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Protection for Hire

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PROLOGUE

Tessa Lancaster's rather freakish paranoia was what almost got her in trouble.

Her automatic reaction as she exited her uncle's club was to scan the dark streets. Seven cars, two on this side of the street and five on the other. Hard to tell if anyone sat inside them, but she didn't catch shadowy movement. A homeless man huddled in a doorway of a shop a few doors down, the same man she remembered seeing when she entered the club.

Her cousin, Ichiro, saw her movements and laughed. "Like somebody's going to jump you right outside Uncle Teruo's club? Nobody's that stupid."

"They may not know who owns the club. It doesn't exactly have 'Japanese mafia' in neon letters over the door."

"Everyone knows it belongs to Uncle Teruo." Itchy's arrogance was about as extreme as Tessa's paranoia.

A stiff breeze from the San Francisco Bay cut through her black leather jacket, and she curled her body tight as they headed toward his car, parked a block down the street.

They walked past the homeless man. Even though she remembered seeing him an hour ago, she still cast a furtive

glance at him through lowered eyelashes. His clothes were worn and dirty, and his body was coated with mud, but in streaks — as if he'd slathered it on himself. His hair was dirty, but maybe not quite as oily as it would be for someone who hadn't washed in weeks. And as she drew closer, she realized he also didn't smell ripe enough.

Her muscles bunched just as the homeless man jumped at them.

She reacted faster than Itchy, so she couldn't be sure who the man meant to attack first. She stepped directly in his path and captured his arm in an armbar.

However, instead of the counter-move she expected from an assassin, he yelped like a dog. "Ow! I'm sorry, it was just a joke!"

"What do you mean, a joke?" She didn't immediately release him.

"My dormmates ... a stupid bet ... how much I could get panhandling as a homeless person in one night ..."

A college prank? Tessa thrust him away with disgust.

"He was only going to ask you for money?" Itchy smirked as they walked away, leaving the man moaning and clutching his tender arm. "Your paranoia is getting psychotic, cuz. You could have killed him."

Maybe he was right. She'd been working for Uncle Teruo for seven years, since she was sixteen, and seven years was a long time to be always on the alert, to be expecting attacks from her uncle's enemies and her own.

Uncle Teruo had never given her orders to kill anyone, but she knew it was only a matter of time. She could take down a 250-pound man and knock him out with a rear-naked choke in less than thirty seconds, but she wasn't sure if she'd be able to take a killshot or snap a man's neck.

She rubbed her forehead. She realized that she was tired of all this. And she could see that her lifestyle and the danger in it was going to make her seriously crazy.

She had Itchy's car keys since she hadn't drunk anything tonight. She fumbled for the remote in her pocket when movement from a shadowy building made her spine stiffen. Itchy saw it a few seconds after she did and pulled his gun. She did the same with hers.

A scuffed sound came from the alley between a nail salon and Chinese restaurant, both of them dark with their windows glinting in the dim street lights like glowing orange eyes. Itchy raised the gun.

"Tessa," came a reedy voice.

She recognized it, although she almost didn't because her cousin Fred usually had a snarling, sneering tone when he said her name. She holstered her gun. "Itchy, it's Fred."

Itchy hastily stowed his gun, not wanting to get in trouble by accidentally shooting the son of the Japanese mafia boss.

Tessa approached the alley carefully, because even though she knew it was Fred, she didn't like the darkness shrouding him or the strange thinness of his voice. "Fred?" She paused, allowing her eyesight to become accustomed to the darkness before moving any closer.

"I'm here." He sounded tired. "You have to help me."

She listened, and caught the sound of movement in the distance. Footsteps. Maybe boots. Men's voices. Then she heard something she had never heard before—Fred sobbing. Alarm shot through her and she walked quickly toward him. "Fred, what's wrong?" The acrid smell of garbage burned her nostrils as she passed a dumpster.

He seemed to materialize in front of her, his face a pale moon,

but she could see dark splotches across his chin and cheeks, like black paint had splashed at him. This close to him, she could detect a sharp metallic scent that filtered its way past the smell of garbage.

“She’s dead,” Fred moaned, his eyes becoming crumpled lines in his face. “I killed her.”

“Who’s dead?” This wouldn’t be the first dead body she’d had to dispose of, although most of the time, it was for her uncle, Fred’s father, not for Fred himself.

“Laura.”

It took a second for her to realize why the name was familiar. Fred’s girlfriend. That’s right, Laura Starling lived in a loft apartment in this area.

“What happened?” Itchy asked.

“We got into a fight. And I got so mad. And the next thing I know, she’s dead and there’s this in my hand.” Fred held up his right hand, holding a bloody steak knife. He glanced behind them. “Where’s your car? We have to get away.”

“It’s fine,” Tessa told him. “You’ll be fine. We’ll get rid of the knife—”

“The police are after me.”

“*What?*” Itchy cast frantic glances around them.

“A neighbor called them when we were fighting. I ran.”

“Did they see you?” Itchy asked.

Tessa already knew they had. The booted footsteps were sounding closer, probably coming from the narrow street that ran behind these buildings. They were pursuing Fred.

They only had a few minutes.

They could take Fred in the car and go, but Fred’s fingerprints were all over Laura’s apartment, and the police would come to question him right away. How likely was it that he

hadn't been seen running away by a neighbor? Maybe the police would lie and tell him someone saw him, just to get him to confess. Regardless, Fred would crack like a crystal glass. He just wasn't strong.

Not like Tessa. The only way to save Fred was to deflect suspicion away from him.

Did she really want to save Fred? No. But she loved her uncle, and she'd do it for him, because he loved his only son.

"Give me the knife." She spotted a gallon container of bleach against the wall of the restaurant and nabbed it. It had maybe a half cup left, but that was enough.

She slid off her jacket and pulled off her black long-sleeved shirt, shivering in her sports bra. Tessa used the shirt to wipe the knife down, then cleaned it again with bleach. Luckily, the steak knife was one of those fancy modern knives that had been forged from one piece rather than having a tang and handle. She hoped she could compromise the blood so any of Fred's blood wouldn't show up on a DNA swab.

She tossed the bloody shirt to Itchy along with his car keys. "Take Fred and go. Put him in the backseat and make him lie down so no one can see him — knock him out if you have to."

"Hey," Fred protested weakly.

Tessa slid her jacket back on and gave Itchy her gun. "Tell Uncle Teruo. Make sure he has your car cleaned so there's no blood, and give him the bloody shirt to burn." She didn't trust Itchy to do a thorough enough job of it.

"What are you . . ." Itchy's eyes were incredulous as he stared at her. "What are you going to do?"

"What I have to." She tossed the knife in the dumpster. It would have her fingerprints on it and it would take them a few minutes to find it. The footsteps were coming closer. "Go, hurry!"

Itchy dragged Fred with him. Luckily he was smart enough to drive sedately away rather than burning rubber and attracting attention.

Within a few minutes, she heard the footsteps at the other end of the alley. “Stop!” someone called to her.

She broke into a run.

A cruiser pulled up in front of the alley, lights whirling. She hesitated, then tried to run around the car.

Someone rammed into her from behind, slamming her into the asphalt, scraping her cheek and smearing motor oil on her face.

As they cuffed her, the full realization of what she was doing finally hit her.

She was going to prison for a murder she didn't commit.

Chapter 1

The young woman was as out of place here as a Ferrari in a used car lot.

The first thing Tessa Lancaster noticed about the mother watching the kids in the game of Simon Says were her expensive shoes, gold and pearl colored heels with a dark gold rose over the peek-a-boo toe, which sank into the grass of the tiny backyard.

The second thing Tessa noticed about her was the gigantic black eye swelling the entire left side of her face.

She must be new at the San Francisco domestic violence shelter, because when she noticed Tessa looking at her, she smiled instead of turning away with a nervous glance.

With shoes like that, she didn't quite look like she belonged. Then again, the shelter was for any abused woman needing a place to stay, and who said rich women didn't get knocked around the same as prostitutes or waitresses?

Tessa raised her voice above the boisterous throng of children. "Simon Says . . . jump on one foot while patting your head and rubbing your tummy and turning in a circle!" Tessa bounced around in front of them, her hair flying out of its ponytail and

hitting her in the face, while the kids giggled and screamed and twirled in circles. They loved her. They didn't care who she'd been or what she'd done. They only cared that she would play with them for her entire volunteer shift at the shelter.

"Snack time!" Evangeline, one of the shelter volunteers and one of Tessa's only friends, called to the children from the doorway behind Tessa which led back into the main building. Like a gigantic blob, the kids raced into the shelter from the building's tiny backyard, still screaming, and some still whirling around from the Simon Says game.

One tow-headed boy ran toward the woman with the expensive shoes, clasping her around her knees and laughing up at her. She smiled as she reached down to pick him up, but he squirmed to be let go. He scurried after the other kids.

"He hasn't laughed in so long," she said wistfully as Tessa walked up to her. Her accent was like maple syrup. Southern. She could have been Scarlett O'Hara in the flesh—flashing eyes, graceful hands, svelte figure.

Tessa squelched a sigh of envy. "What's his name?"

"Daniel."

The sight of the woman's black, yellow, and purple mark in the distinct shape of a fist made a dark, growling blaze burn in Tessa's gut. She tried to keep her voice light. "He's made friends quickly. One of the little girls was already flirting with him."

"He's just like his fa . . ." Her smile faded as her voice caught on the word.

The boy's father? "Is he the one who gave you that shiner?" The words burst out of Tessa's mouth before she could think to temper them.

Oh, no. She looked away from the woman's shocked face and breathed in deep through her nose, trying to calm her temper.

The one thing she'd battled the most since giving her life to Jesus three years ago, and it still rose like a gladiator in her soul. "I'm sorry, that wasn't very sensitive of me."

A beat of silence. Then Tessa asked, "So, where are you from?"

"I grew up in Louisiana, but I've been in San Francisco for five years. Daniel was born here."

"Oh. What do you, uh, do?"

The woman gave Tessa a small smile. "I can shop like nobody's business."

Tessa laughed. It seemed like that's what she wanted her to do. But someone affluent like this . . . "How'd you find the shelter?" Wings Shelter wasn't exactly in the Presidio area of San Francisco.

Tears gathered like jewels on her long, dark lashes. "I was at the San Carlos Motel, but we had to leave."

She didn't have to say it, but Tessa knew her story, the same story as many other women here. She'd probably left her home and checked into a hotel under a false name, but the man who abused her found them there.

"A man on the street saw us. He led us to the shelter."

Wow, how likely was that? God really had led this woman here. An otherworldly stirring in Tessa's heart made her suddenly feel both small and huge at the same time.

"Tessa!" Evangeline called to her from the shelter doorway. "I know your shift is over, but Mina wants to see you."

Ooh, good news? She couldn't think of any other reason the shelter's employment coordinator would want to talk to her. "It was nice chatting with you."

"I better make sure Daniel doesn't get into trouble." The woman smiled at Tessa and then headed into the shelter.

She didn't even know the woman's name. But it didn't matter—the other women here would eventually tell her who Tessa was—or specifically, who her uncle was—and then the woman would delicately avoid Tessa the next time she saw her.

The thought made her feel like a thin glass ornament. She should be used to it—now that she'd been out of prison for three months, women still feared her just as they had seven years ago when she'd been an enforcer for her mob boss uncle and her dangerous reputation on the streets had been slightly exaggerated.

Now they feared her because they weren't quite sure what she was doing here at Wings.

Tessa took the stairs of the old Victorian house two at a time, each step punctuated by a creak. The second floor landing opened up into a long narrow hallway, and she remembered to skid to a stop and knock on the office door before entering.

Tessa had to wiggle between two of the three desks crammed in the small office—once a bedroom—to plop herself in front of Mina's desk. "You wanted to see me?"

Mina's light brown eyes clued her in—not the joyful, we-found-you-a-job look, but a sad, these-employers-are-idiots look.

"Oh." Tessa sagged a bit in the narrow folding chair. "What happened?"

"Well, I've been the one taking calls from employers because you put the shelter down as a reference."

Tessa wasn't supposed to know that. She straightened at the information. Why would Mina break the rules by telling her?

"There's a, um . . . theme to the questions they ask."

"Theme?"

"They almost all want to know if you're *the* Tessa Lancaster. The niece of Teruo Ota. The head of the San Francisco yakuza."

“Seriously?” Tessa closed her eyes, leaned forward, and bonked her forehead on Mina’s desk a few times. She just couldn’t get away from her past with the yakuza, the Japanese mafia. Would she ever be able to?

She suddenly sat up again. “They’re not journalists, are they?”

“No, although I had a few of those. I always check the caller name and company with the list you give us each week of where you’ve applied for jobs. If the person isn’t on the list, I tell them to go away.”

Whew. The last thing she needed was some rabid dog reporter with grandiose dreams of using Tessa to somehow take down the entire San Francisco Japanese mafia. Or worse, some gossip mag wanting the scoop on why one of the yakuza’s unofficial strong-arms was now volunteering at a battered women’s shelter and applying for a janitor position at Target.

Tessa bit her lip. “You, uh . . . tell them the truth?”

Mina’s eyebrows raised. “Of course I do. Well . . .” Her eyes slipped away from Tessa’s gaze. “I’ll admit after the third one of the day, I’m always tempted to tell them you’re Amish.”

Tessa giggled, then sighed. “I wouldn’t want you to lie. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that I have to take the consequences.”

“It’s just unfair, because you really have changed, but they don’t believe it.”

“No, it’s more like they don’t want to get involved.” Tessa had known it for a few weeks now, but hadn’t wanted to admit it to herself. She seemed to have acquired a highly developed ostrich mentality lately. “They don’t know why I’m applying for these minimum wage jobs, if I have an ulterior motive or if I’ve had a falling out with my uncle. They’re not stupid — they’re not going to hire someone who might cause problems for them, and

they're not going to hire me if it's going to make my uncle mad."

Mina pitched her voice low and leaned in to ask, "What exactly did you do for your uncle? You didn't . . . kill anyone, did you?"

"No, never. Auntie Kayoko saw to that."

"Who?"

"My Aunt Kayoko. Uncle Teruo's wife." More of a mother to her than her own mother. An ache blossomed under her breastbone, and she rubbed at it. "She protected me. She dissuaded Uncle from giving me any job that crossed some invisible line she had in her head. She was closer to me than my own mother, in some ways."

"Was?"

"She died last year." And Tessa had cried in her cell all day the day of her funeral, wanting to go but not allowed to. If Tessa had been released a year early, she'd have been able to say goodbye.

Mina cleared her throat. "So, you roughed people up?"

"I did whatever my uncle asked me to do." Tessa looked down at her hands. "It's probably best I not talk about it."

"Oh, of course. I was just thinking . . ." Mina flipped through a stack of file folders on her desk, then grabbed one and skimmed through the pages. "You can . . . basically take care of yourself, right?"

"Uh . . . yeah. I studied Muay Thai from when I was in grade school, and I also studied Brazilian jiu-jitsu, tae kwan do, and a little Capoeira." And basic no-holds-barred street fighting too, with a reputation among her cousins and her uncle's *kobuns* for having a streak of creative ruthlessness.

Mina's eyes widened at the list, but they also shone with excitement. "So how about a bouncer?"

Tessa wasn't sure what to think about that. "You really think someone would hire me as a bouncer?"

Mina made a face at Tessa's job applications folder. "They obviously won't hire you as a janitor, a burger flipper, a cashier, or a stock boy. Why not a bouncer?"

Why not? "I guess . . . although I don't know if I'd be comfortable working for a particularly shady nightclub. I've known the girls who work there, and sometimes it's only a step above slavery."

"It might be a step toward doing bodyguard work." Mina was on a roll. "You'd be perfect for that. Your own private company, you can pick and choose what clients you'll take, and you can more than take care of yourself."

Wow. That would be really cool. "Yeah. Okay, got any leads on bouncer jobs?"

"Uh . . . no."

"Oh, right. Battered woman not at the top of the bouncer qualifications list. I'll look online." Tessa rose and held out her hand to Mina. "Thanks for the idea."

"I'm sorry about those other jobs. I thought for sure that Fat Burger would hire you, but . . ."

Yeah, but was she really surprised? Aside from the fact she was an ex-convict, being an ex-yakuza didn't place her high on anybody's hiring priorities.

She walked down the stairs much slower than she'd gone up, and she headed to the quaint living room on the first floor, situated near the back of the house. A fire might be lit in the antique fireplace, and she loved the crackling sound and the smell. As she entered the room, she spotted the Southern woman's glossy dark head next to a couple other women at the shelter. They

all glanced at her with identical Oh-my-gosh-there-she-is-stop-talking-about-her expressions.

Tessa looked away, just in case they could see the sting in her heart reflected in her eyes. She didn't want to be feared anymore. She wanted to have friends who didn't know how to shoot an automatic weapon or boost a car. She wanted somewhere she belonged . . . but where would that be? She was drifting in between the world of the yakuza and the world of normal, and she wasn't in either one. She didn't want to belong to the yakuza world, but she was starting to think she'd never belong to the normal world either.

A stampede of footsteps. Tessa expected to see a rampaging gang of suspiciously quiet kindergartners come to attack their favorite playmate. Instead, the woman's perky head popped up in front of her.

"Tessa? Hi, I didn't introduce myself earlier, I'm Elizabeth St. Amant."

Tessa took the smooth, manicured hand. "Uh, hi." She glanced at the women Elizabeth had been talking to, and they had alarmed looks in their eyes.

"Oh, don't mind those cats," Elizabeth said. "They thought they were warning me off of you, but as soon as they talked about your unsavory past, I just knew you were perfect."

"Excuse me?"

"Even though they don't believe you've changed, why, as soon as I saw you with those children, I knew that you'd done a 180 like a flapjack on a griddle."

Flapjacks? Elizabeth had a way of talking really fast and draaaawling at the saaaametiiiiime that made it hard for Tessa to follow her. "What exactly did they tell you?" Tessa asked carefully.

Elizabeth actually started ticking them off on her fingers.

“Let’s see. First, you used to do some nasty things for your uncle, who’s some sort of head for the yuck . . . yak . . .”

“Yakuza. Japanese mafia.”

“Second, you’ve been in prison for murder.”

“Manslaughter,” Tessa automatically corrected. Not that it made that much difference, since she hadn’t done it in the first place.

“Third, the only reason you’re volunteering at this shelter is because Evangeline, who used to be your cellmate, stayed here a few months ago because of an abusive boyfriend, but then she started volunteering here, and she vouched for you when you wanted to volunteer here too.”

The problem was that some of the women here didn’t trust Tessa because she wasn’t really one of them. Tessa had never been abused, had never been a mother. In fact, because of her background, she had never been afraid for her own life.

“Fourth, you’ve been going to the church here at Wings. And after hearing that, and seeing you with my Daniel, I knew you must be trying to turn your life around. You’re exactly the kind of person I need.”

“What do you need?” The woman didn’t seem too loco, so Tessa wouldn’t mind helping her. She guessed.

“My husband is trying to kill me,” Elizabeth announced, “so I want to hire you as my bodyguard.”

Chapter 2



Heaven must smell like homemade ramen noodle soup. Tessa stood in the doorway of the Japanese restaurant and breathed deep, closing her eyes and picking out Jerry's signature spices in his ramen broth. She was drooling and she didn't care.

Well, it had been seven loooooooooooooong years. Considering she'd eaten Jerry's ramen once a week up until then, she ought to be excused an excessive Pavlovian reaction. Since she'd gotten out of prison, she'd moved into Mom's house and began looking for a job, so she hadn't had time to come here to get her fix.

"Can I help you?"

The young, perky voice interrupted her olfactory cloud of ecstasy and made Tessa open her eyes.

The restaurant hostess, a young woman with long, glossy black hair, stood in front of the wooden hostess podium just inside the restaurant's glass doors. She had a plastic smile and her eyes were just a little wary of the crazy lady smelling the restaurant. Tessa realized she knew her—Karissa Hoshiwara, one of Jerry's granddaughters. Of course she wouldn't remember Tessa, she'd only been a high school freshman when it all happened.

“I’m a friend of Jerry’s. Is it okay if I go in back to see him?” The politeness sounded stiff on Tessa’s tongue, but after so many years, she didn’t really have the right to barge into Jerry’s overheated kingdom unannounced.

“Oh.” Karissa’s smile lost its edge, as if being her grandfather’s friend explained all sorts of you-ought-to-be-in-therapy behavior. “Sure, go ahead.”

As Tessa turned to head back to the kitchen, Karissa suddenly asked, “Do I know you?”

Tessa turned to meet curious eyes. Innocent. *My eyes were never that innocent.*

No, she had to remember that she was a new creation in Christ! With copious exclamation points! She had to act like it! “Yeah, actually, your mom is friends with my mom.”

“Oh.” Karissa’s brow wrinkled faintly, marring the perfect skin of a young twenty-something. “What’s your name?”

“Tessa Lancaster.” She couldn’t help the tension in the back of her neck, waiting for the reaction.

Karissa’s dark eyes blinked. Then widened. And then she smiled. “Oh! You’re *that* Tessa.”

She’d provoked a lot of reactions in her life, but never one like this. “Excuse me?”

“I saw your picture from that old newspaper clipping.”

So did everyone. Still didn’t explain the one-step-below-rock-star glow in the girl’s eyes. Tessa wasn’t sure what to say, so she smiled weakly. She probably looked like a sick pig.

“Evangeline showed me the clipping,” Karissa added.

“Evangeline?” The name made Tessa’s smile widen. “How do you know her?”

“I, uh . . . I met her at Wings.” Karissa’s cheeks were faintly pink.

“You went to Wings?” Karissa didn’t look old enough to be married, let alone at a domestic violence shelter.

“I used to live with my boyfriend,” Karissa confessed. “He started getting rough with me, and we lived nearby the shelter, so I went there one night. Evangeline was volunteering that night. The shelter asked me about my family, and when Evangeline found out my Grandpa Jerry worked for the Otas’ restaurant, she told me about you.”

“She was my cellmate for three years,” Tessa said.

“Oh. I liked her. But I haven’t seen her in a few months.”

“You moved out of your boyfriend’s apartment, right?” Tessa hated that she sounded like a mother but she’d seen too many horrible stories at Wings.

Karissa nodded. “I’m living with a girlfriend in an apartment near San Francisco J-town.”

“You drive from San Francisco to San Jose every day to work?”

“Oh, no. I’m only here today to help Grandpa Jerry out. He’s short-staffed today.”

“That’s nice of you, to give up your Saturday to help him out.”

Her eyes flickered away. “I didn’t have anything else planned.”

Tessa recognized that look, and the meaning behind Karissa’s words. Many of the women at Wings had lost touch with their friends during their abusive relationships, but in trying to regain their normal lives, they battled loneliness and the struggle of making new friends. She wondered if Karissa was the same way.

“Lots of the women staying at Wings could use someone to chat with,” Tessa said. “Uh . . . if you came to church at Wings with me and Evangeline one Sunday, you could meet them, maybe . . . be a friendly face.” And maybe Karissa wouldn’t be as lonely herself. Evangeline had helped Tessa find the church

at Wings soon after being released, but this was the first chance she'd had to invite someone else.

Karissa looked uncertain.

"You don't have to," Tessa said. "But in case you wanted to. You could see Evangeline again."

"I . . . I think I'd like that." She looked like she even meant it.

"Call me and I'll pick you up. This is my mom's home phone number," she added with a pained sigh. No job, no cell phone. Mom's cell phone was on one of Tessa's aunts' plans and Tessa didn't want to utilize yakuza cell phone minutes.

A harsh voice gave a short bark of laughter. "Still living with your mom, Tessa?"

Rita, one of the waitresses, approached them with two steaming bowls of ramen. Rita had always been jealous because Tessa's close relationship with her uncle caused her to receive a kind of respect not typically given to women in the world of the yakuza. In contrast, Rita, the sister of one of the older yakuza members, had only received this waitressing job at Jerry's restaurant. "It's been what, four or five months? Still haven't moved out yet?" Rita managed to say the innocuous line with a sneer in her voice.

Tessa reached out to oh-so-accidentally knock those bowls into Rita's . . .

No. Tessa drew her hand back, blinking to clear her head. She had to control her temper better. She wasn't that person anymore.

"Get back to work, Karissa," Rita hissed, with a significant glance over Tessa's shoulder. A couple had entered the restaurant while Karissa chatted with Tessa, they now stood waiting patiently just inside the glass doors. Tessa hadn't even noticed.

Karissa gave her a small smile and turned to greet the newcomers. Rita wove through the tables to deliver her ramen bowls.

As Tessa headed through the main dining area toward the kitchen at the back, passing patrons in teakwood chairs, her heart started tap dancing. She'd met a new friend. Invited her to church. And in a few minutes, Jerry would crush her in a ginger-scented embrace, then sit her down with a bowl of ramen the size of a wok, stuffed with vegetables and his homemade noodles.

"Coming through!" Rita's voice sounded almost at her shoulder.

Tessa jerked in surprise, and her elbow connected with something hard. Then the sound of a shattering clay bowl sliced through the buzz of restaurant patrons, and she felt a lash of pain against her ankles.

"Yow!" She grabbed her stinging leg and tried not to hop on her other one as she spied steaming liquid streaming through the grout in the floor tiles. Knowing her luck, she'd twist her knee and do a double back flip landing square on her behind. She side-stepped the river of noodles.

"Now look what you've done," Rita hissed.

"I'm sorry."

"You did that on purpose."

Tessa's temper snapped. "What is your problem? I have better things to do than waste calories making your life miserable."

Tessa's raised voice sounded abnormally loud in the small restaurant.

Rita's face paled. It was the same fearful look Tessa had seen when fellow prisoners found out who she was and what she had done for her uncle. Rita's reaction made Tessa realize her reputation as a bully hadn't changed, even though she wasn't working for her uncle anymore.

And that thought made her anger die away. Because she *had*

changed. She wasn't a bully anymore. And she needed to act like it.

"Let me help you clean up," she said.

The normal restaurant noises rose again, although some patrons gave her sidelong looks. Tessa found a mop in the broom closet near the restrooms at the back of the dining area and started cleaning up the spilled ramen broth. Rita bent to pick up the clay bowl pieces, head down, but casting occasional glances her way—filled with fear.

It hurt.

"Got a new job so soon, Tessa?"

The taunting voice shot adrenaline down Tessa's spine and she snapped to attention. She whirled around to face her cousin Fred, Uncle Teruo's son, striding through the restaurant like he owned it.

She had expected Fred to at least be obligated to come see her or talk to her in the three months she'd been out, yet this was the first he'd shown his face to her, and it looked like it was entirely by accident.

Fred had always hated her for being stronger, faster, and smarter than him. Then one night she discovered him panicked because he'd murdered his girlfriend. Because she knew her uncle would want her to, she'd taken the bloody knife and shouldered the blame for Fred's crime.

Now her cousin owed her, but rather than gratitude, it made his hatred slice even deeper than before. That hatred glared out of his eyes as he stalked toward her.

Fred had always unfairly lashed out at her with his nasty temper, but Tessa had never let him get away with it. She wasn't about to let him get away with it now.

She'd never been so grateful for her Caucasian father's tall

genes as she straightened and stared down at Fred's beady eyes. He stopped a few feet from her, probably because he'd have to crick his neck to glare at her and that would just be embarrassing for him.

"Dealing with garbage suits you." Fred's lip curled.

"Don't worry. I'm not after your day job." Tessa smiled.

Her comment went over his head. "I don't clean up messes."

"No, I clean yours up for you."

His neck reddened.

To think she'd gone to prison for this moldy tomato.

No, she hadn't gone to prison for him. She'd gone to prison for his father.

She flashed him a smile. "Fred, do you have a point to make, for once in your life, or are you just here contaminating the air?"

She caught a few gasps from the quiet restaurant that had stopped to witness their tense conversation. She realized that because of what she'd done for him, she could freely insult this rat dropping whereas others could not.

"You can't speak to me that way," he spat at her.

"I just did, you squashed slug." And Fred knew that if he touched her, she'd use his head to clean up the spilled ramen instead of the mop in her hand.

He sputtered. Fred didn't have many brain cells devoted to quick comebacks. "You ex-convict."

"What's wrong, Freddy-weddy? If you're going to insult the ex-convict, you better be prepared to take what you dish out."

"Tessa, leave him alone."

A commanding voice filled the restaurant even though he hadn't raised his voice above its normal growl.

Rita and the other waiter scurried away, and patrons sud-

denly turned back to their meals, although the volume was barely half what it had been before. Subtly, the air became denser, as if blanketed by an invisible fog.

Not a fog. The presence of the man walking into his restaurant—one of several he owned—was more charged than a mere fog.

“Uncle Teruo.” Tessa stood her ground as he approached her, aware of Fred scuttling out of his father’s way like a cockroach. She dropped her eyes and bowed at the waist in a sign of respect.

He paused, acknowledging her greeting, then suddenly his large square palms were cupping her face, rough against her skin but tender in their touch, raising her gaze to meet his. His eyes, half-shadowed by eyelids puffy with age and responsibility, gleamed with the familiar tenderness that was like water to her parched soul. He shook her face gently, playfully, then drew her to him in a brief embrace. “How are you, Tessa?”

“I’m fine, Uncle,” she spoke into his suit jacket, breathing the familiar scent of his favorite brand of cigar. He had hugged her like this the day she’d been released, and the smell brought back that feeling of being free, of being home. Her fingers curled briefly on his back, then he straightened and stepped away.

“Have you eaten yet?” he asked her.

Now those were the words she wanted to hear. “Nope.” There was that drool again, right on cue.

He turned her by the shoulders and pushed her ahead of him toward the kitchen, where Jerry was still blissfully unaware of the almost-fight between the niece and son of the San Francisco yakuza boss.

...

Tessa had thought Uncle Teruo's arrival was something along the lines of a rescue from a fate worse than death, but now she wasn't so sure. She felt a bit like she'd jumped from a wok into hibachi coals.

She'd gotten her hug from Jerry—today, more garlic-scented than ginger-scented—and her massive bowl of ramen, which was thankfully very garlic-scented.

Eating in Jerry's office with Uncle Teruo sitting across the desk from her . . . not such a happy place.

Normally she loved talking with Uncle Teruo. Except not when he asked things like, "How are you feeling?"

Read: Up for anything more strenuous? Like something that involves beating the stuffing out of somebody?

"I'm doing fantastic now that I have this." She indicated her bowl, peering through the steam at the floating bean sprouts. She wanted to say grace, but somehow saying grace in front of her sociopathic cellmates had been easier than saying grace in front of her Buddhist, gangster uncle.

"You're still staying with your mom?"

Read: So I know where to find you if I want you to do something for me, especially anything involving breaking fingers.

Tessa nodded at the corner of a gigantic cube of tofu peeking out of her soup. "Until I can get a job and move out." She closed her eyes and bowed her head. Maybe Uncle would get the hint . . .

That would be a *no*.

"What kind of job are you looking for?"

Read: I'm delighted you're willing to return to the workplace, because I have the perfect job for you.

Inspiration struck for how to neatly avoid the question. "Uncle, hang on a second. I need to say grace." She jerked her head down.

Dear Lord Thank you for this food Amen.

“Grace? What grace? Who’s grace?” His bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows lowered over his eyes.

Read: You don’t tell your uncle to “hang on.”

“I needed to pray before I could eat.” Tessa picked up her chopstick and the boat-shaped spoon. She took a magical sip of broth, ignoring the stinging heat, rolling the salty, savory goodness on her tongue before letting it slide down her throat, warming as it went down. She didn’t need crack—she had Jerry’s ramen.

“Are you done eating? I need to discuss things with you.”

Tessa froze with the noodles on her chopstick only inches from her mouth. She sighed and let them plop back into the soup. So much for the hoped-for casual chat, non-related to the work she’d done for him before getting arrested.

Uncle reached over and took her hand. “I want to say again, thank you for what you did.”

It took her a second to realize he was referring to Fred, to inserting herself under suspicion for his son’s crime seven years ago. Despite his humble words, the cool, dry skin of his palm lay heavy over her knuckles. “You’re welcome, Uncle,” she replied.

He released her and leaned back in Jerry’s chair. “I can give you a job.”

From anyone else, it would have been a generous, innocent offering. From Uncle Teruo, it carried the weight of a royal statement and deep undercurrents. “Uncle, I already explained this to you.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “You’re just worried. You’re too smart to get caught again.”

As opposed to Fred, who was stupid enough to have been wandering around with the bloody knife in his hand when Tessa found him that night. Fred would have folded under police questioning and led to trouble for Uncle if he’d actually been arrested.

“And I would not ask any more favors from you,” Uncle continued.

If she'd been eating, she would have snorted ramen noodles. That was a loaded promise. Uncle might not actually voice any requests for Tessa to take the heat for someone's crime again, but the situation and Japanese sense of duty would compel her to offer to do it or be held in disfavor by the old-fashioned *oyabun*.

She wasn't sure how to put this delicately, so she plunged full-steam ahead. “Uncle, I told you in my letters from prison and when I first saw you after I got out. I am a Christian now, and I'm trying to learn to love people, not break their kneecaps.”

His frown looked suspiciously like a pout. “I never asked you to break kneecaps.”

She rolled her eyes. “Unnnncleeeee ...” Her exasperation drew the word out into six syllables. “You know what I mean.”

He lifted a forefinger as a thought came to him. “Your cousin Ichiro became a ‘Christian,’ too, but he still works for me.”

Tessa rolled her eyes. “Itchy's girlfriend grew up Episcopalian and has no idea what he does, so he went to church with her so he could get into her pants.”

He glowered at her. “Are you saying you're going to church so you can ...” His mouth worked silently while red stained his cheeks. “... with some boy?”

Tessa choked. “What? No.” This was not going the way she'd hoped. “I go to church because I've become a different person.” She'd been tempted to say better person, but the way her luck was going, Uncle would think she was insulting him and order a hit on her. Or just send Fred to poison her air space.

An indulgent smile hovered around his stern mouth. “This

is new for you. Don't be so hasty to make a complete life change until you know this is who you want to be."

Three years as a Christian wasn't long enough? Then again, she'd had only a few months as a Christian outside the prison walls, so maybe he was justified in thinking it might be a temporary thing.

Except it wasn't. She knew it wasn't, with a knowledge deep in her gut, a knowledge deeper than the secret places of her heart. A knowledge that gave her both peace and strength to say, "Uncle, I'm not going to change my mind."

"Be reasonable. What kind of job can you get?"

She mutinously glared at her cooled bowl of ramen. "I got my college degree in prison." Psychology. It had fascinated her because she'd spent so much of her life reading the emotions and thoughts of the people she talked to on behalf of her uncle. She wasn't exactly proud of what she could do—knowing when people were lying, what they were feeling, being able to manipulate their emotions—but she wanted to use that skill for helping people rather than making or collecting money for the yakuza.

Uncle Teruo's face gentled. "You know that I believe you can do well at anything you set your mind toward, but with only a Bachelor's in Psychology, there aren't many jobs available. Plus ..." He sighed. "I'm sure you've realized by now that there aren't many people who would hire an ex-convict, especially for any type of psychology job."

She had known that even when studying for her degree. She just hadn't really wanted to admit it to herself because her studies had been so fascinating and she hadn't wanted to switch to a different degree program.

“Don’t be stubborn,” he said. “You haven’t had any job offers, have you?”

Telling her to stop being stubborn did what it usually did—made her completely pigheaded. “I have had offers. I just chose not to take them.”

“Oh? What?”

“A woman offered me a job as a bodyguard.”

“Paying how much?”

“Er . . . we didn’t discuss it.”

“Why not?”

“Well . . . her assets are still being held by her husband, whom she ran away from because he was using her as a punching bag.”

“So she couldn’t pay you?” he said slowly. Uncle’s face had that expression that wondered where his niece’s brains had suddenly dribbled to.

“She said she’d pay me as soon as she got her money back. She called some family friend who was going to get her a really good lawyer.”

“I see.” He stared at her for a moment, eyebrows raised, mouth a thin line. “And you turned down this incredibly lucrative business deal because . . .?”

She stared down at her soup bowl. “She has a three-year-old son. And I wasn’t sure about the kind of trouble I’d attract, considering what I used to do.”

“Your ruthlessness is what makes you an Ota,” he said proudly. “But it does collect some enemies.”

Only her uncle would praise her for her ability to cause physical pain.

Tessa had been sorely tempted to take Elizabeth up on her offer, especially after talking with Mina about her own bodyguard business, but she realized that it wasn’t fair to Elizabeth

to saddle her with an even more dangerous person than her fist-flying husband. Tessa would rather try to find a legitimate job first and prove to the world that she was no longer working for her uncle. Once Tessa was off people's radar, then she could protect her clients without bringing even more danger to them.

The old Tessa wouldn't have cared who she put in harm's way, but the new Tessa hopefully thought about other people more than she used to.

"And this is the only job offer you have?" Uncle Teruo asked. He settled back in his chair, the very picture of an uncle indulging his niece's pipe dreams.

"I'm interviewing at OWA tomorrow," she said.

"Didn't you already apply to OWA?"

"Yes." Twenty-two times. "So?"

"This is for another salesperson position?"

"Uh, no. Janitor."

His brow darkened. "My niece is not a janitor."

She was when even McDonald's wouldn't hire her. Maybe they thought she'd kill someone by flipping a burger in their eye. "It's a foot in the door," she said. "From there, I can get promoted. Outdoors and Wilderness Adventures is my favorite store." Just the name made her want to smile.

He sighed heavily and opened his mouth to protest, but she said softly, "I really want this job, Uncle." *I really want to go legitimate.*

He surprised her by reaching across to grasp her chin between his square fingers. "I miss having you around," he said.

Tessa stilled. Uncle Teruo and his wife, Aunt Kayoko, had always given her more affection than Tessa's own selfish mother and irritable sister. With Aunt Kayoko gone, Teruo was her family. She may not want to do illegal things anymore, but she

couldn't deny his hold on her heart. She knew that as long as she had him, she'd never feel alone.

"Uncle." She swallowed. She hated denying him. "Please understand."

"I do." He sighed heavily. "I do. And I owe you a debt I can never repay."

"You don't owe me anything."

"I owe you lunch." He gestured to the soggy noodles in front of her. "Eat. I don't want to be accused of starving my niece."

He stood with stately grace. On his way to the office door, he paused as if suddenly remembering something. "You said you're still staying with your mother?"

"Yes." The tightness of her voice gave her away.

Uncle Teruo found that vastly amusing. He chuckled as he turned the door handle, he chuckled as he exited the office, and he was still chuckling as he turned in the doorway to lean into the office to tell her, "Six more months."

"What?"

"You'll come back to me begging for a job so that you can move out, because I know my sister. You won't be able to live with Ayumi for longer than six more painful months. Have fun!" He shut the door with a soft click.