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A Dangerous Stage

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**A DANGEROUS
STAGE**

Chapter 1

Tessa Lancaster checked in her car's rearview mirror and spotted the headlights of the slightly battered black pickup truck again. Yup, they were definitely being followed.

And the person doing it was really bad at it.

He'd nearly crunched into her rear bumper when he'd had to jam on the gas through an intersection in order to keep up with them after the light turned from yellow to red. It had given Tessa a good view of his face—coarse and red, almost as fiery as his short, spiky hair, with a mean sneer that curled the thin mustache on his upper lip. A second man was in the passenger seat, but Tessa had only gotten a fleeting glimpse of a broad face and dark hair.

She turned to Erica, who was sitting in the passenger seat. “Don't turn around to look, but I think your ex-boyfriend is behind us.”

Erica bit her lip and paled so much Tessa worried she might throw up. “How'd he find us? How'd he know we were going to the bus station tonight?”

“I don’t think he knew,” Tessa said, switching lanes aggressively and causing a cacophony of car horns behind her. “He might have followed us from Wings.”

“How did he know we were at the women’s shelter? Wings didn’t tell him we were there, did they?”

“No, they don’t do that.” Tessa yanked hard on the wheel of her ancient Toyota, nicknamed Gramps, and sent the car into a tire-squealing left turn just in front of a wave of traffic from the opposite direction.

“Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh!” Erica grabbed onto the door handle with both hands.

As they zipped away, they heard another blare of car horns, but Dan’s black pickup was left stranded in the left turn lane, unable to follow them.

The rather neat maneuver—if Tessa did say so herself—had awakened Emily, who was strapped in her car seat in the back, and she sent up a wail. Erica turned to soothe her daughter. “It’s all right, honey. Tessa’s just trying out for the Indy 500.”

A flash of headlights made Tessa glance in her rearview mirror again. “I don’t think we lost him though.” Dan had managed to swerve his left turn between two oncoming cars—making one driver slam on the brakes—and now roared down the street trying to catch up with them. Subtlety was not Dan’s middle name.

“What are you going to do?” Erica’s voice had a low tremor, a remnant of her fear of Dan and his flying fists. The young hairstylist still had yellowing around her cheek and left eye from the last time she’d seen him.

“Erica, I am going to get you and Emily on that bus tonight,” Tessa said firmly. “I promise you that.”

She considered the situation. Dan had possibly figured out they were heading to the bus depot, since she had left Wings domestic abuse shelter heading northwest. But when she'd begun suspecting they were being followed, she'd pulled four right turns in a row to confirm. Dan had followed each turn.

After that last left turn, they were now heading southwest. Right toward the Caltrain station.

Perfect. That's where Dan would assume they were heading.

But first Tessa had to make sure Erica and Emily were safe.

She could totally see Dan charging into a wild car chase in the middle of San Francisco, but she didn't want her passengers in the car if that happened. Yet this was the middle of the city. Where could she drop them off where they'd be safe?

"Erica, get into the backseat with Emily," Tessa said, "and unbuckle her from the car seat."

"What are you going to do?" Erica's elbow clocked Tessa in the temple as she scrambled between the front seats.

"I can get far enough ahead of Dan to make a right turn." Tessa checked out the street signs. Yes, she was now on Fourth Street. "It'll give us a couple seconds where he won't be able to see us. When I stop the car, I want you to get out fast—and I mean *fast*—and run into the In-N-Out with Emily. Hopefully by the time Dan turns the corner, you'll be inside the restaurant, and I'll be driving down the street, and he'll never know you're not with me in the car."

Tessa floored Gramps's accelerator, and he responded with a hack and a wheeze from his ancient engine before picking up the pace. She wove in and out of the cars on Fourth Street, a wide, straight shot toward the Caltrain station. Dan tried to catch up, but his larger truck had a harder time maneuvering into the

small spaces between the cars. He attempted to muscle his way in a few times, but the drivers were reluctant to let him in, so he had to move slowly in order to not take out someone's front bumper. Tessa zipped Gramps farther away from him.

"Are you ready?" Tessa glanced in her rearview mirror at Erica's tense face. She'd dragged Emily into her lap.

"Yes." Erica reached for the door handle.

Tessa cut across two lanes of traffic and swerved right toward the new In-N-Out Burger, which flashed bright and new since it had opened off of Fourth and Brannan a few weeks ago. She slammed on the brakes, earning her a car-horn blast from the SUV behind her who had to swerve around her to continue down the street. "Go!" she shouted to Erica.

Erica was already out the door, her daughter in her arms, before Gramps even came to a complete stop. She slammed the door shut behind her and raced toward the bright lights of the building, which was filled to the brim with people. She instantly blended in with the other twentysomethings who were grabbing a quick bite in the late evening.

Tessa threw Gramps in gear and jerked away from the curb. About a second and a half later, she saw Dan's pickup turn the corner onto Brannan and head toward her.

Showtime.

She cruised down the street, making a few turns to head toward the Union Square Park area. As she drove, she dialed 9-1-1 on her cell phone.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?" The woman sounded faintly bored.

Tessa injected as much theatrical fear as she could into her voice. "Please, help me! I think someone's following me. I'm

nearing the corner of Maiden Lane and Grant Avenue.” She didn’t disconnect the call but tossed the prepaid phone onto the passenger seat so she could concentrate on her driving.

She turned onto Maiden Lane, a narrow one-way street bordered by tall buildings that housed boutiques and art galleries, heading toward the Gambit, a small nightclub and bar that opened a few months ago. She passed the restaurant, which was fronted by a line of people waiting to get in. Colored lights flickered out from the open doorway. The deep bass of a dance beat made Gramp’s steel frame shudder as Tessa drove by.

She slowed as Dan’s pickup turned onto Maiden Lane. When he was only a couple car lengths behind her, she sped up toward the intersection of Grant and Maiden.

Then she swerved the car sideways in the middle of the street and came to a halt.

Dan was too close to stop. His brakes squealed a split second before his truck rammed into the tiny Corolla.

The impact made Tessa jolt in her seat while her seat belt sliced into her torso like a sword blade. She couldn’t breathe for a few seconds, her stomach crushed with pain.

She came to her senses before Dan did. She was staring at the steering wheel and out the front window, where she could see she’d hit a lamppost at the corner of Maiden and Grant. The white steel pole looked a bit slanted from where it rose out of her car’s front bumper.

But she remained in the car, waiting.

Dan seemed to take forever to finally get out of his car. Tessa grabbed her head, pretending to be dazed, as she heard his car door open and then slam shut.

Then she heard a second car door slam. That’s right—a

second person was with Dan. She'd been so focused on her driving she had forgotten he'd had a passenger.

No problem.

Dan yanked open her car door so hard it rocked on its squeaking hinges. He grabbed at her shirt to pull her out of the car, but her seat belt was still firmly fastened, and it dug into her already bruised stomach with a sharp snap. She winced.

Cussing, he hit her, a jab to her cheek.

But she had seen him crank his arm back and had been able to roll with it, reducing the impact so that it felt more like a hammer than an anvil. Regardless, it still made her cry out as his fist crunched into her face. Breath hissed between her teeth as the pain radiated out from her cheek.

Dan reached across her and hit the button to unfasten her seat belt, untangling her from the strap to drag her out of the Corolla. "Where is she?" he roared, spit flying in Tessa's face.

"Hey," said a man's voice over his shoulder.

Oh no. Tessa glanced over to see a young man dressed in black slacks and a silk shirt, obviously one of the people who'd been in line to get into the Gambit. He approached Dan warily. "Let her go, man."

Tessa wondered if Dan would let her go to engage with the Good Samaritan, but his fists tightened on the fabric of her T-shirt, and he glanced back toward his truck.

It didn't look like the collision had done much damage to the front of his truck, aside from a frowning front bumper. Tessa got a look at Dan's passenger now and saw not one but two people.

One was a burly man, black goatee and long black hair that he flipped out of his eyes. She noted the gesture.

The other was a woman who sported a gigantic black eye,

cut lip, and hair mussed as if it had been grabbed by a meaty fist. What was surprising was that she was dressed in a cream-colored business jacket and matching skirt, a crumpled white silk blouse underneath. She limped on Italian leather heels next to the burly man, her thin arm firmly in his grasp.

They'd beaten this woman up. And brought her with them in the truck. Tessa's jaw clenched tight.

The burly man tossed the woman aside onto the street, where she lay exhausted on the asphalt. He then approached the Good Samaritan and shot his hand out to punch the guy in the nose.

Blood spurted as the young man whirled away, staggering and grabbing his face.

No, Tessa wasn't going to stand for this. She grasped at Dan's hands, which were still full of her shirt.

He removed one hand to slap her across the face.

The blow, coming on top of the other blow to the same cheek, rocked her more than she expected. Maybe because she hadn't been sparring as much for the past sixteen months as she had when she was in prison. She'd gotten soft. She blinked away the stars in her vision and took advantage of the opening Dan gave her by slamming the heel of her hand into his nose.

His other hand released her shirt, and he jerked back a half step. She followed up with a knee to his groin, a fist to his kidney, and an elbow to the back of his exposed head as he folded in half. He dropped to the ground.

Her elbow stung from where it had collided with his skull. She shook it off and turned to face Dan's sidekick.

He approached her with more caution than Dan had, his fists up. He moved like a boxer, and he had the shoulders of one. She brought her fists up as he took a swing at her, testing her,

and she easily dodged him. He took another swing, this time more forceful, and she ducked, feeling the air whooshing against her skin as his knuckles just missed her temple.

He took a third shot at her, a beefy uppercut, but as his hand retracted, his long hair fell over his eye. Tessa took advantage of his impaired vision and snapped her leg up in a front kick that slipped between his upheld hands and collided squarely with his jaw.

He reeled backward, his eyelids already starting to fold as her blow knocked him for a loop. She advanced with him, swinging in a reverse roundhouse kick that caught him hard in the temple. He was unconscious even before he dropped to the ground with a satisfying smack, his entire body limp.

Tessa's hands shook with adrenaline, and the entire left side of her face was a swollen mass of throbbing pain. She stumbled as she walked toward the woman in the business suit. "Are you all right?"

The woman looked up at her through her one good eye and nodded numbly.

"You're okay now." Tessa looked up as a few people from the crowd that had been gathered in front of the Gambit approached her.

"Are you okay?" asked a young blonde woman with a short silver skirt and glittery purple top. "The police are on their way. People called 9-1-1 as soon as the cars crashed."

Tessa remembered the 9-1-1 call on her phone—which was probably somewhere on the floorboard of the wrecked car—and figured they'd probably be here soon. "Did anyone call the club manager?"

"I saw the bouncer head inside," the woman said.

At that moment, a short, stocky Japanese man pushed his

way out of the club doors and rushed toward them. His black Hugo Boss suit made him almost invisible in the darkness of the narrow street, but Tessa recognized him.

“Itchy,” she said as he drew near, “I was hoping you would be here.”

Especially since the Gambit was owned by her uncle Teruo Ota, leader of the San Francisco yakuza — the Japanese mafia — and her cousin Ichiro always liked going to their uncle’s newest clubs. She’d deliberately avoided her family connections in the twelve months since she’d gotten shot by a Chinese Triad assassin, because she wanted to be legitimate and didn’t want to be dependent on her uncle’s money or resources. But right now, she could use Itchy’s help.

“When the bouncer told me about an Asian girl taking on two guys, I knew it had to be you, Tess.” Itchy’s deceptively sleepy eyes took in Tessa’s aching face and the woman’s black eye. “What happened?”

“Those two guys were tailing me.”

“Oh, that completely explains why your face is purple and you wrecked my dad’s car in front of the Gambit.”

“I wrecked the Corolla in front of the Gambit because I knew there would be at least one *kobun* here who could lend me a car.” Tessa hoped none of the onlookers knew that *kobun* was Japanese for a yakuza member.

Itchy rolled his eyes. “You really think someone’s going to lend you a car after you did this?” He flung his arm out toward the smashed Corolla.

“I’ve got a single mother and her daughter stranded at the In-N-Out on Brennan. I have to go get them so they can make their bus tonight.”

“Erica Parker,” the woman croaked.

Tessa regarded her with narrowed eyes for a long moment. “Who are you?”

“Charlotte Quilly. I’m Joseph Tucker’s admin.”

“Wait a minute. Joseph Tucker? Erica’s lawyer?” Then the pieces fell into place. “You’re the one who messed up and sent those papers to Erica’s home address rather than to the Wings shelter.”

The woman drew in a sharp breath, looking offended. “How was I to know it was going to be an issue?”

This Charlotte Quilly was the reason Erica had to escape on that bus tonight. Erica’s abusive ex-boyfriend, Dan, had opened the envelope from her lawyer, which contained copies of documents Erica had signed a couple weeks ago, and discovered that his girlfriend—formerly his punching bag—had inherited a cool ten thousand dollars from a great-aunt. He’d been scouring San Francisco trying to find Erica ever since.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Charlotte insisted. “I’ve sent papers to the wrong addresses before, and it’s never been a problem.”

“They beat you up to get you to tell them where Erica was staying,” Tessa said, her voice neutral. “Then they followed us from Wings.”

Tessa supposed she shouldn’t blame the woman. Most people who had been tortured this way would give up the address of anyone, even a single mother staying at a domestic violence shelter. Tessa’s new faith in Christ demanded she give grace the way grace had been given to her. She had beat up plenty of people for her uncle, and God had still forgiven her.

And she guessed that Charlotte wouldn’t mess up an address again anytime soon.

The police finally arrived with flashing lights and solemn

beeps from their squad cars. They parked a few feet from the accident and the men's prone bodies.

Itchy groaned. "You had to wreck in front of Uncle's club, didn't you?"

"They're not going inside the club. All the witnesses are out here. Besides, Erica's and Emily's lives were in danger. I had to take care of these guys somehow."

While waiting for the police to take her statement, she crawled onto the seat of her totaled car and rummaged for her cell phone, which had disconnected after the dispatcher ended the 9-1-1 call at some point. She straightened, tugging her shirt down over her briefly exposed lower back. She then called to check on Erica.

"We're fine!" The young woman had to shout a little to be heard over the noise inside the In-N-Out. "We're snacking on fries at an inside table."

"This might take a few more minutes," Tessa said, "but we'll make your bus tonight."

"Okay."

The policeman who talked to Tessa was young, too young to remember her face from when she and Itchy had been involved in shady dealings in San Francisco more than eight years ago. He took her statement but didn't seem to believe her when she said she'd thrown a few punches and kicks to get the two men to leave her alone. The policeman obviously thought the Good Samaritan, not the slender girl in leggings and a long-sleeved T-shirt, had been the one to dispatch the men.

The Good Samaritan talked to another officer and seemed to be feeding their impressions, mimicking punches in between dabbing at his broken nose.

Tessa was relieved, truth be told. The street was a bit dark, and maybe the other witnesses would give only vague accounts of the fistfight. She just wanted to fade away as a hapless victim rather than be drawn into anything that would bring her family connections to light.

Dan and his boxer friend were handcuffed and sulking in the backseat of the squad car. When the officer turned his attention to the two men in the car, Tessa nagged Itchy into letting her borrow his car, a brand-new black BMW coupe, then left to pick up Erica and Emily and drive them to the bus depot.



Standing in front of the waiting bus, Erica folded Tessa into a hug, holding her tight to convey her gratitude.

“Remember the tips I told you for staying off the radar. Just in case Dan gets out of jail faster than we expect.”

“Thank you for setting all this up and helping us to get away. I wish you’d let me pay you, especially now that I have my aunt’s money.”

Tessa shook her head. “You’ll need it soon enough. Emily will probably want to go to some expensive private college.”

Erica laughed and gave her another strong hug. “I’ll keep in touch.”

“You can email me or write to me through Wings. I volunteer there twice a week, usually.” Tessa gave Emily a smacking kiss on her round, soft cheek, making the little girl giggle. “Good-bye, sweetheart.”

“Bye-bye.”

Tessa sent them off, waving at them as the bus drove off into

the night. The satisfaction of helping Erica warred with the empty feeling of another person moving out of her life. Tessa's clients came and went. Her old yakuza mafia connections had been severed when she stepped away from the family. And Charles was gone.

She felt a small stab in her heart. She had been proud of herself for only thinking about him once a day now.

Tessa drove back to the Gambit, where Itchy was pacing outside the club, waiting for her. He circled the car as she drove up, inspecting it for scratches.

"This wasn't here before," he accused her as he fingered an almost invisible scratch along the car's left rear panel.

"Yes, it was," Tessa shot back. "What, like there are any bushes for me to drive through on the streets of San Francisco?" She tossed him his car keys. "Thanks for the ride."

"It's only because you could kick my butt if I said no," he groused.

"And don't you forget it." She gave him a quick peck on his clean-shaven cheek. "It's good to see you, Itchy." She thought back and realized that the last time she'd seen him had been ten months ago when she'd gone to her uncle's house for Christmas. She hadn't made it to Uncle's annual Fourth of July barbecue.

He nodded toward Gramps, now a crumpled heap being loaded onto a tow truck Itchy had called for her. He gave her a sidelong look. "Not that I intend to be your personal car supplier, but you need a new one now, right?"

She gave him an evil grin. "Why, thanks, Itchy, I'd love to take your Beamer off your hands—"

"No, no, no," he said hastily. "Keep your paws off my new baby. But Dad just got a 1991 Suburban from a friend of his for cheap."

“Really?” Tessa couldn’t help but be interested. A ’91 Suburban was built like a tank. With her new bodyguard business, Protection for Hire, the extra protection of solid steel would make her—and her clients—feel more secure.

“I’ll have Dad call you.”

“Thanks, Itchy.”

He waved at her, already circling his car to get into the driver’s seat so he could find it a nice safe parking spot. She waved back as he drove away, then dialed Wings on her cell phone.

“Hello. Wings Domestic Violence Shelter. This is Karissa.” Karissa’s voice sounded as young as she was, a perky twenty-two years old.

“Hi, Karissa. It’s Tessa. I didn’t know you were still there tonight.”

“I was just about to leave. What’s up?”

“I hate to bug you, but could you pick me up near Union Square Park?”

“What happened to Gramps?” Karissa asked, surprised.

The sound of a motor filled the air as the Corolla was slowly lifted from the street onto the tow truck. “Um ... he finally retired.”

Chapter 2

What happened?” Tessa’s best friend and old cell mate, Evangeline, asked as Tessa entered Wings thirty minutes later.

“Oh, just another day on the job.” Tessa’s cheek, swollen from the blows she’d received from Dan, made her words come out a bit muffled.

“You know, that gets old after the twentieth time you say it.” Evangeline gave her a dry look.

“It’s true, sad to say.” Tessa’s stomach was still bruised from the truck colliding with her and the seat belt cutting into her torso. She winced as she sat down on a couch in the living room. It was empty, since most of the inhabitants of Wings were asleep in the rooms at the back of the old Victorian house.

Tessa tentatively touched her swollen face, but Evangeline slapped her hand away. “Karissa, would you please get me some ice from the kitchen?” she asked, then started cleaning up Tessa’s face.

“I wouldn’t think you’d normally get this beat up,” Evangeline said as Karissa returned with a bag of ice.

“This time, I was trying to start a fight.” Tessa winced as Evangeline dabbed alcohol on a cut.

“Why?”

“I managed to crash Dan’s truck in front of a nightclub with people outside it, so I wanted them to see Dan beating me up. Someone was bound to call 9-1-1 or at least go get the nightclub manager.”

“Wait a minute. Dan? As in Erica’s abusive psycho ex-boyfriend? How’d he find out you were taking Erica to the bus depot?” Evangeline’s brown eyes were sharp as they studied Tessa’s face.

“Joseph Tucker’s admin accidentally sent inheritance paperwork to Erica’s home address, not to Wings. They tracked down the admin and beat where Erica was staying out of her. They were probably watching Wings and saw me drive her out tonight. Ow!” Tessa flinched as Evangeline’s hand twitched while she was dressing a cut, probably from the ring Dan had been wearing.

Evangeline frowned. “I’ll talk to one of the Wings’s directors tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to get anyone in trouble,” Tessa protested.

“Joseph Tucker needs to hire admins who don’t give away information on clients who are hiding from abusive boyfriends,” Evangeline snapped, her dark brows drawing low over her eyes. “For these women, mistakes like that can have serious consequences. If it had been anyone else taking Erica to the bus depot tonight, Dan would have gotten to her and hurt her. Again.”

Tessa had nothing to say to that. Even Karissa’s lively dark eyes were somber as she watched Evangeline attach a bandage to Tessa’s cheek.

Evangeline slapped the ice pack over Tessa’s face. “There.”

“Ow.”

“So if you deliberately crashed your car and let Dan beat you up, you’ve got to have some other injuries,” Evangeline said briskly. “Fess up.”

“My ribs feel like I’m wearing a steel corset. Probably from the seat belt.”

“Let’s see.” Evangeline lifted Tessa’s shirt, but it was Karissa who gasped.

Tessa looked down, but she couldn’t see anything around the icepack and her swollen cheek but a mass of red, green, and blue swimming together. “What? What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing.” Karissa swallowed. “I’ve never seen your tattoos before.”

“I got that one when I was seventeen.”

“I didn’t know you were so young when you got it. Weren’t you still living with your mom?” Evangeline said.

“That’s why I had the artist draw it around my torso. Easier to hide it. Later, when I got more tattoos, I kept putting them in places I could cover up, because my sister wouldn’t have let me visit my niece if I’d looked like yakuza.” She didn’t want to alarm Karissa, but like most of the yakuza, she had large, vibrant tattoos all up her back and down her thighs. But the flaming dragon that circled her waist was different from other yakuza tattoos, yet it was similar to her uncle’s dragon tattoo, and she liked it the best. She hissed as Evangeline, who had been gently feeling her ribs, touched a sore spot.

“I think it’s broken. Why didn’t the police insist you go to the hospital?”

“They did, but I told them it looked worse than it felt. I don’t have health insurance.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Just bind me up like you did last time. I healed fine.”

“Yeah, right.” But Evangeline dug out the flexible cloth ACE bandage from the first-aid kit. “That’s the reason you’re always whining and complaining.”

“At least I’ve never been wrong. If my ribs ache, it means it’s going to rain.” She gritted her teeth as Evangeline bound her torso.

“I saw two guys with big dragon tattoos at Uncle Jerry’s ramen shop the other day,” Karissa said. “It was all over their arms and stuff.”

Tessa didn’t say anything, but if they had large dragon tattoos and were hanging out in a shop owned by Tessa’s mafia uncle, they were probably yakuza.

“It was kind of weird,” Karissa said. “At first I thought they were accountants or math geeks, because they were talking numbers like in some code. But then they mentioned television and a singing competition and odds. I guessed they were talking about gambling odds and were betting on one of the singing shows on TV.”

Betting on a singing show? Even though gambling was Uncle Teruo’s bread and butter, it surprised Tessa that the yakuza would take bets on something as unpredictable as that. Unless . . . She looked away from Karissa. Unless they were rigging the show. If that were the case, the less Karissa and Tessa knew about it, the better.

Karissa’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve got that look.”

“What look?”

“That ‘I can’t talk about it or I’ll have to slice off your pinky’ look.”

Tessa rolled her eyes. “Yakuza do not slice off other people’s

fingers.”

“Aha! I knew it was about the yakuza.”

“It’s not. Or if it is, I don’t know about it, since I’ve been going to insane lengths to avoid most of them for a year now.”

“Yeah . . . I suppose mafia relatives make family parties rather interesting.”

“By the way, Erica said to give you this.” Evangeline reached into her cardigan pocket and withdrew an envelope.

As soon as Tessa touched it, she knew it was cash. “I told her not to pay me.”

“Erica is almost as stubborn as you. Besides, you need the money.”

“You do?” Karissa’s brow wrinkled. “I thought your former client, Elizabeth, was referring all her rich friends to you, since she knows the entire world.”

“She still is, but the jobs haven’t been steady or long-term. Usually just a weekend or two, or even just a one-night event. I’m not penniless, but I’m not making enough to be able to rent an apartment of my own. That’s why I still live with my mom.”

“Can’t Charles get you clients?” Karissa asked.

At Charles’s name, Tessa felt like a boot had hit her in the stomach.

Karissa continued without noticing. “He’s got to have some clients who need protection from whoever’s suing them.”

As Karissa was speaking, Evangeline’s eyes widened and her mouth pulled down at the corners. She seemed to be trying to signal Karissa to stop talking.

Tessa swallowed against a tight throat. “I haven’t talked to Charles in a year either.”

Karissa ignored Evangeline’s hand, which was not-very-subtly

twitching in a slicing motion to get her to shut up, and said, “A whole year? You mean since the last time *I* saw him at that party at your house? I thought he was on retainer with you or something like that.”

Heat began to radiate from Tessa’s neck and cheeks. “I . . . haven’t needed him.”

“Isn’t he costing you a ton since he’s on retainer?”

“No, he said he waived his retainer fee because I saved his mother’s life from those Chinese assassins.” Saying it that way made it sound like Tessa was talking about a Jet Li action movie. “But I can’t see his firm really agreeing to that, so I think Elizabeth got the firm to waive the fee, seeing as how one of their former senior partners had tried to kill her.” And now it sounded like a John Grisham novel.

And she was babbling. *Shut it, Lancaster.*

Time to go. “Well, thanks for patching me up.” She got gingerly to her feet. “Let me know if you hear of anyone else who needs a bodyguard.”

“I still think you should ask Charles—” Karissa started to say.

Evangeline, standing slightly behind the young woman, whipped her hand up and clapped it over Karissa’s mouth. She spoke to Tessa over Karissa’s shoulder. “And how are you going to get home? Didn’t you crash your car?”

Tessa froze. “Oh. Yeah.”

“I love you, but I’m not driving you home to San Jose, because it’ll take too long. And it’s late to be using public transportation. The beds are all filled here, but you could sleep on the couch—”

Karissa yanked Evangeline’s hand from her mouth. “You can come home with me. I’m ten minutes away, and I have an extra

bedroom because one of the roommates moved out.”

Karissa’s eyes held a rather predatory gleam that Tessa didn’t trust. “Uh . . .”

“And we can spend some time chatting. We haven’t done that for a while. And you can tell me what’s up with you and Charles.”

A topic of conversation Tessa would sell her car in order to avoid. Oh, wait. She didn’t have a car anymore. “Why are you suddenly asking me about him?”

“Oh, because I saw him yesterday.”

“Where?” Tessa asked before she could stop herself.

“At Sophie’s Cajun Restaurant. Josh and I went there for lunch, and I saw Charles there with his mom.”

What did he say? Did he look like he was doing well? Did he say what he was up to? Tessa swallowed the questions that leaped to her mouth and instead croaked out, “Oh.”

“He spent an awful lot of time on his cell phone, so I talked mostly to his mom,” Karissa said helpfully. “She invited me over for dinner sometime. She said Sophie’s is the best Cajun restaurant she’s tried in California, but it doesn’t compare to her cooking. She promised me shrimp creole to die for.”

“Yeah, it’s great.”

Tessa realized her mistake as Karissa’s expression became curiously suspicious. If that was an expression someone could have. “You’ve seen Mrs. Britton?” Her voice was deceptively mild.

“I go over to visit her once a month or so.” Whenever her son was at work.

The first time Vivian had asked her over, Tessa had been a bit nervous considering her mixed emotions about Vivian’s son. But Vivian had just enfolded Tessa in a warm embrace, and

everything had been the same as before ... when Tessa hadn't known that Charles had urged the judge to add two years to her prison sentence.

"Uh, you know, I think I'll brave mass transit tonight. Thanks for the offer."

"Oh, don't be silly. Just stay here. I'll head home and leave you in peace." Karissa sighed with disgust as she went to pick up her purse. "I don't know why you won't talk about him ..."

"It's complicated." As in she couldn't understand how she could want to both kiss him and punch his lights out at the same time.

"I used to tell that to my counselor when I was talking about my ex-boyfriend," Karissa said as she headed for the door. "My shrink said it usually wasn't as complicated as I thought."

After Evangeline left for her bed, Tessa observed her nightly ritual of reading a few chapters in her Bible, but the words swam in front of her eyes. Similarly, her prayers that night for her family's health and another bodyguard job seemed to be hitting the ceiling and bouncing back.

As she tried to find a comfortable spot on the lumpy couch, which was covered with musty-smelling blankets, she reflected that Karissa's counselor was right. Her relationship with Charles wasn't complicated.

It all boiled down to the fact that she would never, ever forgive him.

Chapter 3

His brother was going to die right in front of him.

Charles Britton winced as he watched the tall, black-haired fighter swing a roundhouse punch that caught his brother on the jaw. Eddie stumbled back a few paces, looking dazed and almost touching the ropes edging the fighting ring. His opponent followed with a flurry of jabs to Eddie's face and head. But Eddie flinched away from most of the blows and swung an uppercut through his opponent's guard, making the man's head snap back when Eddie's fist glanced against his chin.

"You get him, son!" Charles's mama hollered from where she stood next to him. She punched a fist into the air. "Woot! Woot!"

Had Mama seriously just said *woot woot*? Charles didn't know what was worse, watching his brother getting pummeled in the middle of the fighting ring or standing beside his mother with her teenage vocabulary. Thankfully, no one had heard her, since everyone around them was also shouting.

Eddie's opponent did a strange diving move and grabbed Eddie's waist, driving them both to the mat with an alarming

thud. Mama had a pained look on her face, but she wasn't hysterical or panicking, so this must have been a normal thing for a mixed martial arts fight. Which Charles would have known if he'd gone to any of his brother's scrimmage fights earlier this year.

The guilt leached away as Charles watched Eddie's opponent press his forearm against his brother's throat. It looked like the opponent was having trouble. Eddie had a hand clamped to the base of the other man's head and was tilting it forward and down, and his legs were wrapped around the man's waist.

The man tried to get out of Eddie's grip, planting his foot, trying to get leverage for his body. But then, suddenly, Eddie grabbed the man's wrists and did some twists that pushed the man's head closer to the mat. And then Eddie's legs jumped from the man's waist to encircle his head and one arm.

Charles recognized that choke hold. Eddie had used it to subdue the Chinese assassin at his house last year.

The opponent struggled for a few moments, his arm trapped against his head within the triangle formed by Eddie's locked legs. The fighter's face was screwed up in pain and frustration. Then the fighter's hand tapped against Eddie's leg, and Eddie released him.

It was over. Eddie had won by tap-out submission.

"Glory, hallelujah! He won!" Mama jumped up and down like a teenage girl at a Justin Bieber concert.

Out of the speakers, the fight announcer's voice boomed. "The winner of this fight, at two minutes, twenty-three seconds, in the third round, by triangle choke submission . . . Eddie 'The Fighting Britton'!"

"What?" Charles said.

“I know. His name needs work,” Mama replied before going back to screaming and jumping.

Charles and Mama squeezed past people and scrambled over chairs to get to the ring as Eddie stepped out of it. He practically fell on Mama in his joy.

“I did it, Mama!”

“I’m so proud of you! And that other boy was so much bigger than you too!”

Charles winced a bit at the backhanded compliment, and Eddie’s face also twisted into a grimace, but then his normal good-natured smile shone out. “Thanks, Mama.”

“Great job, Eddie!” Charles said as Eddie crushed him in a sweaty hug that made Charles exhale a short, “Ooof.”

Suddenly Eddie’s voice in Charles’s ear shouted, “Tessa!”

The ringing in his ears distracted Charles for a moment as Eddie moved behind him. Then he realized what his brother had said.

Tessa.

Charles whirled around to see Tessa’s luminous face above his brother’s sweat-streaked, bare shoulder. Charles swayed in dizziness, although maybe it was because he had turned around so quickly. Or maybe it was because of the look in Tessa’s amber eyes — part surprise, part longing.

Then she blinked, and her eyes chilled.

“Did you see?” Eddie was asking as he released her. “In the second round, I did that feint you taught me, and he fell for it.”

“It was textbook. You were magnificent.” Tessa’s smile glowed up at Eddie, and Charles felt something slithery uncoil in the pit of his stomach.

He should go. He was expected back at the law firm and had

a mountain of material to go over before court tomorrow morning. But the sight of Tessa made him want to stay, just to hear her voice, see her smile. Even if her smile wasn't for him.

"Tessa." Mama reached for her to give her a hug. "I knew you wouldn't miss Eddie's first official fight."

"I arrived a little late," Tessa said. "I had to borrow my sister, Alicia's, car, and she was late coming home from work."

"Why did you have to borrow her car? Is Gramps okay?"

"Oh . . ." Tessa scratched the back of her neck, just under her glossy golden-brown hair. "He was having problems. He's so old, you know. I'm not surprised he was on his last legs."

Something about her tone or face or gestures made Charles think she was lying. Or at least stretching the truth a bit for Mama. What would she be lying about? She was only talking about her car being out of commission . . .

He studied her face intently and thought he detected a slight puffiness on her left cheek, and her skin seemed powdery, even under the dim lights from the rafters above. Was she wearing makeup?

"What happened to you?" he asked before he could stop himself.

The look she gave him would have vaporized butter.

Mama said, "Charles, what do you mean?" She turned to Tessa. "Did something happen?"

"I'm fine, Vivian. I don't know what Charles is talking about." Tessa glanced at him, her face hidden from Mama. Her expression clearly said, *Shut up before you worry your mother, you moron.*

Okay, well, maybe he mentally added the "you moron" part.

"Are you coming to my victory party?" Eddie asked Tessa.

Charles didn't think a person could half-look at him, but Tessa managed it. Her smile was a little stiff, but she said, "I wouldn't miss it."

She was going to the party. He hadn't considered that. Then again, he hadn't been sure it would be a victory party or a keep-Eddie-from-wallowing-in-misery-after-his-crushing-defeat night. If Charles stayed for the party, Tessa might eventually mellow enough to talk to him. She might even warm up to him enough to talk about the weather.

No, he had to get back to the firm. Two of the senior partners were there with Rick already, and while they understood he'd had to leave for an hour, they wouldn't appreciate him ditching them for a party.

"Mama, Eddie, I'm afraid I have to get back to work."

Mama's blue eyes had that same expression they'd had when he'd come home from school with a bloody lip and dirt all over his new clothes because he'd been fighting. "Why?"

"We have court in the morning, and my team is still at the firm going over documents. They're expecting me to come back after the fight."

Eddie's eyes faltered, but his smile was friendly enough. "That's okay, I understand. I'm glad you were here."

"I wouldn't have missed it, Eddie." He pulled his brother into another hug.

Tessa's neck was flushed—probably her face, too, but it was covered with makeup. However, she seemed more composed than before as she said good-bye to him.

As Charles turned to leave, he heard Mama say, "Tessa, you should come over for lunch again. I haven't seen you in over a month."

Charles had the strange sensation that his legs were marching him away faster than he intended, even while a heaviness in his gut seemed to weigh him down. He already knew Tessa visited Mama—always when he wasn't home—so why did it upset him now? Why was he acting like this?

He got into his car and slammed the door. Tessa obviously wanted nothing to do with him. Before tonight, she'd avoided talking to him for a year—a whole year!—even though he was on retainer for her.

Maybe she just hadn't needed a lawyer.

Maybe she hadn't been able to get away to see his Mama except during weekdays.

Or maybe she'd never, ever forgive him for what he'd done to her.

Charles drove out of the gym's parking lot and headed north out of Daly City into the heart of San Francisco. It was early evening, but the traffic was still a bit sluggish.

He arrived at Pleiter & Woodhouse and immediately headed to the conference room, where his friend Rick Acker, another partner in the firm, was poring over discoveries and making notes. At the other end of the table, two senior partners in the firm, Jon Yee and Edward Dennis, were fingering through two more boxes full of paper.

"Finally." Rick tossed down his pen and leaned back in his chair. "Did Eddie win?"

Charles nodded. "By triangle choke submission."

"Triangle choke? Maybe I should learn MMA. Then my kids would listen to me." He grinned but then rubbed his forehead with his fingers. The skin around his eyes was tight with pain.

"Another headache?" Charles asked softly.

“I’m fine.” Rick dropped his hand and gave his normal slanted grin. “I was worried you might not come back. Like the dog when one of the kids leaves the front door open too long. Whoosh!” He sliced his hand forward.

Charles gave him a level look. “I’m so flattered to be compared to a bolting dog.”

“Okay, maybe you’re more like Lightning McQueen. Or Miguel Camino. Or—”

“Have you been watching *Cars* again?” Charles demanded.

Rick shrugged. “Hey, I’m just glad the youngest finally outgrew *Sesame Street*.”

“Charles, if you’re done chitchatting, Rick could use some help sorting through those papers,” Jon called from the other end of the table in a droll tone.

Charles guiltily dropped into a chair and pulled a stack to him. “Where’d the associates go?”

“They’re going through another twenty boxes of papers in the copy room,” Rick said. “We’re ‘all hands on deck’ tonight.”

When they finished three hours later, Charles felt as if his eyeballs were going to fall out of their sockets. Tempers had flared, and both Jon and Edward had snapped at Rick and Charles several times as they scrambled to get ready for court the next morning. Charles took it in stride with his usual resilience, but Rick’s face seemed to be getting grayer as the night wore on.

When Jon and Edward finally left the office, both tired and frustrated, Rick flicked his pen on the table with a loud clatter. “I wish Jon would just get off my back.”

Charles glanced up at him. “Don’t take it personally. I seem to recall a hotshot lawyer telling me that when I first started here.”

Rick snorted, but it was a dispirited sound. “That hotshot

lawyer didn't have three losses under his belt in three weeks. It's like they've forgotten about all the clients I've brought into this firm, all the settlements . . ." He sighed.

Charles clamped down on a pang at the thought that in the past few months, he hadn't been as successful as he needed to be in bringing in high-profile clients either. His highest profile client was actually Tessa, or rather, her San Francisco-mob-boss uncle, who had paid her retainer fee, but since Charles couldn't actually tell the firm where the money came from, it didn't add to his street cred with his peers. "I need more clients," he mused.

"Everyone needs more clients," Rick snapped. "I had a dozen leads, and none of them panned out."

"I had about that many too."

Charles and Rick finished up the last few pages they had left, then finally packed up. "Are you still in that marathon training group?" Rick asked him.

"Yeah, we're on target to be in shape for running the Napa Valley Marathon in the spring." He picked up his briefcase. "I never thought I'd enjoy running like this. I was a terrible athlete in school. But it's been satisfying. And I've met some nice people."

"Any cute girls?" Rick winked.

Charles laughed because Rick expected him to. "I don't have time for girls."

Rick sobered. "You're still too hung up on that yakuza woman."

"She's not yakuza."

"She used to be. Not to mention the fact she's an ex-convict."

"Hello, she's my client. I wouldn't bad-mouth her to you if she paid me."

Rick followed Charles out of the conference room and shut off the lights. “You need a wife, you know.”

Charles did a double take. “Did you somehow body-snatch my friend and replace him with my mama?”

“I’m serious, Charles. Now that you’re partner, you have to set your sights on senior partnership. They look for two things — success and stability. You have to win your cases, and you have to show you have a stable home life. That usually means a wife and kids.”

“I’m only thirty-two.”

“I got married when I was eighteen.”

“The love of your life was your next-door neighbor. My next-door neighbor was Colonel Morrissey, a die-hard bachelor with twelve pet pigs.”

Rick blinked at him. “You’re making that up.”

“Ask my mother.”

“You’re not distracting me with your weird Louisiana stories,” Rick said. “You need a wife to further your career. And preferably not one who’s an ex-convict, ex-mafia woman.”

“I’m not about to marry an ex-convict, ex-mafia woman,” Charles said. But the words grated against his throat as they came out.

“Look, I could come up with a list of eligible young women. And I promise they’d be pretty, smart, and socially adept.”

“Are you sure they’d want to be with me? I may be pretty and smart, but I’m a social clod.”

“In reality, you’re pretty ugly and only smarter than a chimp, so you’re actually perfect.”

Charles glared at Rick as they exited the office and then punched the button for the elevator.

“So I’ll help you on the female front, but you’re on your own for getting new clients,” Rick said. “And while you’re at it, get me some fresh leads too.”

“I’ll be sure to pick them off my tree when I get home.”

“It’s too bad neither of us golfs.”

“What is it with golf and wealthy businessmen?” The elevator doors opened, and they both got in. “Why can’t wealthy businessmen play some other sport? Then I could meet them while playing beach volleyball or something like that.”

“Hey, you said you met some people in your marathon running group. Any candidates?”

“They have a rule that you can’t talk business during the runs,” Charles said. “Apparently, one time some guy joined the group specifically to hit people up for his roofing business.”

“Yeah, I guess even Bill Gates would want to run in peace.”

The name jolted Charles as much as if the elevator had slammed to a full stop. “I don’t run with Bill Gates, but I do run with Steven Nishimoto.”

Rick’s mouth dropped open for a full five seconds before he pulled it closed. “And you’ve done something about this beautiful lead, right?”

“I told you, no business during the run.”

“What about afterward, doofus?” The elevator doors opened but Rick stayed where he was, staring incredulously at Charles.

“He leaves right after the run. He’s probably pretty busy since the next Sapphire computer is rumored to hit the market next month.”

The doors closed with both of them still inside, but the elevator didn’t move. Rick shook his head. “I forgot. You probably don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

“Just about every lawyer here at Pleiter and Woodhouse has tried to get Steven Nishimoto as a client.”

“You’re starting to exaggerate like your kids, Rick.”

“No, I’m dead serious. I’ve gone after him. Rodriguez. Jon. Doug. You name anyone here, they’ve tried. And not just our firm, but I know people from at least three other firms who’ve tried to get him.”

“Well, he’s probably happy with his own law firm.”

“That’s the thing. He’s still using some small firm in San Jose. His business has already grown too big. He’s going to need a larger firm eventually.” Rick backhanded Charles in the shoulder. “Charles, get off your bum! Steven Nishimoto owns the most high-profile computer company in San Francisco. The profits from Neesh are starting to rival Apple. You can run and talk at the same time, right?”

Rick’s words made Charles’s insides squirm, but not with embarrassment that he hadn’t tried to talk shop with Steven. Charles had started training for a marathon as a bucket-list sort of thing, but he’d found that running cleared his head, made him feel more centered after the craziness of work. He knew Steven felt the same way.

He didn’t want work to intrude on the one place he could escape it. And it seemed underhanded to take advantage of his new acquaintance when Steven obviously needed the escape too.

But Charles also wanted to consider his future. The senior partners wouldn’t be satisfied with a partner who only maintained the status quo. Dozens of other associates would love Charles’s position, and he was in competition with other partners too. The firm would get rid of dead weight in a heartbeat.

He'd been working hard to network and meet new potential clients, and if he met Steven anywhere else, he wouldn't have any qualms about getting to know him better. But the running club seemed a different place than a corporate party or a charity auction. These people and this group somehow seemed to require a respect for the haven they had created, a place for people to forget their "real lives" and instead focus on a single goal—the marathon—and their own personal mile markers.

But Charles would gain an incredible amount of respect from the senior partners if he landed the one fish no one else had been able to catch. And because of that, it might be worth pushing the boundaries of the running group. Charles knew how to network without being pushy. He would try to get a handle on Steven, his personality and lifestyle, and develop a relationship they could take outside of the running club.

"You're right," he told Rick. "I've been treating the no-business rule like the Great Wall of China, but it's just a chain-link fence."

"That's the mind-set you should have! Now how about your love life?"

Charles groaned and pushed the door-open button on the elevator so they could exit. "Somehow, getting dating advice from you seems socially claustrophobic."

"What do you mean?"

"You're like a nun."

"A monk, not a nun. And just because I wouldn't allow my oldest daughter to date until she was eighteen doesn't make me unusual; it makes me—"

"A control freak with a key to her chastity belt."

Rick sighed. "That's what I should have gotten for her."

“That only proves my point. You’d pair me up with either *Sound of Music* Maria or *Hand That Rocks the Cradle* psycho-nanny.”

Rick gave him a long-suffering look as they walked through the parking garage. “Your movie references are so out of date.”

“Yours are all rated G.”

“PG-13, thank you very much. The middle daughter is officially a teenager now.”

Rick paused at Charles’s car, his face drawn and somehow seeming more lined than it had a few minutes ago. “I’m serious about the whole perception of stability in the firm, Charles. How about if I promise to ask Annelissa to help with my list?”

“How about if you promise to ask your wife to make up the list *without* you?”

Rick gave a disgusted sound and looked like his old self for a moment. “Fine, fine. At least you’re willing to move on from your pretty little assassin.”

“She never killed anyone.”

Rick was already walking away, and he raised a hand without turning around. “That’s what they all say. Good night.”

“Night.”

As Charles laid his briefcase on his passenger seat, he realized it was vibrating. Or rather, his cell phone inside was vibrating. Who’d be calling him now? It was close to midnight.

It wasn’t a call. It was a reminder that he’d received a voice mail from Elizabeth St. Amant, his mama’s goddaughter and a former client. She’d called a couple hours ago, but it still would have been almost one in the morning in Louisiana. He played the voice-mail message.

“Hello, Charles. It’s Elizabeth. I know it’s a little late, but I

saw your brother, Eddie, online, and when I IM'd him to congratulate him, he mentioned you were at work, so I decided to call. I was up talking to a friend of mine in Los Angeles who might need your help. I know you're terribly busy—well, you're still at work right now, and it's . . . goodness, it's ten o'clock in California. Anyway, I know you're busy, but my friend is very desperate, and I took the liberty of setting up a meeting with you at Lorianne's Cafe tomorrow night at seven o'clock. If you can't make it, just let me know. Sorry to talk your ear off, Charles. Bye!"

Her syrupy accent always seemed like sunlight, and her rambling was typical, but something about her voice mail struck a funny chord in Charles. Not funny as in "ha-ha," but funny as in "Elizabeth St. Amant is up to no good."

She had never left such a long voice mail. She preferred chatting with him in person. And for the several clients she'd sent his way last year after he'd helped her out, she had never set up a meeting for him without talking to him first so he could consult his schedule.

She was trying to avoid talking to him.

Charles stared at his cell phone. He was free tomorrow night as far as he knew, but he considered calling her and demanding to know what was going on. The problem was that Elizabeth would probably take the passive-aggressive way out and simply not answer his call.

Charles had the sinking feeling she was setting him up. But for what?