

Out of Sight Out of Mind

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Extract – Chapter 1 & 2



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Published 2013 by Choc Lit Limited

Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK

www.choclitpublishing.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-978-1-906931-75-9

Chapter One

It was a dark and dirty alley and a very expensive dress.

Madison Albi hesitated. She *really* didn't want to go in there. Not in a shimmery little cocktail number and a pair of strappy sandals. *Hell, not even in boots and a protective suit.*

Without her permission her foot took a step forward.

She peered into the shadows, wrinkling her nose at the smell. Stuff was rotting, down in the darkness. She didn't want to know what. She shivered. *If you plan to go wandering around in the dark, you really should bring a coat. But who planned this?* A puddle of something that looked like oil gleamed in the lights of a passing car. It had to be oil. It hadn't rained for days. Unless it was ... blood?

Huffing out a breath, she pulled herself together. This was *so* stupid. She was spooking herself into nightmares here. All because she'd thought, just for a moment, that she'd felt something.

A burst of power, like static, in her head.

Huh! She'd had one glass of tepid white wine at the reception – which had been one glass too many, given the way it tasted – and now her imagination was working overtime.

Disgusted with herself, she turned away, trying to ignore the treacherous pull of disappointment.

She'd been so sure, just for that moment ...

She took one step away, then another. Then stopped.

'This is crazy.' She swung round and marched back to the entrance of the alley. 'What are you – a scientist or a wimp?'

She didn't have to go in. She could stand right here, where there were street lights and traffic. She glanced around. *Hmmm.* This wasn't exactly the centre of London. It wasn't that light and there weren't that many cars.

She cast a longing glance up the street, at her apartment block. Lights, people. *Warmth.* So near and yet so far.

In the other direction the section of the new development still

under construction was a desolate wilderness of scaffolding and creaking tarpaulins. Was that the source of that burst of ... whatever it had been? Was the sense she was picking up, of a presence – a presence that could connect to her mind – one of the security guards at the building site? She breathed deep. No – that was wishful thinking. There was no guard on the site. The security patrol came by every hour in a nice, *warm* van, to check the place out.

Which left her with something else. Something lurking in the alley between the two abandoned shops, boarded up, marooned and derelict, destined for demolition the moment a legal quirk over ownership was finally settled.

A sudden gust of wind set something flapping on the construction site. The sign proclaiming the second phase of the development to be nearing completion, and ninety per cent sold, was rippling as if it were alive. Madison shivered. *If you've got any sense you'll go home, now. In ten minutes you could be sipping hot chocolate in your dressing gown.*

But then you would always wonder ...

Resigned, she took another step towards the alley. It really wouldn't take long. A simple matter of collecting the power of her thoughts and projecting them into the darkness. The likelihood of there being any response was minimal. Less than minimal. *You've been looking for long enough, and you haven't found anything yet.* Dropping her shoulders, which had unaccountably hunched themselves up around her ears, she breathed deep, focusing.

This she could do.

The probe went in smoothly, her mind expanding into the gloom in a controlled sweep, searching for connection. Sorting, sifting, sensing.

A thrill of excitement flared. There *was* something.

She leaned forward eagerly. *No, dammit!* The impulse that was jittering out of the alley was coming from the small, fuzzy mind of an animal. Probably a rat. She shuddered, snapping off the contact. There was nothing there. No ghoulies or ghosties. Nothing human.

She brushed her hands up her arms, feeling gooseflesh. *What are you doing? Standing in the cold, communing with a scavenging rodent!*

Time to get real.

Go. Now.

As she moved, her heel twisted under her. Cursing softly, she stumbled sideways before regaining her balance.

And then, without warning, it came again.

An incredible surge of power, roaring out of the darkness, sweeping blindingly over her.

Even as a hand went to her throat in alarm, she felt the click in the back of her brain. Like coming home.

Then, in a rush, he was on her. Towering over her.

Light glittered on the metal bar, clutched in an upraised hand.

‘No!’ It came out as an ear-piercing scream.

The bar dropped.

In the sudden silence she heard it hit the ground and roll away.

‘Oh God.’ The voice was dredged up from somewhere very deep. Rusty. Older than dirt. ‘Didn’t know ... woman ... shouldn’t be here ... not safe.’

He was swaying towards her, invading her space.

With no room in her head to think, she put up her hand to shove him back. As the flat of her palm connected with his shoulder she felt him flinch violently. The gasp he gave echoed in her own lungs.

Like a lightning bolt, even as she was withdrawing her hand in panic, skull-splitting pain arced out of him, and into her. Splintering into her mind. Threatening to engulf her.

She opened her mouth to scream again, for both of them. The sound died in her throat as the pain broke off, as swiftly as it had come. There was an abrupt, sickening blackness.

Then her assailant dropped like a stone, out cold at her feet.

Chapter Two

Madison crouched by the inert body, teeth chattering. Her heart was hopping about in her chest like a demented frog, making it difficult to breathe. She steadied herself, reaching out a tentative hand to his neck, feeling for a pulse. His skin was colder than hers, but the beat there was strong.

He wasn't dead.

Relief flooded her, followed by irritation.

'Come on, Madison, get a grip. You don't kill someone by poking them in the shoulder.'

She leaned in, looking him over.

She couldn't see much in the dim light, except that he was big. Dark cap, dark beard, dark overcoat. The clothes didn't tell her anything she hadn't expected. A touch confirmed it. She withdrew her hand quickly from the greasy collar of the coat.

The man was a derelict, one of the homeless who lived on the street and slept in doorways or wherever else they could find. She blew out a breath. She'd worked at the lab with most of the rough sleepers from this part of outer London. He wasn't one of them.

She felt around in the dark for the slim, gold evening purse that held her mobile phone. *Find the bag, get the phone, get help, get the hell out.*

The bag had to be close; it had been in her hand when all hell broke loose.

Triumphantly she located the fine chain of the handle and pulled. When the chain gave way, she almost lost her balance. Totally confused, she found the broken end and traced it back, groaning as realisation dawned.

Her bag was under the body.

She was going to have to kneel down, to push him out of the way. With a sigh, she hitched up the hem of her dress.

After three unsuccessful attempts to roll him over she gave up.

She couldn't even slide her hand under him, to drag it out.

'Sod it, sod it, sod it.'

They were completely alone; off the road, at the mouth of the alley that opened into the narrow area in front of the shops, that had been used for parking. Residents were still parking there, and would be until the building site was finished. Madison scanned the scattering of cars. No other human being in sight. The foyer of her apartment block glowed invitingly, just yards away. It might have been on the far side of the moon. She could be along the road in less than a minute, but if a car reversed in here while she was gone, trying to park—

She sat back on her heels. She had to get him somewhere safe. Safer than this, anyway. Which meant he had to be awake. Offering up a brief, silent prayer, she leaned over to tap his cheek. Tapped a little harder when she felt the flicker of movement.

Her heart lifted in relief when he coughed and muttered something she mercifully couldn't make out. Breath hissed in her throat as his head flopped sideways, into a small patch of light, and she saw the green and yellow of old bruises on the side of his face and neck.

Someone had beaten him. Viciously.

No wonder he'd come at her with an iron bar. Blood was welling from a fresh cut over one eye.

She took her hand away sharply as a long shudder went through him.

He was waking up.

Thank God. Her knees were killing her.

She just managed to get out of the way as he rolled over, wincing.

'Holy hell, it's an angel. Two angels.' The voice was husky but sounded more normal. Deep. No accent. He was squinting at her, fingers feeling up into his hairline. 'Bloody heck! What did you hit me with?'

Madison was too busy helping with his efforts to sit up to argue the point. *Boy* he was big. Solid. *And still uncoordinated*. She dodged a flailing hand. Up close and personal he didn't smell too bad,

considering. Not like she expected a date to smell, but bearable.

With a brief pang for her dress, she knelt forward, bracing her arm to let him pull himself up. A surge of vertigo swept out of him and over her, then was gathered up and gone. Somehow he managed to get his feet under him and they made it over to a low wall. He collapsed on to it with a groan, dropping his head into his hands.

‘I must be losing it. Did you punch me, or what?’ He shook his head gingerly. ‘You must have a right hook like a battering ram.’

‘I think I just got lucky.’ He was staring up at her, owlishly. ‘I just finished off what someone else started,’ she explained.

‘Oh. Yeah, right.’ He scrubbed a grubby hand over his forehead, looking puzzled when it came away wet. Madison found a handkerchief and handed it over. He mopped at the cut, looking around vaguely. ‘There were some kids. Uh – couple of weeks ago. I was sleeping ... Three weeks? Yeah – three weeks.’

‘They attacked you?’

‘Mmm.’ He shifted position on the wall, uneasy. ‘I think maybe ... Did I mistake you for them? That they’d come back?’

‘Doesn’t matter.’ She was feeling around on the tarmac, where he’d been lying.

He coughed, hunching over, peering at her. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Looking for – ah!’ She pounced on the bag. Opened it. And found her sleek, black phone was now in about six pieces.

‘Where is he, then?’

‘What?’ She was only half-listening, intent on the wrecked phone. She prodded it. It was clearly beyond hope. ‘Where’s who?’

‘Boyfriend, date, whatever,’ he prompted.

‘Oh.’ She shook her head. ‘No date. No boyfriend.’ She followed his eyes down her dress, which now had a spreading stain on the hem. ‘It was a work thing. Reception. The mayor, people like that.’

What are you doing standing here, discussing your social life with a bleeding man? Need to take control here. The phone is gone, but he’s awake and talking, so it’s probably okay to move him.

‘You know you shouldn’t be out alone.’ He was frowning, words

slurring. ‘Woman on her own. S’not safe.’

‘I can take care of myself.’ *This from the man who came at me with a metal bar?* ‘Look, if I help you, do you think you can get up the road, to that building?’

He sat up, focused. ‘Yeah. I can make it. But why would I want to?’

‘Why?’ She turned to face him, confused. ‘So we can get you medical attention. A doctor—’

‘Nah.’ He was shaking his head from side to side, for emphasis or to clear it. He didn’t look too happy with the movement. ‘Don’t need a doctor.’ He waved a hand. ‘You’ve done the good Samaritan thing, getting me up off the floor. I’m not planning to sue you for putting me there, so you don’t have to hang around. Go.’ He made a shooing gesture that almost had him off the wall.

Madison stared at him. ‘You think I’m just going to leave you here? Five minutes ago you were out cold. When you came round you were seeing double,’ she accused.

‘Yeah.’ Somewhere in the matted beard there might have been the skeleton of a smile. ‘Two angels.’ He mimed looking round. ‘Now, where did they go?’

For a second, fury sparked brightly in Madison’s chest. He was laughing at her. *Right, if he doesn’t want help, that’s fine.* She didn’t have to stand here in the cold, arguing. Her teeth were chattering. Her dress, her bag and her phone were probably beyond repair. She’d done her bit all right. Anyone with an ounce of common sense would have walked away already.

She swung on her heel, hesitated, swung back.

To hell with that. Common sense could take a hike.

His chin was slumped, the wide shoulders drooped and his arms were buried in the folds of his disgusting coat, holding himself precariously together. Whoever or whatever he was, and whatever he said, she couldn’t leave him alone and hurt, here in the dark.

But that’s not all, is it?

She could feel the need, clawing inside her like cramp. She was

never going to walk away. Not from something like this. A reckless exhilaration was fizzing in her blood. She hadn't imagined that surge of power. Her ears were still ringing with it. She'd felt his pain, mental and physical. This ... he ... was the most exciting thing she'd encountered since ... since ...

There had never been anything this exciting.

She couldn't let him go. She had to get him somewhere safe, where she could assess him properly. Which meant she was going to help him, whether he wanted it or not.

When she went, he was going with her.

Without pausing for thought, she grabbed his good arm and yanked.

Taken unawares, and still unsteady, he came up with a rush.

Before he could protest, or evade, she shoved her shoulder under his and began to pilot him up the street.

He hauled in air as if she'd sucker-punched him. Her hand on his wrist stopped him slipping out of her hold.

'I said I wasn't going with you, lady. What part of no don't you understand?'

'All of it.' She gritted her teeth and kept going. 'Just walk, will you.'

The way he was leaning on her told her he'd be flat out again if she let go. She was pretty sure he knew it too, which was why he stopped trying to shake her off.

Until they reached the front of her block.

'No! No way!' He swore violently and dug in his heels when he saw where she was heading. 'You can't take me in there!'

'I can and I will.' She tightened her grip and ploughed on. 'This is where I live.'

'Lady, you're crazy.' He flapped his hand. 'You got a porter, concierge or something?'

'Of course. Mind the step.' He stumbled, then got his feet coordinated. They were both breathing heavily. 'What's the problem?'

'What do you think? One look and the guy will be calling the

cops.’

‘Not when you’re with me.’

‘Not even if I was with the Queen! I’ll be back here in the road before you can turn around. S’no point.’

‘We’ll see – but as you didn’t want to come with me in the first place, why are you arguing?’ she asked sweetly. When he didn’t answer she put her hand behind his back to shove, getting a muffled curse of pain in response. It tweaked her conscience, but not much. Her shoulders were aching and they were almost at the door. ‘Stop making a fuss and get a move on, before we both die of hypothermia.’

The lights in the foyer skewered his eyeballs like lasers. With one thing on his mind – getting off his feet before he fell down – he changed tack, towing his captor towards the nearest sofa and flopping out of her grasp into the soft depths. Absently he stroked the red leather. Expensive. Nice place his angel lived in. Angel. Pity he had to pick a bossy one. But with his luck – except – what did he know?

‘How do you feel? Better?’

He hadn’t realised he’d closed his eyes. He opened one. *Better* didn’t describe the river of pain coursing across his left shoulder, nor the aching nausea of the too-empty belly, not to mention his head, which he was trying to ignore, but in her terms he probably was *better*.

And she’d sounded so full of hope.

Now there was a word that hadn’t been in his mind for a while.

He grunted, which seemed to satisfy her. Maybe he *didn’t* feel so bad. He was getting warm, for the first time in a week, and the sofa was doing good things to his weary bones. Left alone, he might stretch out for a while. But that wasn’t going to happen.

The little guy from the reception desk had trailed them to the seating area, open-mouthed. Now he was shifting from one foot to the other, looking unhappy. No surprise there, seeing that he had a

vagrant in his hallway, messing up his designer décor. Plus he was going to offend one of his tenants. Probably a good tipper, too. She looked like a good tipper.

He transferred his open eye to the angel. Actually she looked plain good, except she wasn't plain. *Losing the thread here.* Tall, slim, brunette. Long hair. Straight. Shiny. The gold dress clung in some interesting places. Pity about the oil stain. He sat up a fraction straighter, so he could see the rest. Excellent legs. Fuck-me shoes. Now there was a thought. A very old, lost-in-the-past thought.

His mind hazed. Something about her—

There was a reason he was here, but he couldn't recall it.

She needed someone to take care of her. Maybe that was it. Alone on the street at night, wearing all that gold round her neck.

He focused on the heavy gold chain. It glittered in the strong light and he looked away. Maybe he *should* stick around. She wanted him for something. Stick around, he'd find out what.

Fat chance.

The little guy had started his pitch. Wouldn't be long now and he'd be out on his ass. *May as well make the most of the sofa while it's available. Catch a few Zs.*

'Miss Albi. Um ... I really don't think I can allow this.' Madison looked up from studying her captive. He seemed to have passed out again. Straightening her shoulders, she fixed Scott with her coolest stare. The concierge swallowed bravely. 'My job is to keep people like him out. And he's dripping *blood!*' Scott's voice dropped to a horrified whisper.

'Only on to his coat. It's not going on the furniture.' Madison frowned, wondering what had become of her handkerchief, then brushed it aside to focus on the concierge. *Do not give in. Smile nicely, act gracious. Lie. And slip him a tenner.* Good thought. She conjured the smile.

'I know this is difficult, Scott, but we only need a minute. As soon as I get him back on his feet and into the lift, we'll be out of here.'

Behind them the street doors opened, with a blast of cold air. Madison nodded towards the pizza delivery man who'd come in with the air. The scent of garlic and tomatoes wafted round the lobby.

'Why don't you go and see to that, and when you come back, we'll be ready to go.'

Scott looked unconvinced, but went.

'Told you so.'

The captive was awake and watching her. Smug.

'Shut up, you, I'm thinking.'

She saw him take a breath to respond, then decide against it and let it out again, collapsing further into the leather sofa.

While she was thinking she went back to her inspection. The dark cap was pulled down over matted hair. Stubble – no, make that beard – obscured most of his face. The heavy overcoat, buttoned at the throat, had been good once. When it was new. Some time back in the last century. Way back. The fabric was shiny with wear in some places, stained in others, but there were signs that someone, presumably its inhabitant, had tried to clean and brush them away.

The hair under the cap was dishevelled but not lank. It was midnight dark, except for a splatter of silver at the sideburns. What she could see of the beard was black and silver, too. His head was down, sunk into his chest, so she couldn't check out his features.

The fresh cut over the eye was oozing now, not dripping. In a proper light she could see that it had been half healed but had reopened when he fell. With his head down, the bruises were less obvious. He'd been heavy enough when she'd manhandled him in here, but the ancient overcoat hung loose on him. She suspected he was gaunt for a man of his build. The ragged edges of a pair of grey trousers showed under the coat. The trainers were the most disgusting pair she'd seen in a while.

They would be going straight in the bin.

One of his hands, grazed at the knuckle and ingrained with dirt, was splayed out, limp, on the seat beside him. He was scrubbing awkwardly at the cut with the other.

‘Here.’ She found a lipstick-stained tissue in the bottom of her battered evening bag, tore off the stained part and handed it over.

‘Thanks.’ It was no more than a mumble, but it did get his head up.

The eyes were dark, possibly blue. Clouded and unfocused.

His head drooped again, but he still held the tissue, so he hadn’t drifted off.

Almost absently she scanned him; a fast, non-invasive once over. What was coming out of him now was the standard soupy muddle of thoughts she could pick up from any passer-by, on any street corner in London. The sort of stuff she’d learned to tune out, aeons ago ... Nothing special.

Shit! Had she made a mistake, dragging him in here?

She hesitated. She didn’t normally do this. It was against all her principles. But this wasn’t exactly normal. She gathered her thoughts and probed into him.

‘Fuck! Don’t do that!’ He jumped, wincing away from her. As if she had slapped him.

‘You can feel it?’ Shock spiked through her.

‘How can I fail to,’ he flapped his hand as if he was warding off a troublesome insect, ‘when you’re coming at me like a boot to the head?’

She pulled out of him sharply, heart rate accelerating and decision made.

‘Right, here’s the deal.’ She leaned over him, talking fast and close to his ear. Scott was walking back towards them. ‘You go along with everything I’m about to say and you get food, a bed for the night and fifty quid. In exchange you help me with a couple of experiments.’

‘Mind experiments?’

She caught her breath. Exhausted and in pain, he was still as sharp as a razor. ‘Yes. Mind experiments. Nothing painful, I promise.’

‘Huh!’ He hunched away from her, chin down. She was getting used to the look of the top of his head. ‘Hundred.’

‘What?’

‘Hundred pounds.’

‘In your dreams. Seventy.’

‘Hundred.’ He was looking sideways, over her shoulder. ‘Make your mind up quickly, lady. Your little pal is almost here. Got a pretty determined expression on his face. I reckon I’m gonna be out on my ass in about ten seconds.’

‘All right!’ She capitulated, exasperated. ‘A hundred. You’d better be worth it!’

‘Always do my best to satisfy a lady.’ He leaned back on the leather cushion. There was a distinct gleam in the dark eyes.

‘You’ve certainly recovered.’ She put all the ice she had into her stare before turning away. *What have I done?*

She squared her shoulders. He was big and undoubtedly smart, but so was she, so that was no problem. He was hurt, which gave her the edge. She pushed down a qualm. He was better off with her than out there on the street, in pain. She could handle him. She had to. He had something she wanted. Really wanted.

‘Scott.’ She moved forward, smiling. ‘Please don’t give me grief on this.’ The folded note in her hand disappeared smoothly into Scott’s top pocket. ‘It’s just—’ she shrugged, looking guilty. It wasn’t that hard. She didn’t like lies, and there were far too many in her life already. But she had to get Scott onside. If he made a fuss – hell, she was *not* going to lose this guy. She had the speech planned. It wouldn’t be a lie. Not exactly. She revved up the smile. ‘Like you said, he’s bleeding. He was on the ground behind my car. I could have clipped him when I backed in.’ *Maybe – if he’d been anywhere near at the time.* ‘I don’t want any trouble. If I can get him upstairs and cleaned up, he’ll be out of here by morning. We’ll use the service entrance.’ She put all the reassurance she could into her voice, then held her breath.

Scott was wavering visibly. ‘Well – I suppose he’s your guest, like, isn’t he?’ He made up his mind. ‘All right.’ He rolled up the sleeves of his uniform and leaned over to grab one of the captive’s

arms. ‘Come on, sunshine, on your feet. And mind you behave yourself with the lady.’

‘Yes, guv. Obligated to you, guv.’ Over Scott’s head Madison met eyes with the wickedest gleam she’d ever seen. Then he winked. She swallowed a breath. The next few days were going to be ... eventful.

Scott had got him up, but he was floundering, favouring the left side of his body. The one she’d thumped in the alley. She swallowed down a twinge of guilt, and moved to take his arm gently, letting him settle his weight against her in his own time.

‘Thanks.’ The word was a whisper against her ear. She looked sideways. As he stooped they were on the same level, and she met his eyes again. Navy blue. Softer now, but still knowing.

She was about to take this stranger into her home. A place she didn’t even take her friends. She shivered, hoping he didn’t feel it.

Scott was getting impatient.

An unlikely threesome, they shambled towards the elevator.

Scott was back on the ground floor, soaping his hands in the cloakroom, when the door banged open behind him. His sister, Sandra, stood in the doorway, holding a mop and bucket.

‘Wondered where you’d got to.’

‘Had to wash my hands, didn’t I?’ Scott shook water off his fingers. ‘Been up to the penthouse. Helped Miss Albi take a man up there.’ He smirked when his sister’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Some old vagrant she nearly ran over. Filthy, he was.’ Scott fastidiously adjusted the cuffs of his uniform. ‘Too soft-hearted, she is. Wanted to make sure he was all right. I’d have left the bugger there.’

‘Yeah, well, you would.’ Sandra advanced towards the sink. ‘You know Miss Albi, she’s dead kind to everyone, treats everyone proper. She’s a really nice lady. For a spook.’

Scott’s head jerked. ‘You don’t want to go saying that. That’s just stupid gossip.’

‘Might not be gossip.’ Sandra flounced as she put her mop in the sink. ‘That place Miss Albi works. Research laboratory – *mind*

research. Got to be top secret, innit? Spooks and stuff.'

'You want to keep your mouth shut,' Scott warned. 'If Miss Albi hears you talking like that she won't want you cleaning her place.'

Sandra sniffed. 'Know when to be discreet, don't I?' She turned off the tap. 'Bit risky though, innit, taking in some bloke off the street? You reckon she's all right up there?' Sandra frowned, concerned. 'She's got some nice stuff, and she's all on her own since that chap of hers went. Pity about that.' Sandra gave a sentimental sigh. 'Right before the wedding and all.'

'Better before than after,' Scott said sharply. 'You don't want to go talking about *that*, either.' He adjusted his tie. 'She'll ring down, if she wants anything. You get on and do the lobby, while it's quiet.'

Madison shoved her key in the lock, one eye on the captive. *Really must get a name*. He was propped against the wall, head down. Scott had scarcely handed them out of the lift before he'd pressed the button to descend. The lift foyer to the penthouse was tiny, but it had still taken them an age to cross it. She looked him over, mouth twisting. Exhaustion was closing in on him. *Him*.

'Do you have a name?' She pushed the door open.

'Mmm.' He was swaying. She grabbed him before he fell. If he went down, she'd have to call Scott to get him up again.

'Not far now.' She hauled on the front of his overcoat, holding him upright with teeth gritted. She felt him pull in a deep breath. Some of the weight eased. 'Okay?' she checked, cautiously.

'Yeah.' For a moment they stood, looking at each other.

His eyes were surprisingly alert, long lashed. Madison felt colour coming up into her face. His body leaned against hers. Close. Hard. Warm. Warm was good, except—

She swallowed. Behind her was the open door of her home. Her refuge. What was she doing?

'S'all right.' His voice was husky. 'We have a deal.'

'I don't know what you mean.' She tried to sound brisk.

'You're worried about taking me in there.' He nodded behind

them. ‘And if you’re not, then you ought to be.’ She couldn’t really tell, under the mat of beard, but there might have been a twisted grin in there somewhere. ‘I’m assuming there isn’t a husband/lover/boyfriend lurking?’

He’s going to find out, so why hide? ‘No.’

‘No one to object if you bring your work home with you.’ There was definitely amusement in the voice now.

Madison felt a familiar stir of resentment. Women had to be so careful about things a man wouldn’t think twice about. It got under her skin, but now wasn’t the time. Even so— ‘I wouldn’t be with a man who wanted to dictate what I do. And I’m not afraid of you,’ she added, for good measure.

He was staring at her. ‘That so?’

‘Yes.’ She pursed her lips, trying to ignore the squirm in her belly. This was getting to be quite a night for half-truths.

His eyes were still on her face. ‘You sure? Only you did such a good job, fibbing to Scotty-boy—’

‘If you were listening, you know I didn’t – fib.’ The childish word suddenly made her want to giggle. She resisted, sucking in her cheeks.

‘Sophistry.’

Madison blinked. ‘What?’

‘You heard. Didn’t think someone homeless would know a big word like that?’ He was baiting her again. Temper stirred.

‘I make it a rule never to prejudice anyone I meet.’ *But you may have underestimated this one.* She ground her teeth. ‘I misled Scott. I admit it – so sue me. It got you up here.’ She met his stare. ‘I repeat, I am not afraid of you.’ *Make something of that, mister.*

‘Good, because you don’t have to be.’ Abruptly he gave up the contest. She saw a shadow of pain cross his face. Anger faded as her heart twisted in sympathy. ‘I can be civilised,’ he added. ‘Your person and your furniture are quite safe.’

Bitterness, under the flat tone?

‘Good to know.’ It was disconcerting to hear the quiver of relief in

her voice. She took his arm again.

They made it into the hall. Madison took a second to breathe, wondering how the place appeared to a stranger. She'd chosen the coral paint to be warm, welcoming. Not that she ever welcomed anyone. Not since Neil. She stepped past that thought.

'Right.' She straightened up. 'I'll fix us some food, while you take a shower.' She frowned. 'Will you be able to manage that?'

'I'll manage – I'll find something to hold on to – unless you're offering to prop me up?'

She wasn't going to dignify *that* with a response. 'There are clothes—' She gestured to the hall cupboard. 'They should fit.'

She opened the door and rummaged. She knew Neil wasn't coming back, but she hadn't been able to get herself together to dispose of his things. They'd made it as far as a couple of plastic sacks in the closet by the door and no further. Now she was glad she'd lacked the courage for that final step. Neil and this guy were much of a size.

She unearthed the black bags and pulled out jeans and socks, a soft plaid shirt, which gave her a pang under the heart, and a nearly new sweater, which didn't. Digging deeper she found an unopened pack of boxer shorts, and turned with the pile in her arms.

'These were on their way to the charity shop, so you can keep them. Afterwards.'

'After you've had your wicked way with me, you mean?'

She ignored him, looking at his feet. Shoes would be a problem. Neil had small feet for a six footer, smaller than this one. Those trainers were *too* disgusting. He'd have to go without until the stores opened tomorrow. She caught herself up. *Making plans to take him shopping?*

He hadn't moved to take the bundle, so she put it down on the hall table.

'Not coming back?' He nodded towards the pile. 'The previous owner?'

'No.' She hoped her body language was telling him not to go

there. Giving him Neil's clothes was one thing, explaining— 'I assume you don't have issues with pre-owned?'

He shrugged and winced. 'Not if he doesn't.'

'He won't.' *Can't.*

He was leaning against the front door, as if he still hadn't quite decided whether to bolt. 'And they're part of my fee – after you've sucked out all I have to give and spat me back out.'

'You have a wonderful turn of phrase. It's your mind I'm interested in, *that's all!*'

'Didn't imagine anything else. No, wrong. Imagined, maybe. Expected? No.'

It took a second for her to realise he was laughing, not wheezing.

He looked dreadful, haggard and drawn and bruised, but he was laughing, head tilted, inviting her to laugh with him.

She almost wanted to.

'Actually.' He put his hand to his face, rubbing the cut as if it hurt him. 'Despite my boasting downstairs, I'm not sure I'm in a fit state to accommodate a lady. Even one who only wants my mind. I think you may have wasted your money.'

'I haven't paid you yet.' She pulled his hand away from his face. 'You'll make it bleed again.'

'Sorry,' he muttered, closing his eyes and leaning more heavily against the door. She stared at him. He hadn't struck her so far as the kind of guy who apologised much, so he had to be feeling pretty bad.

Very cautiously, she flicked a probe into his mind. In and out, before he could sense her too deeply.

Even the half-second of contact was enough. Three different sorts of physical pain, confusion, gnawing hunger – and something that felt very close to total exhaustion. His system was just too overloaded to cope. It was swamping him. He was hanging on more or less by willpower alone.

Touched by something she couldn't identify, she put a finger to his bruised cheek.

'What the hell happened to you? Who hit you?'

‘Before you, you mean?’

‘I thought we’d settled that. I apologise.’

‘Me, too.’ He shrugged himself up, wearily. ‘I scared you.’

‘We scared each other. You were expecting them back, weren’t you? Who was it?’

‘Dunno. Couple of kids with boots and sticks. They’d had a few beers and were looking for some fun. It wasn’t anything personal. I was just there ... wrong place, wrong time.’

She felt anger rising inside her. She knew it happened. It didn’t make it easier to hear. ‘That’s evil.’

‘Fact of life on the street.’

‘How can you choose to live like that? You don’t seem to have an abuse problem, you’re educated, articulate—’

‘Hey now, lady, don’t go using those big words on a dumb slob like me.’

‘Don’t play the fool.’

‘And don’t you pass judgement.’ There was ice in his eyes. ‘You don’t know anything about me. All I am to you is a piece of meat – raw material for your experiments.’

‘No!’ She reacted indignantly. ‘A subject, yes, but never less than a human being. A person, doing a job, for a fee.’

She let her eyes challenge him.

He was the one who looked away.

‘What d’you want me to do then, to earn my money?’

‘Shower and food first, then we’ll talk. Bathroom is that way.’ She scooped up the clothes and shoved them at him. He fumbled with his left hand and wedged them against his chest with the right. She reached out to stop them falling.

‘Look, how badly are you hurt?’ She remembered the pain she’d felt in him. ‘Do you need a doctor?’

‘Nah. It’s bruises, mostly, and I think my collarbone is busted. That’s why the problem with the arm. Everything will heal, but—’ He stopped.

Madison waited.

‘I think you’ll have to give me a hand with the coat.’ Clearly he hated asking for help. Alpha male, cornered. ‘I don’t think I can get it off by myself.’

The material felt slippery under her fingers. She tried not to think about where he’d been sleeping lately and concentrated on getting him out of it, with a minimum of pain. There was one of Neil’s top coats at the back of the cupboard. He could have that, too. Then she could burn this one.

They were both panting by the time they had stripped the coat off him.

‘Can you manage the rest?’

‘Yeah.’ He nodded – convincing her, or himself? ‘Just give me a minute.’ He sucked in air. ‘Where was the bathroom again?’

‘That door. There’s soap and shampoo. Towels on the shelf.’

‘Thanks.’ He peeled himself off the wall. ‘You ... you’ve been great. Shame about the dress, by the way.’

Madison looked down at herself, regretfully. Even her favourite dry cleaners – specialist and expensive – weren’t going to be able to rescue this.

‘Great shoes, though.’ He stumbled into the bathroom.

Madison stared at the closed door. Neil had been a shoe man. She had a whole closet full. Seduction slippers.

‘Oh *shit*.’ She wiped a tear off her face with the back of a grimy hand. She didn’t have time for this. She had things to do.

Out of the ravaged dress and bundled into jeans and a sweatshirt, with her hair tied back, she nudged the thermostat on the heating up a notch. She could hear the shower running.

Satisfied, she padded into the kitchen. If she could get in a short session tonight, tomorrow she would take him to the lab and throw everything she had at him. She chewed her lip. Physically, he was a mess, which might be why he was so susceptible to her. She’d be as ruthless as she could stomach, but it was going to take a while. He hadn’t specified a time limit for earning his hundred pounds. *Not so smart there, buster.*

She filled the kettle and flicked the switch. She needed coffee. It would probably work for him, too. Plus some sandwiches. Maybe soup?

She had the fridge door open, looking for cheese, when the phone rang.

‘Madison? Where did you get to? I’ve been ringing your mobile all night.’

‘Hi, Jonathan.’ One handed, she poured hot water on instant coffee. ‘Mobile is ever so slightly FUBAR.’ She glanced over at the dismembered mobile phone sitting on the counter, well beyond any of her engineering skills, and sighed. ‘Long story.’

‘Hmm.’ Jonathan didn’t sound impressed. ‘Don’t you know it’s not polite to run out on your escort before the end of the evening? You go with him, you leave with him. I thought all nice girls knew that?’

If I was one of those I wouldn’t be planning to do what I’m going to do to the man currently in my shower.

‘I’m a scientist. It sort of cancels out.’ She sipped coffee. ‘Anyway, I thought you’d pulled with that gorgeous waiter. I was trying to be tactful.’

‘Dalliance, mere dalliance.’ Jonathan waved away the idea of the waiter. ‘You know Ashley and I have an exclusivity agreement – but I don’t blame you, cutting out. Boredom doesn’t describe it. I wish I’d thought of it. I’m not cross really.’ His voice dropped and softened. ‘Just making sure you got home safe, sweet pea.’

‘I did.’

‘Good to know. I’ll see you in the morning, then.’

She hesitated. ‘Yes.’

Jonathan took about five seconds. ‘You don’t sound too sure – ah – Heaven be praised. You’ve got a *man* there.’

‘No!’ She heard the hiss. ‘All right! Yes.’

‘And you’re wasting time talking to *me*?’

‘He’s in the shower.’

‘All wet and waiting? God, you little minx. Who knew you could

move so fast? You didn't find him amongst the soggy canapés, so it had to be on the way home ... oh no!' Jonathan's voice rose half an octave. 'Please don't tell me you've been trawling the back alleys, *after dark!* Mad, it's not safe. And to take him home! You get that pretty boy from the reception desk right now, to help you throw him out. I'm going to stay on the phone until you do. I don't care if he's naked. Give him a fiver and tell him to come to the lab in the morning for the rest.'

Madison bit her lip to stop herself laughing, hearing the concern in her colleague's voice. 'That's very sweet of you, Jon, and I do appreciate it, but it really is perfectly okay. He's too beat up to do me any damage. In fact it was the other way round. I thumped him—'

'You thumped him? Why? What did he do?'

'Misunderstanding,' Madison cut in quickly. 'We straightened it out. It's fine, honestly. He's fine. Well, actually he's not, and he won't let me get him a doctor—'

'Mad,' Jonathan broke in ominously. 'Tell me this man is not going to die on you? Go into a coma? Something permanent *and difficult to cover up.*'

'We're spooks, we can cover up *anything.*'

'You watch too much television. Or maybe not enough. Look, sweet pea, I love you, but Mad is not just a fond nickname. Get rid of him. You do not need this in your home. He'll come to the lab for money. They all do.'

'Cynic.'

'Realist. Turn him loose, please.'

'If I do that, I'm afraid I'll never see him again. He's ... resistant.'
And yet she'd felt, somehow, as if he was searching.

Wishful thinking.

'He's something special, Jonny. Power like I've never experienced. And he can feel me. He knows when I'm inside his head.'

'Oh God. How many glasses of paint stripper did you have at that bloody do?'

This time she did laugh. ‘One, and that was one too many. Look, it’s okay, Jon, I know what I’m doing. I’ll bring him to work in the morning and you can see for yourself.’

She heard Jonathan exhale. ‘Well – if you’re dead set on keeping him, do you want me and Ash to come over? Act as bodyguards?’

‘It’s a lovely offer, but no. It really isn’t necessary. I *will* call you if I need you.’

‘Promise?’ Jonathan was weakening. ‘Uh – I still think you’re crazy, and I won’t sleep a wink with worry, but if you’re sure ...’

‘I am. I’m a big, bad scientist. I can do this. Goodnight, Jonny. And don’t fret. I’m quite safe.’

She replaced the receiver, smiling. She did feel safe. It was the captive who needed to watch out for himself. *You really have to find out what his name is.*

She looked at the clock, frowning. He’d been in the shower over half an hour, which ought to be long enough to wash off the grime, even the ingrained stuff. Thorough was good, but enough was enough.

The bathroom door was still shut.

‘Hello?’ She knocked. ‘I made coffee.’

No response. No sound of running water. No sound at all.

She turned the handle. The door wasn’t locked.

He was lying on the floor, naked except for the shorts.

‘Blast!’ For the second time in less than two hours she crouched beside him, heart thumping, Jonathan’s scare scenarios lurid in her head.

When he moved – a small nestling gesture that tugged at her overworked heart – she could have broken into song. She leaned closer and was rewarded by a faint but audible snore. She leaned back, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. He’d neatly sidestepped her plan to begin experiments tonight.

He wasn’t unconscious.

He was fast asleep.

Balked of her objective, Madison sat on the floor beside him. She

was going to have to get him up sometime soon, and into the guest bedroom, but she might as well take the chance of a quick physical appraisal. Not as if she had anything else to do, and she was pretty sure he wasn't going to volunteer her a look at his injuries. She brushed off a flicker of conscience. She really did need to get an idea of what sort of mess he was in.

The face, shrouded in beard, eyes closed, was still an unknown quantity. His hair, newly washed, was dark and springy. She caught her fingers in the act of stretching out to touch, and pulled back sharply. His body, and she could see virtually all of it, was a complete surprise. Hard, toned, muscled. Way too lean for his height, but otherwise breathtakingly perfect. She'd expected signs of privation, but there was nothing. He was strong and fit. Ripped, even. Who knew?

And much younger than she'd thought. The silver in the hair had thrown her off. Early thirties, at a guess. Lying on his uninjured side, his left shoulder was swollen, the flesh discoloured by bruises, confirming his diagnosis of something broken. Somehow she had to get him medical attention. There were healing cuts and more old bruises in other places, souvenirs from the kids with boots and sticks. Nausea grumbled in her stomach. All that hurt, for a sick thrill.

And aren't you planning to do the same thing to his mind? Work him over, for your own pleasure?

Not pleasure! This is my job. This is science.

And you don't enjoy your work?

'I won't leave him damaged and in pain, and he'll be paid.'

And that makes it all right, does it? But of course, he's only a down-and-out. Something you found in the gutter.

'That's not true, but if he chooses to degrade himself—'

Sometimes it's not a choice. You know that.

Madison let out an exasperated snort. She was talking, *out loud*, to a voice in her head!

She leaned against the bath and focused on a spot where the wall tiles joined, clearing her mind.

Why guilt? Why now? The lab had to have subjects. She worked with residents from a number of homeless shelters. No one was harassed. They were all volunteers and they were treated with respect. Hell, she even had a few who were regulars. They were good material and they didn't talk afterwards. *Or if they do, no one much listens.* She shook her head. Why was this one different?

Because you more or less dragged him in here, and you're not planning on letting him go in a hurry. And he has power. Of his own. You want to teach him to use it.

She snapped back, feeling dizzy. Apprehension tugged at her stomach. Did she really—

She shook her head again, gritting her teeth. Enough with the self-examination. She was tired and hungry and off balance. Right now she had to get six-foot plus of inert, naked male off the floor and into a bed.

She scrambled up, considering the problem. A wet towel? Ice? Both? *Each!* Should she just get a blanket? He looked very peaceful, but the floor was chilly and hard. Probably no worse than where he'd been sleeping, but even so—

She put her hand on his arm. His skin was smooth. Besides the bruises there were scars. A jagged, newly healed slash along his side that had probably come from a knife. And then something older. And more puzzling. A slight puckering of the skin in the crook of his elbow. Plastic surgery?

Curious, she traced it with a finger. There was definitely something. A skin graft, to cover a birthmark or a tattoo?

Shrugging, she shifted position, watching his ribs rise and fall.

Clean, warm and in a secure place, his system had simply sandbagged him, taking what he'd been fighting not to give. No wonder he'd fallen asleep, even on so inhospitable a location as the bathroom floor. Her hand drifted over his chest. His stomach was flat, with an intriguing line of soft hair disappearing into the top of the boxers.

With a gasp she pulled her hand away, horrified at herself.

Checking out his injuries was one thing, ogling and pawing him, when he wasn't awake to know about it—

Face flaming, she got to her feet. Filling a glass of water, she splashed a few drops on his face.

He came awake quicker than she expected, propping himself on his good arm and blinking at her. After a second of blankness, his eyes focused. Recognition.

'Mmm.' He yawned hugely. 'Did I go under again?'

'You were asleep. Come on.' She'd become quite adept at sliding an arm under his, to get him on his feet. She tried not to think about smooth, exposed skin. He pulled against her, half-heartedly. 'There's a perfectly good bed, on the other side of the hall. Just a few steps.'

A mix of coaxing, bullying and threats got him into the bedroom and sitting on the edge of the bed.

'Feet up.'

He resisted at first. He was strong, even two-thirds asleep. She'd almost given up when he lost interest and let her scoop him on to the bed and roll him away from the injured shoulder. She wrapped the duvet around him. On an impulse she couldn't identify, she bent and dropped a soft, fleeting kiss on his forehead. His eyes flickered open, muzzy.

'Here you are, practically naked in my bed – one of my beds. And I still haven't found out your name.'

For a second the eyes cleared, as if he understood her. He muttered something. She leaned forward to hear. It was barely a breath and then his eyes closed, shutting her out.

She frowned. He wasn't making sense, or she hadn't heard properly.

What she *thought* she'd heard him murmur was 'Don't know.'

To be continued

Ebook available now, paperback released 7th March 2013.