when I realized that Brian was not only smart, but resourceful. I'd made a huge mistake in underestimating him. I'd made an even bigger mistake by ignoring him.

Shit. Nice one, big guy! Screwed up big time. Only half of the most valuable programming code ever invented and you'd killed a young kid to get it. Come on, man, in your heart, you had to know getting your hands on that code couldn't be this easy. One of your biggest jobs ever. What were you thinking? Did you honestly believe all you had to do was kill Marc, grab the code, contact your sources and let them battle over the greatest contribution of mankind? Yeah, right.

I was angry at myself, my stupidity, my total lack of judgment. Greed had become my focal point. I was more of a pro than that. I knew better. I shook my head to clear my mind.

Get hold of yourself man. Ok, so you screwed up. Shit happens. I rubbed my forehead. That just means your mission is only half over. Now get back to work and act the professional you are. I emitted a deep sigh. No more screw-ups.

I removed the flash drive from the computer and leaned back against the wall. I was weary; tired of my life, the constant games, the endless travel, the many nights I'd slept alone. Everything. Tonight had made me feel old. I didn't like the feeling.

I studied the painting of "Tres Personajes" by Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo for several moments, trying to clear my mind

and get back on track. One of several objets d'art I'd stolen in the late 1980's. I'd planned on selling it underground, but changed my mind. There was something about that painting. When the time came, I couldn't sell.

I know why I couldn't sell the painting--because everything about that painting is the antithesis of my life; bright colors and tres personajes – three people, not one. I stared at the three abstract figures. An emotion stirred from deep within me that left me feeling uncomfortable.

It was because of this painting and the "Harbor Scene" I'd stolen in the late 1970's that I no longer involved myself in art theft. I found that I was too emotional about art. The "Harbor Scene" had been one of four paintings I'd taken during a heist. Unfortunately, only afterwards did I realize that one of the four, a Rembrandt called "Portrait of a Rabbi" was too high profile for me to easily sell. The two others were by less well-known artists and in poor condition, not worth my time, or the risk.

I laughed to myself. I'd wound up giving those three back. Walked right into a major antique show and left the box off to the side of the main room; three valuable paintings just sitting in a box. The room was so jammed with people, no one noticed or suspected a thing. Considering all the hullabaloo that went on after the discovery of the abandoned box, apparently they thought someone had left a bomb.

I probably should have given the Harbor Scene back along with the other three, but I liked that painting. "Harbor Scene" had a dark, turbulent feel; the way I felt my life was sometimes. I'd come to realize that "Tres Personajes" stirred up painful memories of my past and an impossible future, whereas the "Harbor Scene" was a true reflection of my life.

So now the two paintings were hanging in my office, hidden away so only my eyes could ever see them. I slid the Tamayo

to the left and reached for the safe. Only my fingerprint opened the lock. Another security measure. I touched the pad with my index finger, the tumblers moved and the door popped ajar. I opened the safe door and slipped the flash drive and Marc's wallet in amongst the wads of bills and passports. My fingers brushed the velvet box beneath.

I really have to clean that safe out some time, I thought dispassionately.

I felt physically tired. I crossed the room to my black chair and rested my head against the coolness of the old leather. Sitting in this chair was the one time I could let my guard down and totally relax. I'd arranged the chair so that my back was to the wall and my face toward the door. I felt safe here. I sighed deeply and let my body go.

I must have slept fifteen or twenty minutes; just enough to be called a power nap. I could do that; sleep fifteen minutes and wake up refreshed and alert. A talent honed to perfection during all those stake-outs, when I couldn't afford eight hours of down time. I had to take short power naps to lessen the chance of missing anything. Each nap was crucial for recharging, so when I slept, I fell asleep almost immediately and didn't dream. I devoted the entire fifteen minutes to recharging my battery.

When I awoke, my head clearer, thinking was a lot easier.

Ok, if Marc Damon had only half the code, Brian had to have the other. Was Marc meeting someone at the coffee shop when I found him? The way he was looking around, I got the feeling he was watching to see whether or not he'd been followed. Or was he waiting for a visitor?

Did Brian still have the code? Who knows, maybe someone had already stolen the code and Brian was lying dead somewhere with his face pressed to the cold cement. No, Brian was a farm kid at heart. He deserved better than cold cement. If someone

had to kill him, I hoped I would be his killer. I would give him the good death he deserved.

How would Brian die? I let my mind wander to various ways that I might kill Brian Dermish, playing with each possibility, running various endings back and forth in my mind like a video tape. None of them seemed appropriate. Too bad kids like that had to die. So much potential. Who knows, Brian Dermish could go on to other great discoveries, given the chance. But precisely for that reason, I couldn't risk getting the code and letting him live. He could easily recreate that code, given the time. Unless he was dead.

I stared at the Harbor Scene. All right, so that dark, turbulent painting reflected my life, but I wonder what Marc Damon's painting would be? I'm sure someone must have done a painting of a young, ambitious man driven by greed. I shifted gears. Marc Damon's mental picture bored me.

There were a million Marc Damon's in the world.

But there were damn few Brian Dermish's. What painting would reflect his life? *Nothing quite so foreboding and malevolent as my Harbor Scene*, I mused. *Ordinarily, a kid like that would have been a bowl of fruit, but Brian wasn't that cut and dried. He was an Elroy anomaly.*

Chapter 2

I woke the next morning to a dismal, overcast day. I'd stayed up late going over what code I had, hoping there was something to salvage, but I needed that second half. After a restless night and only a few hours of sleep, a quick shave and a piece of toast were the only luxuries I afforded myself this morning. Time was of the essence. If Marc Damon was in New York, he would have been here for only one reason.

Let's face it. Marc Damon was a smart kid, but Brian was the real brains behind the operation and didn't even know it. I wasn't sure if he'd stumbled on the answer or was bright enough that the answer came to him. Either way, what Brian Dermish had was sheer genius. Marc was just the marketing man.

The Human Genome Project had been a thirteen-year world-wide project, completed in 2003. The goal was to identify all the approximately 20,000-25,000 genes in the human DNA. With this information came the possibility of correcting or possibly eradicating disease. In fact, since its completion, over 30 genes had already been pinpointed and associated with breast cancer, muscle disease, deafness and blindness.

What Brian Dermish had done was way beyond anything anyone had ever hoped. Brian had written software which took the information from the Human Genome Project and corrected the

flaws. The resulting human DNA would be impervious to disease and have a much greater life expectancy. Brian had uncovered the perfect human DNA blueprint.

The implications were staggering. There wasn't a government or scientist on the planet that wouldn't want to get his hands on that information. This was the deal of a lifetime for me. If I had those two halves, I could name my price. And this would be it, my last deal. Somewhat ironic that my final deal had been in the hands of two young saplings from Wisconsin. Even worse, negotiations were left to an inexperienced, ambitious kid.

Marc was nothing more than the assistant to Brian in his computer work. Computer programming wasn't Marc's strong point, but marketing was. This kid had an arrogant confidence befitting a true marketing man. Marc had obviously convinced Brian that his only role was to produce the product and he needed Marc to get this program out, find a buyer and make both of them filthy rich. I headed down to my Mercedes, still mulling this over in my mind. The sun was just coming up.

Oh, Marc was smart enough, but he was a show man; a show man with no real experience in the big time. Marc planned to make money on Brian's coattails.

Brian took Marc's confidence and bravado as genuine know how and bought the whole act, hook, line and sinker. He followed Marc like a little puppy dog.

Without Marc, Brian appeared to be just a confused, naïve genius from a dairy farm, lost in the big city. I don't think he'd ever been out of Elroy. He was counting on Marc for everything.

I opened the door to the Mercedes and stopped short.

"He was counting on Marc for everything," I repeated slowly in a deep whisper. Of course. That means Marc would have made all the plans, told Brian what to do, and Brian would follow his orders.

All right, I had to think like Marc Damon. Where would he have sent Brian? Marc would come on ahead to make the contacts. They made separate flash drives to ensure that nothing was stolen. Only a moron would keep Brian close to him or even worse, leave him on the farm. He would have found a safe place for Brian to lay low and Brian would be waiting for Marc's call to make his next move. At this point, he doesn't even know Marc's dead. Would Marc have set up a rendezvous point? If so, where?

I slid in behind the wheel of the Mercedes. Damn. I didn't figure Marc would be ready to move this quickly. I'd been watching the two of them for months, after a lead from an old friend that owed me one. Those years of gut instincts kicked in and I knew I had to be on to something. Once I knew what they were into, I couldn't let this baby go. This was big; bigger than anything I'd ever seen.

Their inexperience played right into my hands. They weren't a hard track. Marc may have taken months to track down Brian, but he didn't have my contacts or resources. Following those two boys was like taking candy from a baby. I went back to Elroy and worked hard to blend in with the natives. I tried to adapt to the local's Wisconsin dialect, although Elsie Cooper swore they didn't have one. Once in their home territory, the boys were easy to track down and tail. They never knew I was there. Driving around town in that old red Pinto, they were leaving me bread crumbs. Babes in the woods.

I started the car and pulled out into the empty street. Now what? Marc's dead.

Idly driving the back streets of New York with no destination in mind, I knew better than to go back and hang around the crime scene and I didn't want to risk going back to his hotel room. I'd taken any identification to make tracing the body easy and Marc didn't strike me as being the kind of guy who would

ever have been fingerprinted. With no identification or fingerprints to go on and a body that wasn't local, the New York cops wouldn't have much to go on. I was hedging my bet that those factors would give me the lead time I needed. But I never underestimate the NYPD. Those guys can be like bloodhounds.

There hadn't been time for me to frisk Marc's body. If I'd left anything at all for them to go on, his hotel room would be sealed off with police tape within a few hours of the shooting. There wouldn't be anything there anyway. The cops don't know what they're looking for and Marc would never have left important information like a back up for the flash drive in a hotel room. Marc may not have had much experience, but he was no idiot.

Up until now I could be fairly confident that no one had recognized me or even seen me. They had been too intent on catching trains or buses or getting home to the wife and kids. I'd have been just another face in a massive crowd. I stuck to the quiet back streets as I drove.

Think, man, think! You're Marc Damon. The product is ready, now what do you do?

First thing, I'd find a buyer. But why did he come to New York? Logical choice would have been to contact the CIA, but CIA headquarters are outside of Washington.

Other operatives? Would Marc sell out his country?

"Hell, everyone would be in the market for this baby!" I said out loud. Let's face it, Marc Damon was not beneath selling out the United States if selling to a foreign agent meant money in his pocket. And we're talking big money here. That would have been very tempting. Would he even know who to approach? After all, he was new to this game and he needed more than a cocky attitude and over confidence to play games with the big boys. Would he even know the right people to call? Names ran through my head like a spinning rolodex.

Come on, man, think! I've tackled men wiser and much smarter than Marc Damon my whole life. Figuring this out can't be that hard. Yeah, but the men I tracked were much more sophisticated in playing these games, and in their own way, predictable. Marc may be predictable in his everyday life, but in the game of espionage, this young kid definitely couldn't be counted on to be predictable. I couldn't expect him to make the same twists and turns professionals would.

All right, Brian Dermish, where are you? Oh, God, the possibilities seemed endless. No, Marc Damon was too predictable for there to be endless possibilities. My mind was swirling. I had to get control of my thoughts.

I pulled the car over on an empty street to roll down the window and let the morning air clear my head. For a few moments I watched the city come to life. I was always amazed at how many people were active this early in the morning; especially on a Saturday morning. A young woman in a sleek jogging suit came out of one of the townhouses, did a few warm ups and immediately took off down the street, jogging past a man running alongside his black lab.

"Morning," I heard them address each other. There seemed to be something about exercise people. Normal New Yorkers wouldn't address each other. Exercisers were a breed of their own. They greeted each other almost like they were part of a secret fraternity. They simply had to address one another when they met, however briefly. Kind of like people walking their dogs. A jogger and a dog walker combo package—that was good for a definite greeting.

I leaned back in the seat, closed my eyes, and smiled at the idea of me in a sleek jogging suit or taking a dog out for his "walkies". *I don't think I've ever jogged in my life. Or walked a*

dog, for that matter. When would I ever have had the luxury of such menial everyday tasks?

I shook off the sentimentality.

Ok, let's re-wind life. You're a pro. You can find this man.

I'd found Marc in New York and had been tracking him. I'd seen him in the crowd just south of the Emerson Building, then lost him. I hate rush hour. Never lets me do my job. All those damn commuters trying to catch the train, bus or taxi. He was just one more dark head in a blue suit.

Don't get side tracked. Look around you. You can figure this out. Stop to consider everything, and I mean everything you can remember.

Ok, it's getting dark, rush hour on a Friday night. People are everywhere. I'd had him pegged in front of me just a moment before that crazy old man with a cell ran into me and dropped his phone. Hell, he was weaving all over, trying to talk and walk at the same time. Should be a law against old people having phones. Cell phones just confuse them. He'd immediately reached down to retrieve the pieces and the reaction was like a six car pile-up on the Kennedy Expressway.

"Hey, man, watch it!" a brown suit had yelled at him, tripping over the bent body. I'd leaned down to help the old man and when I looked up, Marc was gone.

Frantic, I studied the mass of heads for the familiar mop of hair. Nothing. A moment of panic hit me. *Damn kid! I couldn't lose him!*

"Where the hell is that kid?" I remember muttering.

I'd been glancing all around me when the bronze name plate of the Emerson Building caught my eye. A small buffet for building employees on the twelfth floor came to mind. I ran to catch the express elevator before the doors closed. A Mexican janitor with his yellow bucket and an old smelly mop eyed me

suspiciously. Ignoring him, I impatiently punched the button for the twelfth floor. The restaurant had a patio. I might possibly see him from there.

The door opened up into a lobby. I stepped out of the elevator and looked to the left. The buffet was empty and the front doors closed. Makes sense. After 5:00 on a Friday night, everyone working the buffet had to be anxious to get home. No one would have worked late.

I scanned the lobby. The doors to the patio were still open. I ran outside and looked over the edge.

Looking down twelve stories had a dizzying effect. A wave of commuters were weaving in and out of each other. Their movement looked rhythmical, almost hypnotic.

It reminded me of Betsy. She spent most of her waking hours watching little microbes through a telescope. She told me once that while watching microbes on a glass scurrying around, she felt such an air of superiority. "Almost like God, looking down on the world," she'd said.

Looking over the railing from the twelfth story of the Emerson Building, I could identify with that feeling now. Small New Yorkers running to and fro, much like Betsy Johnson's microbes, each on their own mission. *All perspective*, I thought. *Just perspective.*

Hey, focus! I was wasting valuable time. I couldn't lose that kid! I should be searching for that blue suit and that mop of dark hair, not reflecting on the rhythm of commuters!

"Like that sleazy little microbe in a dark suit," I mumbled, catching Marc Damon making his way through the crowd. There was no mistaking that walk. He was below me, about a half block ahead, checking to either side while moving swiftly through the crowd. With one glance back, he opened the door of the Perk Me Up Coffee Shop and slipped inside. I had him!

I wheeled and raced for the elevator, jabbing the down button repeatedly. I couldn't lose him again. I'd almost lost the little bugger and now there he was, conveniently going into a coffee shop half a block away. Damn good luck.

I punched the button again. *Come on! Where the hell was that elevator?*

The doors opened and I almost leapt inside.

What was Marc doing in a coffee shop and why was he looking around? Was he meeting someone? Could I get to him before they did? Would he have the flash drive? The drive was almost within my grasp!

"Yeah," I repeated again. "What luck."

I had Marc Damon, flash drive in hand, just within my reach. *Breath slow*, I reminded myself. *Lose the questions*.

At the ground floor of the Emerson Building, I dashed out the front door.

"Hey, watch it, buster!" A man in a black pin-striped suit pushed back while I shoved my way through the throng of people.

I tried to keep the front door of the coffee shop in sight. I saw no one going in or coming out. I reached the shop and resisted the urge to rush in. I took a deep breath, hugged the side of the building and peered inside.

My view partially hidden by a large, artificial fig tree, I could see Marc at the counter, speaking to the barista while glancing furtively around. A young couple sat at a table nearby, whispering, foreheads together, oblivious to anyone around them. Otherwise, curiously, the coffee shop was empty. I saw Marc tap his suit coat pocket.

I moved away from the window, but stayed close to the side of the building. The way Marc was checking that front inside coat pocket, he had to be reassuring himself that the flash drive was still safe. The furtive glances meant that either he was plan-

ning on meeting someone and hadn't done the exchange yet, or he was worried about being followed.

Was that it? Was he meeting them here? Was the exchange about to happen? Damn. This was all happening faster than I'd expected. When did things get moved up? Had he found a buyer? The flash drive was right there, within my grasp!

Almost within my grasp, I reminded myself. Someone was on their way and about to take my most valued possession, the program code.

So, that had been the problem. The moment I'd allowed my fear of losing him *and* the flash drive overpower my common sense and professionalism.

I opened my eyes, turned my head toward the side window of the car and shook my head slowly. What had happened to me? In all my years, I'd always been the calculating, cautious, meticulous one. I'd never been one to make inexperienced, foolish mistakes, especially like the ones I'd made in the last two days.

I'd panicked. From the moment I'd moved back from the window of the coffee shop, I'd panicked. All my hard work and I was about to lose everything if I didn't get that flash drive before someone else did. I remember seeing all that money slipping through my hands if I didn't do something quickly. *Just slipping through my fingers like water. Shit.*

I closed my eyes again and laid my head back on the head rest. *In that fleeting moment I'd thrown all that experience away. I'd almost blown everything I'd worked so hard for. In fact, it remained to be seen whether or not I had. Either way, I'd never let that happen again.*

I let out an audible sigh. Maybe my life was catching up with me. All those years of traveling, one country after another, sleeping in strange hotel rooms with one hand on a gun and one eye open, waking up the next morning and struggling to remember

what city I was in. Years of solitude, of planning every move I made, every step, came rushing back. I'd always been looking over my shoulder; always been on guard. I could never relax. Perhaps all those years of solitude and paranoia were finally catching up.

How many men had I killed? Whose side was I on? Was there a side? Hell, who was I kidding? I didn't have a side, no loyalty to any country, even my own. My only allegiance was to the highest bidder and that allegiance was temporary at most, as long as it took to transfer the money to my account.

For all I know, there's a little group of men just like me pulling the strings for all of us. I can see them sitting up there in their secret office with lead walls; cold, calculating, extremely bright men who aren't from any country. There's no emotion to what they're doing. They look at the world like a monopoly game, moving their pieces around the board and manipulating utilities, oil, housing rates and wars.

I could definitely see that possibility. They pull one string and someone is in power. They pull another string to control world prices and someone else is in power. The shift of power is continual. One day you're head of a country, the next day, you're caught cowering in a cave. Maybe this was one great scheme; part of one giant game. Maybe I was a puppet. Or someone was on the twelfth floor of the universe, looking down on me, along with everyone else and pulling the strings.

I don't know any more. I can't think. Everyone I'd ever shot required shooting. What I had done was a job, man, just a job. But these kids...

"These weren't bad guys, just kids," I said out loud.

Suddenly, I couldn't remember how I got to that point in the alley, or why. I only remember that there was so little time and if I didn't act at that moment, all that time and effort, all that money, was going to slip out of my hands. The biggest deal

of my life. All those lonely nights, long flights, plans, secret calls that had been my life, culminated. All that came down to seconds. Up until then, there had been “their side” and “my side” and there had always been a reason they had died.

How did we get there, Marc Damon and me? How did we get to the moment when I stood at the end of a dark alley with my quarry cornered?

I'd raised my gun, squinted one eye, took aim and fired. The body jerked, frozen in mid-air, quivered slightly and slumped to the ground.

Marc Damon was dead. In an instant, his life and mine had changed. The puppeteer had pulled another string.

Chapter 3

I knocked on the door of Betsy's Upper East Side apartment. I needed to clear my head. Nothing else I had done had sorted these jumbled thoughts. I'd made too many mistakes lately and Betsy Johnson was just the woman to take my mind off all this. Not a bad place to hide out, either, just in case.

No response. I knocked again. On a Saturday morning, there should be no work. Maybe knocking at her door shortly after dawn was too early for her. I smiled. Betsy wasn't exactly a morning person.

A dark haired woman opened the door. Her silk robe opened slightly to reveal the soft curve of her breast. I let my eyes rove the length of her body. God, that woman was beautiful! Obviously just out of bed, her hair was still tousled with that look that I'd seen so many times before.

"Oh my God!" Betsy cried and threw her arms around me. "Where the hell have you been?" This woman had some kind of power over me, all right. The moment I saw her, last night's disaster slipped from my mind. All I saw was the milky soft sweetness of her skin and eyes a man could get lost in.

"Hey, gorgeous," I returned, wrapping my arms around her, kicking the door shut gently with my foot. Her hot breath warmed my cheek. A shudder of anticipation went through

my body. Instantly I morphed from the dead man I'd been to a man who'd come alive. Her body fluid in my arms, I wanted to envelop her.

"Oh, God, I missed you," she whispered.

I swept her up to the bedroom where I threw her down amongst the pillows, kissing her fiercely. She responded with hungry kisses of her own. It had been too long. I wanted this woman with a renewed passion that surprised me.

The long silk robe slipped away and I took in every inch of her being. Her quickened breaths coming fast in my ear excited me even more. I kissed the inside of her shoulder ever so lightly, then her body arched toward mine and I heard her sharp intake of breath when I moved my lips from her breast down along the soft curve of her belly. She struggled to unfasten my belt and reached for the zipper of my slacks. I quivered in anticipation at her fingers brushing against me. My pants dropped to the floor.

"I want you!" I whispered hoarsely. Her body responded and my lips came down on hers fiercely, almost violently. She parted her legs and clung to me, fusing her body with mine. At her muffled cry of ecstasy, my heart pounding in my ears, I took her quickly. The frustration of the last twenty-four hours ebbed from my body.

A long sigh escaped my lips, we hovered motionless a moment, then collapsed into each other's arms. I fell back against the pillows, and turned my head to look at her—her damp, dark hair clinging to her temples, her breasts rising and falling, her eyes closed in a sweet dream. Her face had that incredible freshly fucked look of contentment. A smile tugged at her lips. My chest swelled with pride. I was the one responsible for putting that smile on her face. Our encounter may have been quick, but the sex was good. I put my arm around her and pulled her close to me.

She laid her head on my chest and we were silent in each other's arms. I closed my eyes to revel in the soft scent of her perfume and perspiring bodies and the encompassing smell of hot sex. It felt good to be here. Real good.

"Hey stranger," she whispered, looking up into my eyes. "I missed you."

"Missed you too, Sunshine," I replied. "Although that should be pretty obvious." She smiled in return.

I fell into a contented sleep, hypnotized by her rhythmic breathing, her body nestled close to mine.

The smell of fresh coffee opened my eyes. How long had I slept?

She was perched on the edge of the bed, the silk robe closed, but softly draped off one shoulder. Her eyes seemed to be tracing every inch of my body.

"Hello again," she said, smiling. "I thought you could use a little breakfast and I didn't get a chance to eat, since a certain someone interrupted my beauty sleep!"

I grinned, dragging my finger slowly along her thigh.

"Well, if a certain someone hadn't looked so incredibly hot, we could have had breakfast first!"

She laughed and playfully pushed my insistent hand away. "You keep that up and we'll miss breakfast a second time!"

"What time is it?" I quickly added, "How long did I sleep?" I didn't want to sound like a man who just blew in for a little sex, only to leave right away.

She climbed back in bed with me, leaned against the pillows and pulled the breakfast tray closer.

"We only slept a little over an hour," she replied. "It's still early."

She poured me a cup of coffee from the silver coffee pot and I bit into a soft croissant, the buttery bread still warm. The woman

certainly had a way about her. Hot sex and warm croissants; two of my favorite things.

We ate in a silence broken only by an occasional sip of coffee. I realized I hadn't eaten anything but a burnt piece of toast since yesterday afternoon. Everything tasted exceptionally good.

"It's always so good to see you again, my little minx," I kidded, reaching for a second croissant. "You look incredible, you know. How's work going?"

"Oh, you know, kind of routine," she replied.

I put the croissant down, turned and stroked her cheek before tilting her chin toward me. "Hey, really, I'd like to know."

She looked at me tentatively for a moment and then nodded. "All right, Erik has me working on the correlation of single-base DNA variations among individuals with health and disease. I'm hoping that perhaps I could be on to something." Her words were hurried and I could see the excitement in her eyes. She quickly finished her last sip of coffee.

Erik Harmon was her boss. She thought he walked on water, but I pegged him for an arrogant, ambitious, self-righteous piece of shit. Unfortunately, Erik was an important player in this little love triangle of ours. Erik had been, and still was, my key target. Head of Betsy's company, he was instrumental to getting the information I needed.

In the beginning of our relationship, Betsy had been nothing more than my unwitting stool pigeon; a means to my end. At first I wasn't bothered that the married president of the company was shamelessly flirting with Betsy, but I was pretty certain that over the past six months, their relationship had turned into more. Now I was irritated just hearing her whisper the name of that little prick.

"If I can derive meaningful knowledge from the DNA sequence, that discovery could have a huge impact in years to come.

Finding the DNA sequences underlying diseases like diabetes, arthritis, cancer or heart disease alone, would have a phenomenal impact on science and medicine. Over thirty genes have already been pinpointed and associated with common issues such as deafness, blindness and breast cancer. It's an exciting time to be a scientist." She was almost breathless with enthusiasm.

I digested that sudden outflow of information, along with the second croissant, and tried to put my irritation with Erik on the back burner. She'd given me more information than I'd hoped for, but at least she'd opened up to me. In the past, extracting information from her had sometimes been difficult. She must be excited.

"Wow, that's great!" I said, still trying to put all the information together. I knew what she was talking about, after all, I wasn't an idiot, but the facts that she'd provided didn't sound like anything of value, so I was only half listening. I was more miffed at the reference to Erik Harmon than hearing what she had to say about DNA sequences. I was afraid to ask for more, in case questioning her would make it obvious that not only was I drilling her, I was drilling her for information as well.

She laughed. "Right. I'm sure you followed all of that. But thanks for your interest. This research really is exciting. Erik has been pushing me hard, but I have a real lead that I believe is significant. In fact, I've got an important meeting Monday that should give me the one piece of information I need. I honestly feel that I could be very close to something that could change everything in the scientific world the way we know it." She glanced at me furtively.

My muscles tensed, the croissant caught in my throat. I hoped she hadn't noticed.

Ok, that part I understood. There couldn't be...she couldn't possibly have any idea...could she? I chose my next words care-

fully. I wished now that I'd paid more attention to what she had been saying.

"Hmm. Change the scientific world the way we know it, huh? That's a pretty bold statement to make. Change the world in what way?"

Betsy slipped back out of bed and reached for the empty tray.

"Change in a big way; a very big way." She turned toward the kitchen with the tray, then looked back over her shoulder. "But I won't bore you with any more scientific mumbo-jumbo. I've already said more than I should. Besides, a girl has to have her secrets, doesn't she?"

I heard the sound of running water and dishes going into the dishwasher. I quietly mulled over that last bit of information. Could her company be working on something similar? I knew Erik Harmon well enough to know that he had to be up to something. Old instincts kicked in and there was no doubt in my mind that there might be something here for me. Could there be any possibility that Erik Harmon knew about Brian Dermish and what he had discovered on the Human Genome Project?

"What about you?" she called from the kitchen. "How's the international banking business treating you?"

"Busy," I said. "I just seem to have been so damn busy lately."

"I know exactly what you mean," Betsy answered from the kitchen. "I haven't spent more than a few days here at home and now I'm off again on Monday. You're lucky you caught me when you did!"

Banking had been my ploy. I'd told her I was in international banking in order to explain all those trips overseas and the weeks away. She had no idea of the real truth. The lie helped keep our hot and sexy relationship at an arm's length. I could see her when I wanted and explain my absences with the excuse that work had kept me on the road or abroad.

But I think our relationship worked well for Betsy, too. She was a beautiful woman, absorbed in her work. Even though she was DNAco's lead scientist, Erik Harmon seemed to have her dancing at the end of a string. He knew all the right buttons to push and had a wonderful way of making her feel important by catering to her ambition. That wasn't all bad. Manipulating her was just the way we both worked, but I always felt that Erik was controlling Betsy for his own good.

As a result, Betsy seemed to spend hours in the lab and even more trips abroad, comparing notes with other researchers. That left little time to develop our relationship. We met when we could, shared little of our personal lives with each other, had hot incredible sex and went on our way. *Our romance technically was based on little more than mutual respect and hot sex*, I reflected. Conversations were kept to a minimum and I always guarded how much she knew about me or my life.

On the other hand, besides finding out what I needed to know about her research at DNAco, plus keeping tabs on Erik Harmon, I really knew very little about her or her personal life outside our sexual liaisons. But that seemed to work for both of us. She was like a friend with benefits, but without the intimacy of friendship. Personally, I liked that; at least until Erik moved into my territory. I had a strange urge to pee on every corner of the apartment to mark my territory.

I glanced at my watch. Shit. I wanted to know more about what was going on with Erik. From what Betsy had relayed, I doubted that Erik was on to something concerning Brian, but then again, this was Erik we were talking about. I felt torn. During times like this, I wished I could be in two places at once. Part of me wanted to continue to press Betsy, but I had more urgent matters on my mind. I had damn little time to catch a flight and track down Brian Dermish. I'd already used up an hour of valuable

time sleeping. I was tempted to stay and quiz her, but whatever Betsy was working on with Erik Harmon would have to wait.

“Hey, Betsy?”

She peeked her head around the door of the kitchen. “Yeah?”

“Hey, sweetheart, you know I hate to eat and run, but actually...” *How was I going to get out of this gracefully? I had a lot on my plate and no time to spend the day idly, pumping her for more information.* I smiled at the pun. The sex was incredible, but work was work.

“Shit, kiddo, this isn’t going to sound good at all. Ordinarily, I’d love to spend the day with you, but I’m on my way to JFK to catch a flight. I just couldn’t leave this time without stopping in to see you. I honestly didn’t mean to just buzz the tower.”

She laughed and came over to the bed and leaned over and kissed me. “Apology, however insincere, accepted. Ok, go ahead, eat and run.” She laughed again. Her laugh was infectious.

“You can get out of leaving me after a quickie this time, bust-er, but you owe me one.” She turned back toward the kitchen.

“Ah, Betsy, you’re one of a kind.” I slipped out of bed and reached for my pants still lying on the floor. I didn’t even have time for a shower. I picked up my shirt, carelessly flung during the melee and slid the soft fabric over my shoulders. I reached for my keys and headed toward the kitchen, buttoning my shirt along the way.

I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her toward me. “I mean it,” I said softly. “You truly are one of a kind.” She returned my kiss and I let her lips linger on mine longer than I should. *God, she felt good in my arms.*

“Ok, now get out of here or you’ll miss your plane.”

Betsy laughed, slapping me on the butt when I turned toward the front door. I looked back at her, leaning seductively against the counter.

“You’re going to miss this while you’re gone,” she taunted, opening the front of her robe.

I sighed, tempted for a moment to dump the flight and take her back in my arms.

“See you next time around,” she said and blew me a kiss. I smiled and closed the door behind me.

Yup, truly one of a kind. She seemed to have everything I wanted in a woman.

Was there any chance she knew? True, I had to admit, she had a lot of ambition. She always talked about making a name for herself. She wanted to go down in history and she was in the position to get key information on the Human Genome Project.

I moved down the hall, away from her door.

Ok, let’s say she did find out something about Brian Dermish. Did Betsy have the wherewithal to get this information from Brian? Get it, hell, let’s face it, with her ambition, she’d be the first one to steal the information and claim the data for her own!

Could Betsy be an agent? Highly improbable. First of all, in my years of experience, I’d become acutely aware that real espionage agents don’t look that damn good. I smiled at the recent memory. But I could see that her ambition and ego were possible flaws that any agent could use to their advantage. Hell, I had, hadn’t I? But to go out on her own? Nah, I doubted she would.

But Erik Harmon? He was another story. Erik Harmon would do whatever he needed to do to make his company world renowned. If he had any idea of the project Brian Dermish was working on....

Sudden paranoia had me searching the street for signs of Erik Harmon. I didn’t have time to follow up on him right now, but I’d keep my eyes open, just in case.