

CHAPTER ONE

As soon as I saw Dominic Stone I knew someone somewhere had made a catastrophic mistake, and I was screwed.

It didn't matter he wouldn't recognize me. It was enough I recognized him. How could I not? Our last meeting hadn't been the kind you forget—on my part. Or forgive—on his. It had been sheer luck the bullet had missed. No one, I assured myself, *no one* could be that lucky twice.

Drawing back into the shadows of the mezzanine I watched in reluctant admiration as he finessed his way through Security. Nothing had changed there, either. He was still arrogant. Still remote. I could almost see those winter-gray eyes narrow in evaluation as their gaze moved around the foyer. Feel the chill rolling off him like fog off dry ice... And he was heading my way.

Which left me either the back stairs, or the freight elevator to the basement.

I tossed a mental coin. *Freight elevator.*

“Megan,” a voice behind me said. “Good. You're still here.”

I swung away from the mezzanine balustrade, schooling my face into a neutral mask as I did so. “I'm just leaving.”

Amos Brewer, CEO of Dayton and Associates, gave me a look I could have shaved my legs with. “Geoffrey Montford has arrived. I don't know how he heard you'd be here, but he's in my office demanding to talk with you—and I'm not certain he'll take no for an answer.”

In spite of the sense of urgency bubbling under my breastbone I felt an unwilling tug of interest. “We are talking about the same Geoffrey Montford, aren't we?”

“Yes,” Amos said, his uncharacteristically curt tone threaded through with tension. “And I'm concerned, Megan. He's not himself.” He glanced down at the briefcase in my hand. “But if you don't have the time—”

“I do.” As my quick getaway was now shot to hell I had all the time in the world. I certainly hadn't been avoiding Stone's devil for months just to trip over him now. Far better to face Geoffrey Montford's deep blue sea. “Now's fine.”

“If you're not feeling up to it—” Amos began, but stopped when I lifted a hand. “I'm only trying to be helpful.”

“No,” I said. “You're not. You've made it quite clear you think in spite of my qualifications, I had to sleep with the boss to get where I am. Well, I may not be thirty yet, but I didn't—how did you put it?—flutter my big blue eyes, toss back my long blonde hair and hypnotize a dying man more than twice my age into leaving me his millions'.” Only God knew why Charles Dayton had ever done anything, especially that last little bombshell. “I might not know about business in general, but when it comes to my job I'm the best there is.”

His mouth began to open, and my temper slipped.

“Don't,” I warned. “I'm not in the mood. Suck it up, Amos. Let's pretend Charles is still alive, you're still my friend, and none

of the last ten days has happened. Now, I'm going to find out what's stung Mr. Montford on the temper, fix it, and then I'm going home—”

“To *Charles's* home,” he corrected, ice crackling in the emphasis.

“To Charles's home,” I agreed. “Now mine,”—along with his myriad business interests and an appallingly large chunk of England's green and pleasant land—”and I'm going to do what I haven't had time to do since he told me he was dying.”

“Which is?”

“Grieve,” I said.

Judging by the revulsion on Amos's face I might as well have told him I wanted to strip naked and dance around Nelson's Column at rush hour.

Tears, hot and dangerous, pricked behind my eyes. Not good. Not going to happen. I blinked hard.

Behind me, the lift gave its discreet little ding. Even with Reception about to run interference on this floor I'd run out of choices.

“But, in the meantime,” I lifted my chin and jerked it towards the beautifully carved door further down the corridor, “I'll try to live up to the appalling image you have of me. Lead on, Mr. Brewer.”

Amos's mouth tightened, but he didn't say another word. He simply turned on his heel and stalked back towards his office.

I hadn't meant to sound either brusque or bitchy, but the words came out both. In fact, I sounded precisely like the grasping little gold-digger he thought I was. With any luck I'd get a chance to act like her too. But I didn't want to. I just wanted Amos to return to his comfortable fatherly self. I wanted everything back the way it had been. I wanted the damn moon.

Fifteen minutes, Meg, I told myself as I followed in his rigid wake. Fifteen minutes, and it'll all be over.

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I'd met Geoffrey Montford three times before—once at his home when Charles Dayton and I had appraised his art collection, and twice socially—but each time he had been with his wife. She was obviously the civilizing influence. Today he was alone and, to judge by his lowering brow, feeling far from civilized. A covered painting rested on the easel by the window.

“Just what sort of business are you running, Brewer?” he snapped the moment Amos closed the door behind me. “I don't have time to waste while you—”

“Nor do I,” I interrupted. No one talked to Amos like that except me. “I have fifteen minutes, Mr. Montford. What can I do for you?”

Montford's dark eyes flashed. Apparently he was the only one allowed to be abrupt.

“I have reason to believe,” he said, after a moment's internal struggle, “someone has replaced two of my family's paintings with reproductions since your appraisal. And although this”—he flicked a contemptuous hand towards the easel—“may well be one, my level of trust is no longer what it was. I wish to remain in the room while you work.” He shot me a challenging glance. “Is this a problem?”

Normally it wouldn't be. But, to cover those times when it *could* be a problem, I had learned to make one stipulation; breathing space. To the world in general I was claustrophobic. No one crowded me and expected to remain unscathed. Well, except for Charles, of course. But he'd known the truth. No one else here did. Another reason I missed him.

"I've told Mr. Montford your requirements," Amos said, "and he's happy with them."

"Good." I placed my briefcase on the floor by Amos's desk. "Then let's see what we have. Take a seat, Mr. Montford."

"I shall stand," Montford said, curling his lip as though the very words were sour. "Where I am."

Something in his tone caused cold fingers to slide down my back.

The trouble with safety is you get used to it. In the last few months I'd relaxed my guard. Now I was alone again, and there was nowhere safe. Only an unknown sea with undercurrents strong enough to drown in.

The chill increased when, as I moved away from him and towards the painting, Montford followed me as though he'd been stapled to my sleeve.

I came to a halt. "I understand your concern, Mr. Montford," I said as politely as I could. "But I'm hardly likely to tuck the work inside my jacket and dash off with it from under your nose."

"I want to see what you do."

"There's nothing to see," I said, aware that Amos was now at my other side. "Amos, would you—?"

For the first time since the lawyer had read Charles's abominable will, Amos touched me, his pat on my forearm firm but not unfriendly. The smile he gave Montford was pure CEO. "Most of our people," he said, "prefer to work in private. If you'd rather have another company assess—"

"No." The word seemed to have to force itself past Montford's clenched lips. "No." He lifted his hands, palms forward. Stepped back. "My apologies," he said. "Please. Continue."

More icy fingers traced their patterns across my shoulder blades. I met Amos's troubled gaze.

"I asked Mark for coffee," I said, hoping he would understand what I was saying. "Perhaps he could bring it here instead of my office. Have they fixed your intercom yet?"

Comprehension flickered in his eyes then vanished. "Not yet. I'll have a word with reception. If you'll excuse me for a moment?"

Montford didn't respond. I merely nodded, and continued towards the easel as though I told the company CEO to arrange my morning beverage every day of the week.

When the door clicked shut I let go the breath I'd been holding. Reception would get a kick out of our head of security's temporary demotion to tea-lady. With luck it would be all any of us would get, but I had a bad feeling it wouldn't be that simple.

As I lifted the sheet off the painting I could sense Montford's gaze boring into my head. *Easy*, I told myself. *Take it easy*.

I walked around the back of the easel to where I'd marked the painting when I'd looked at it last. Slid my finger over the microdot. And there it was. Good. Chances were it was the same work. All the same...

Pretending to make a closer examination I leaned down and, after making sure my body blocked Montford's view, drew in a slow breath, placed one fingertip on the frame and another on the canvas.

Everything around me began the usual spin; colored paint swirling into white... into pink... into...

Red.

Bright, blood red.

I have the gift of psychometry. This means, in my chosen field of art appraisal I see a lot of dead people—mostly artists. Sometimes I even see them die. But, on the whole, if I see their

deaths it's not a problem for me; the majority have been bones or ashes for hundreds of years.

The vision of death currently replaying under my fingertips was different for several reasons. I knew the event was recent because the corpse and I had enjoyed a drink together at her exhibition a month ago. I knew it was unnatural—the bloody brains being splattered around her studio were a good clue there. I also knew I was in deep trouble. Her killer wasn't some street punk sporting a Rolex knock-off and high on Meth and danger.

The spade-wielding maniac was currently wearing Savile Row and standing right behind me.

I made my fingers resume their seemingly casual progress. Kept my breathing slow. Careful. Tried to figure out why I was seeing Rheda Flynn's murder rather than Domenikos Theotokopoulos's creation of this masterpiece. And glimpsed a possible reason when blood arced towards me and hit the frame. "How long did you say it's been in your family?"

"I didn't," Montford said. "But since 1939. My grandfather made several excellent investments in the art market during the late thirties, early forties."

A lot of people had "invested in the art market" in Europe during the early years of the Second World War. Sometimes money had even changed hands.

"And your professional opinion?"

I only half heard his question. The rest of the scenario unfolding beneath my touch—the sheer callousness of it—almost robbed me of breath. Balanced between pity and fury I let myself flow completely back into the present. Then I straightened.

In my professional opinion I was in the room with a mentally unstable client who had already killed at least once and who was not only going to get away with it, but would also probably kill again if something wasn't done. My choices were to let him go, or to tip him over the edge. A sane woman would let him go.

“My professional opinion?” I glanced towards the heavy walnut desk in front of which Montford stood like a soldier on parade. “Oh, you had an El Greco without a doubt.” Montford's shoulders stiffened “At least, you did until you lost your temper.”

He stared at me. “What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about the painting you took to with a spade. After you killed Rheda Flynn. A falling out of thieves? Not clever, Geoffrey. Not in either choice.”

I stopped. Swallowed the rest of my words as I saw Montford's expression.

His cheeks had faded to white. Bone white with a sheen of sweat. The only color in his face came from his eyes, wells of dark torment. His breath hissed through his teeth in a long, slow inhalation.

“I was right,” he said, but he sounded more exhausted than pleased at his cleverness. “You knew about it. You were in on it. I thought you were. But you said—” His brows drew together. “It doesn't matter. When I found your names I knew what they were planning.”

Names? They? “Whose names?”

He ignored me. Just kept talking in the same slow, tired monotone. “She was going to leave me. Did you know?”

There was only one “she” in Montford's life. “Marie?”

He nodded. “For Rheda.”

Oh shit. I'd been wrong. A crime of passion, but not for art. “And that's why you killed her?”

He didn't even blink. “I didn't mean to. I only went there to talk. But then I saw the El Greco, and I knew what they were doing. You were going to help them sell it.”

He lifted those haunted eyes to me and something moved in their depths. Something terrifying. Something—

And it all went to hell.

How he'd gotten the gun past security God alone knew. All I knew was in the couple of seconds between the rattle of the office door handle and the time it took for the door to open fully, Montford had whipped the deadly little automatic out of his jacket and was aiming the business end at me.

On the edge of my vision I saw movement. Someone was going to try to be a hero. Die a hero.

No one dies for me, the cold, hard voice in my head said. *Not again. Never again.*

In the slow-motion-time which seems to follow in chaos's path, somebody shouted, someone else cursed, crockery shattered, something large and shiny skimmed through the air from the direction of the doorway, and Montford's finger tightened on the trigger.

I was already diving when he fired.

Even before I hit him in a flying tackle Montford staggered backwards. The second shot almost deafened me. Then my head ploughed into his stomach, something solid thumped me on the shoulder blade, and we both crashed to the floor.

There was a clang like a bell as a silver tray hit the floor next to my head. An instant's stunned stillness. Then action rushed back, and the keening started.

The anguish in that high, thin howl made the hair on the back of my neck snap to attention. There were words in there too. Tormented. Indistinct. Like echoes from the souls of the damned. About his wife, and the El Greco, and Rheda, and betrayal, and death. He flailed around, wailing, punching me until I managed to drag myself up his body and kneel on his forearms, holding on like a cowboy to a bucking bronco.

But not for long. I was grabbed from behind, hauled off him, and into a chair. Mark and his security team took my place. I was only half aware someone else was talking to me, shaking me, but I

couldn't respond, couldn't take my eyes off what was happening on the floor.

It was surreal. Four uniformed security men, plus Amos, and all five of them—solid guys—couldn't keep Geoffrey Montford on the ground. He'd snapped. Lost it. Just like he had with Rheda.

The enormity of it all hit me with the force of a sucker punch. What the hell had I done? Worse, how was I going to explain it? I couldn't tell the truth, and Amos wasn't Charles; he wouldn't lie for me. Wouldn't—

“Witch!”

Although everything sounded muffled as though it was being filtered through cotton wool I recognized *that* word. And the emotion bubbling up my throat. Fear, primal and primitive. It scabbled for a handhold inside me, while under his blanket of security people Montford writhed like a snake with hiccups, screaming... screaming...

“Witch! You're a witch! Burn the witch! Burn them all—”

His eyes rolled in their sockets like white billiard balls, and froth and spittle ran down his chin—

I couldn't take any more. Wrenching away from the hands gripping my shoulder, I surged to my feet. I had to get out—get away—before the storm of emotion I'd been running ahead of for weeks finally caught up with me and I shattered the cardinal rule of performers everywhere; don't break character.

But I was disorientated, and slow to see I had a more immediate problem. Between me and the door—like a reef before safe harbor—stood Dominic Stone.