



Seduction Game: An I-Team Novel

By Pamela Clare

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the novels of Pamela Clare

“Packed with action and raw, sexual tension . . . *Striking Distance* brings readers the edgy suspense, meaty subject matter, and intense emotions fans have come to expect from this talented author.”—Cindy Gerard, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Clare is a dazzling talent.”—Lori Foster, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Everything feels flawlessly researched, and she blends enough detail in to make her writing authentic, without bogging it down. This book is sharp-edged and smart.”—Smart Bitches, Trashy Books

“One of the few authors I find reliable in the romantic suspense department these days . . . [A] cracking good read with believable and diverse characters, deeply romantic and emotional.”—Dear Author

About the Author

Pamela Clare is a former newspaper journalist. She is the author of the I-Team novels, including *Striking Distance*, *Breaking Point*, and *Naked Edge*. She lives in Colorado.

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1

Trust no one.

What the hell was Kramer trying to tell him?

Nick Andris rubbed his closed eyes with the heels of his hands, then looked up at the clock. Almost midnight.

Shit.

This was a waste of time.

For almost three weeks, he'd been keeping Holly Elise Bradshaw under round-the-clock surveillance. He'd turned her life inside out, but had found nothing. He'd tapped her cell phone and landline, sifted through her laptop, searched her condo, memorized the details of her childhood, learned about her friends, pored over her financial records, scrutinized her posts on social media for hints of tradecraft, and tracked every move she'd made via GPS. He'd found nothing remotely suspicious.

He'd even gone behind Bauer's back and contacted Rich Lagerman, an old buddy from Delta Force who was now working for the FBI, and asked whether Bradshaw was one of theirs. Every federal agency in the country now had undercover officers, and it wouldn't be the first time operatives from different agencies had tripped over one another while pursuing a suspect.

“Nope. Not one of ours,” Lagerman had said. “But if you need any help with her, maybe some late-night, under-the-covers work, let me know.”

“Right.”

Nick now knew more about this woman than she knew about herself. If Holly Bradshaw were some kind of underworld operative, a foreign agent, a traitor who sold US secrets, then he was Elvis fucking Presley.

Someone at Langley had screwed up.

Bauer had recalled Nick from assignment in Tbilisi amid whispers that a handful of officers were missing or dead and that the Agency was conducting an internal investigation of its Special Activities Division, or SAD, the top-secret branch of the CIA that had recruited Nick out of Delta Force nine years ago. He’d never been assigned to operate within US borders, so he’d arrived in Langley expecting to find himself in the middle of an inquisition.

Instead, Bauer, his supervisor, had given him a file with the latest intel on Sasha Dudayev, aka Sachino Dudaev, the Georgian arms smuggler who’d killed the only woman Nick had ever loved.

“He killed an officer and stole a flash drive containing classified information vital to US operations outside the homeland,” Bauer had said. “Holly Elise Bradshaw is his contact for the deal. Keep Bradshaw under surveillance, recover the data, and neutralize them both using any force necessary.”

As a rule, the Agency left affairs within the homeland to the NSA and FBI, but they sometimes broke that rule when it came to high-value international targets and US citizens who’d crossed the line to work with those targets. It was unusual for Nick to run surveillance on a fellow American in her home, but apart from that element of his current mission, Bauer had given him exactly what he’d wanted for two long years now—a chance to make Dudaev pay.

Dudaev had played the Agency and brought the Batumi op down on their heads. Nick had been there that night. He’d watched, wounded and pinned down by AK fire, as the son of a bitch had emptied his Makarov into Dani’s chest, then made off with the cache of AKs the Agency had wrested away from Chechen terrorists. Nick had crawled over to Dani and held her body afterward, held her until he’d passed out from blood loss.

His sole task that night had been to protect her, and he’d failed.

But now things were about to come full circle.

There was only one problem.

The suits at Langley had clearly made a mistake when they’d fingered Ms. Bradshaw as Dudaev’s contact. Okay, so it was an understandable error. The bastard’s last lover had been an Italian journalist who’d acted as his mole and messenger—until he’d killed her. Analysts must have assumed he’d recruited Ms. Bradshaw when she’d interviewed him about his new art gallery and then begun dating him.

As understandable as the error might be, nothing changed the fact that Nick had now wasted three weeks discovering that Holly Bradshaw was exactly what she seemed to be—an entertainment writer; a smart but shallow blonde; a woman who loved sex, expensive clothes, and good times with her friends. He’d explained all of this to Bauer, sharing every bit of intel he’d gathered on her. If Dudaev was about to sell the flash drive, the deal would go down without Bradshaw’s knowledge or participation.

Bauer had blown him off. “Stick with her. I swear she’s the one.”

Some people just hated to be wrong.

Nick’s time would be better spent trailing Dudaev and hunting down the real contact—or sorting truth from rumor on the internal investigation and the missing and dead officers.

Trust no one.

Kramer had contacted him this afternoon, insisting they speak face-to-face. He’d be passing through Denver tomorrow and had asked Nick to meet him for lunch. Nick hadn’t needed to ask what was on Kramer’s mind. It wasn’t unusual for an officer to be killed in the line of duty, but it was strange that Nick and Kramer had worked with all of them. Then Kramer had ended the call with those three words—and Nick’s imagination had taken over.

“They’re ombré crystal pumps in royal blue with four-inch heels.”

Nick took another swig of cold coffee. In his earpiece, Bradshaw and her friend Kara McMillan were still talking.

“I love them,” Bradshaw said, “but my shoe budget is blown for the next ten years.”

Nick doubted that. Bradshaw’s daddy was a retired brigadier general who had served with US Army Intelligence—another reason analysts believed Dudaev had chosen her—and Daddy had created a nice little trust fund for his baby girl.

“How much do a pair of Christian Louboutins cost?” McMillan asked.

Nick ran through the key facts on McMillan, more to help himself stay awake than because he’d forgotten anything.

McMillan, Kara. 40. Journalist, author, journalism instructor at Metro State University. Wife of Sheridan, Reece, lieutenant governor of the state of Colorado. No arrests. No suspected criminal associations. Three children. Formerly employed by the Denver Independent on its Investigative Team, aka the I-Team. Met Bradshaw through work. Close personal friend.

“Well, it depends on where you buy them, whether they’re on sale, which shoe you choose—that sort of thing.”

“Holly,” McMillan said in a stern voice. “How much?”

Bradshaw hesitated. “These were just over three thousand.”

Nick had just taken another swig of coffee and nearly choked.

Three thousand dollars? For a fucking pair of shoes?

“Wow!” McMillan laughed. “Reece would divorce me.”

Damn straight!

“Did you get them for your big date with Sasha tomorrow?”

“I needed something to go with my new dress.”

Nick rolled his eyes. The woman’s closet was full of shoes. The last thing she needed was one more pair—especially one that cost three fucking grand.

“I read in the paper that he’s a billionaire—gas and oil money,” McMillan said.

Nick’s jaw clenched.

Dudaev had built his fortune on human lives, including Dani’s. Killing her had been nothing more than a business transaction to him. He could change his name, wear designer suits, and open a dozen art galleries to make himself seem respectable, but nothing could wash the blood off his hands.

“You should see the sapphire necklace he gave me last week. The chain isn’t actually a chain. It’s a strand of diamonds.”

Nick already knew from another conversation—this time with Sophie Alton-Hunter, another friend from the newspaper—that Bradshaw had bought the dress to match the necklace. Now she’d gotten the shoes to go with the dress. And at last Nick understood what a woman like Holly Bradshaw would see in Dudaev.

Well, greed was blind.

She had no idea what kind of man he truly was. If she wasn’t careful, he’d strangle her with that necklace.

“Sophie told me. It sounds like he’s serious about you. Do you think this will be it—the big night?”

Nick frowned.

What did McMillan mean by that?

“I don’t know. I mean, he’s good-looking enough.”

“Good-looking enough?” McMillan laughed. “He’s a lot better looking than that banker you went out with last year. Where was he from?”

“South Africa.”

“He’s better looking than that Saudi prince, too, whatever his name was. In the news photos, he looks a lot like George Clooney. Sure, he’s got some gray, but I’ll bet he’s fully functional.”

Ah, yes. They were talking about Ms. Bradshaw’s love life. Again.

Nick glanced for a moment at the photos of her he’d pinned to the wall above his desk. He could see why men were eager to sleep with her. She was hot.

Okay, she was incredibly hot. Platinum blond hair. A delicate, heart-shaped face. Big brown eyes. A full mouth, and a body that . . .

Get your mind off her body.

What good were looks if they got you into trouble? There were men who preyed on beautiful women, and Dudaev was one of them.

“Yeah, but he’s . . . I don’t know . . . self-absorbed. He’s probably the kind of man who makes you wish you had a magazine to read when you’re in bed with him. You know—the kind who acts like he’s doing you a big favor when he rams into you for two minutes.”

McMillan was laughing now.

But Bradshaw hadn’t finished. “A lot of guys are oblivious like that. ‘Don’t worry about getting me off, babe. I just want to go down on you all night long’—said no man ever.”

Nick shook his head. Is that truly what she expected?

A dude would have to have a motorized tongue to pull that off.

Did all women talk like this about sex? Nick couldn’t imagine his sister sharing details about her sex life with her friends or using this kind of language. His mother, a devout Georgian Orthodox Christian, would have had a coronary if she’d caught her daughter or even one of her five sons talking like this.

Not that it offended Nick. He found it kind of sexy, actually. But then, given the things he’d seen and the things he’d had to do, a conversation about oral sex was pretty damned tame.

“Not all men are selfish.”

You tell her, McMillan.

“No, I suppose not. But lots of them are. It makes me want to take out a full-page ad in the paper just to help out womankind. ‘It’s the clit, stupid.’”

Nick let out a laugh—then caught himself.

Keep your shit together, Andris.

Holly Bradshaw glanced over her shoulder at her living room wall. “Mr. Creeper must be watching something funny on TV. I just heard him laugh. I never hear him.”

“You still haven’t met him?” Kara asked through a yawn.

“He’s lived there for almost a month now and hasn’t once come over to say hello. He stays indoors and keeps the shades drawn. I’ve seen him outside once. He was taking out the trash, but he was wearing a hoodie. I couldn’t see his face.”

Kara’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Maybe he’s a serial killer.”

“You’re not helping.”

“Who cares about him anyway? If I were you, I’d be so excited about tomorrow night. You lead such a glamorous life. I’m so jealous.”

But Holly knew that wasn’t true. “You and Sophie and the others—you spend every evening with your kids and men who love you, while I watch TV by myself or go out to the clubs. I think you’re the lucky ones.”

Like the rest of Holly’s friends, Kara was happily married to a man who cherished her. Reece was one of the kindest, most decent, and sexiest men Holly had ever met—which was really strange, given that he was a

politician. He'd bent over backward to prove to Kara that he loved her. Now, they had three kids and lived what seemed to Holly to be a perfect life.

The fact that all of her friends were now married and most had children had changed her life, too. She spent a lot less time out on the town with them and a lot more time alone while they took on new roles and responsibilities. As much as she loved excitement and enjoyed the city's nightlife, some secret part of her had begun to long for what they had—a family, a sense of roots, the certainty of belonging with someone. If she hated anything more than boredom, it was loneliness.

But Kara didn't seem to believe her. "Are you saying you'd be willing to trade places with me?"

"And sleep with Reece?" Holly smiled to herself, stretched out on her sofa, and wiggled her toes.

"That's not what I meant."

But the question, however intended, had Holly's imagination going.

Reece was sexy with dark blond hair, blue eyes, and muscles he hid beneath tailored suits. How fun it would be to peel one of those suits away from his skin.

Then there was Julian Darcangelo, Tessa's husband. He was the city's top vice cop and a former FBI agent who'd worked deep cover. Tall with shoulder-length dark hair, a ripped body, and a strikingly handsome face, he was sex on a stick—and crazy in love with his wife.

Then again, Marc Hunter, Sophie's husband, had served six years in prison and had that badass vibe Holly loved. A former Special Forces sniper, he was also devoted to his family—and sexier than any man had a right to be.

Gabe Rossiter, Kat James's husband, had a rock climber's lean, muscular build and a daredevil attitude. He had all but given his life for the woman he loved. Kat was lucky.

Zach McBride, a former Navy SEAL and Medal of Honor recipient, had saved Natalie from being murdered by the leader of a Mexican drug cartel. All lean muscle and confidence, he had the hard look of a man who was used to taking action.

Nate West, Megan's husband, had been badly burned in combat, his face and much of his body disfigured. The part of him that wasn't scarred was extremely handsome—and he had a cowboy charm that brought the song "Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy)" to Holly's mind.

Javier Corbray had rescued his wife, Laura Nilsson, from captivity in a terrorist stronghold in Pakistan, sacrificing his career as a SEAL. With a sexy Puerto Rican accent, dreamy dark eyes, and a mouth that—

"Are you fantasizing about my husband?" Kara's accusing voice jerked Holly out of her reverie.

"No, of course not. Not really. Okay, a little," Holly confessed. "I was just deciding which one of you I'd most like to trade places with."

It was just a game. Holly had never so much as flirted with a married man. She didn't poach on other women's territory. But that didn't mean she couldn't fantasize.

"Holly!" Kara laughed. "I'm sorry I phrased it the way I did. Let me try again."

Tessa, Holly decided.

She'd trade places with Tessa. She'd always had a secret crush on Julian.

But Kara went on. "If you want to meet good men, maybe you should quit going to the clubs. Most of the guys there are just looking for someone to hook up with."

It wasn't the first time Kara had suggested this, but she didn't understand.

How could she?

Holly fired back. "You met Reece at a bar."

Okay, so it had been a restaurant. Still, Kara had consumed three margaritas, so it might as well have been a bar.

"Only because someone interfered," Kara replied.

Holly smiled to herself. It had been so easy.

"Where else can a woman meet men? If I don't go out, I'll never meet anyone. It's not like Mr. Right is going to walk up and knock on my front door."

"You never know." Kara changed the subject. "Hey, did you hear that Tom is converting to Buddhism?"

Holly sat upright. "Tom? The same Tom Trent I know? The one who spends his day shouting at everyone? He's converting to Buddhism?"

"That's what my mother says."

Kara's mother, Lily, lived with Tom.

"She would know. But Tom—a Buddhist? He and the Dalai Lama have so much in common, like, for example . . . nothing."

Tom was the editor-in-chief of the Denver Independent, where his temper was as much of a legend as his journalistic brilliance. As an entertainment writer, Holly didn't work directly beneath him like her I-Team friends did. Beth Dailey, the entertainment editor, was her boss. Beth never yelled, never insulted people—and she appreciated Holly's shoes.

"I think it's perfect," Kara said. "If anyone needs to meditate, it's Tom. Gosh, it's after midnight. I need to get to bed—and so do you if you want to be rested for tomorrow night."

The two said good night and ended the call.

Holly got up from the sofa and went through her nightly routine, undressing, brushing her teeth, and washing and moisturizing her face, a sinking feeling stealing over her. Naked, she walked over to her dresser and carefully took her new Louboutins out of their red silk bag, moving them so that the light made the crystals sparkle.

She didn't want to spend another moment with Sasha Dudayev, but she'd already accepted and had the shoes . . .

Just one more date and that would be it.

She tucked the shoes carefully back in the bag, turned out her light, and crawled between her soft cotton sheets.

Nick fell to the concrete, pain knocking the breath from him. He looked down, saw that the round had penetrated his right side. He pressed his hand against the wound to staunch the blood loss.

He glanced over his left shoulder, caught sight of Dani. She lay flat on the ground behind a forklift, her gaze on him, her eyes wide.

She was safe.

Thank God!

She got to her knees, clearly about to run to him.

Nick shook his head in warning. "Stay there!"

But their attackers had already spotted her and opened fire again.

Rat-at-at-at-at!

AK rounds struck the forklift, ricocheting wildly.

Dani fell flat again, panic in her eyes.

Then Dudaev appeared, gliding down the center of the warehouse like an apparition.

The bastard walked over to Dani.

"No!" Nick shouted.

Dudaev glanced his way, looked back down at Dani, and said something. Then he drew a Makarov from a shoulder holster inside his jacket.

"Dani! No!" Nick fought to reach her, bullets raining from above, pain and blood loss making it impossible to move.

He was too late.

God, no!

"Dani!"

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Nick awoke with a gasp, sweat beaded on his forehead, a hand pressed to his side. There was no blood, pain only a memory.

Around him, the room was silent.

Another nightmare.

He rose, walked to the bathroom, splashed cold water on his face, his sense of terror slowly receding, grief taking its place.

Dani.

Every damned time he had one of these, it was like losing her again, the pain as real and new as it had been when he'd lain there holding her body, her lifeless eyes looking up at him, her blood and his mingling on that warehouse floor.

God, how he wished it had been him.

How he wished Dudaev had killed him instead.

"They say they've got more leg room, but that's bullshit. I'm six feet. You just can't get leg room in economy."

Nick nodded, took a swig of Tsingtao, his gaze on Kramer as he typed a message onto the Notes app of Nick's phone with one finger. Nick had known Kramer since the beginning. He'd been working under Bauer when Nick had joined the Agency and had taken Nick under his wing, acted as his mentor, showed him the ropes.

Kramer had always seemed indestructible to Nick, but today he was looking rough around the edges—older, pale, worn. There were thick bags under his eyes and a couple days' growth of whiskers on his jaw. His hair was more gray than brown now and looked as if it hadn't been combed in a few days. Then again, he'd just flown in from South Korea. But it was more than that.

For the first time since Nick had known him, Kramer seemed shaken, worried.

Kramer turned the phone so Nick could read it.

We've got big trouble.

As soon as he'd read the message, Nick deleted it and typed his own.

An internal investigation. Who? Why?

"I'm six-three, man," he said aloud. "You're preaching to the choir."

On his plate, an order of kung pao beef was growing cold, the food and conversation nothing more than cover.

Kramer frowned, took the phone, typed.

Daly, Carver, both dead.

"I sat there for the last three hours of the flight wishing I could stash my legs in the overhead compartment," Kramer went on, the tone of his voice casual, his Brooklyn accent standing out in this crowd of Coloradans and California imports.

"I've had that same fantasy." Nick deleted the words, typed his own message.

I heard. Were they outed?

Kramer shrugged, deleted Nick's message, and began to type again. "They're going to have to decrease their fares or take out a couple of rows of seats if I'm ever going to climb into one of their rust buckets again. I felt like a goddamn sardine."

McGowen's dead, too.

"Too bad you've still got four hours of flying time to go, old buddy." Nick's mouth formed words that barely registered with his mind as he did the mental math, a sense of foreboding growing in his gut.

He typed out his reply.

They were all part of the Batumi op. What the hell is going on?

"Yeah, too damned bad about that, for sure." Kramer looked Nick straight in the eyes, typed one last message, then finished his beer and stood.

Nick turned the phone so that he could read it.

Watch your six.

That was it? Kramer had met with him just to tell him to watch his back?

Nick had every intention of doing just that, of course. He erased the message, stood. "Want a ride to the airport?"

Kramer tossed a couple bucks onto the table. "I'll grab a cab."

As he watched Kramer leave the little Chinese joint, Nick felt certain that Kramer knew more about all of this than he'd just shared.

2

Nick adjusted his platinum-and-diamond cufflinks, his gaze focused on the crowd, a knot in his stomach, the same knot that had been there since he'd gotten the news.

Kramer hadn't made it to DC. He'd stepped out of that restaurant, climbed into a cab—and disappeared. His luggage had been found in an alley in Aurora beside a couple of spent 9mm shell casings and a pool of blood that would probably test as his. But so far police hadn't found his body.

What the fuck was going on?

A dozen possibilities had been running through Nick's mind all evening, but one stood out among the rest: Dudaev must have known Kramer was in Denver and had gone after him. That meant Nick was in danger. If Dudaev had been able to identify and track down Kramer, Nick had to assume the bastard could do the same with him.

That thought had prompted Nick to switch his cover at the last minute. Rather than showing up at the gallery opening as a member of the catering staff, he had come as a wealthy art collector, the glasses, graying hair, and mustache an attempt at a last-minute disguise.

You look like something out of a 1970s Stasi manual, Andris.

Maybe so. But Nick didn't need to win a beauty contest. He just needed to get Dudaev before the bastard got him.

He hadn't cleared the change of cover with Bauer. If there was a leak somewhere in the chain of command, someone within the Agency who was handing officers over to the enemy, he didn't want to give himself away. As far as everyone in DC knew, he was currently walking around the gallery dressed in black and wearing a fine apron.

He shifted his attention back to the crowd, mental discipline pushing other thoughts aside. He had a job to do.

It was already past nine, and Gallery Dudayev was packed. Denver's glitterati had turned out in force to see and be seen at the grand opening—and to meet the city's newest billionaire. By Nick's estimate, there were almost two hundred people here, all of them dressed to kill. He had no difficulty picking Dudaev's men out of the crowd. He'd counted five. They stood along the edges of the room, their gazes moving over the sea of faces. Compared to the gallery's guests, they looked sullen and stiff, their suits not quite enough to camouflage the thugs within.

Meanwhile, Dudaev was still at the restaurant with Ms. Bradshaw. He was probably planning on making a late entrance. The bastard loved drama.

Nick accepted a glass of champagne from a young server and feigned interest in a sculpture, his gaze shifting to the other side of the room. He was here tonight to see if he could spot Dudaev's real contact, the person who'd come to act as Dudaev's courier and deliver the stolen intel to its buyer. He couldn't be certain the contact would show tonight. Still, the gallery's grand opening was guaranteed to draw some of Dudaev's underworld contacts.

Near the buffet table, Denver's new mayor was talking with a city councilman about tighter regulations for the city's private marijuana clubs. In the corner, an older man and his wife argued about whether he'd been ogling younger women. A hipster in skinny jeans kept circling back to the buffet as if he hadn't eaten in a week. A gay couple moved from painting to painting, discussing the merit of each and holding hands.

"What he's trying for here is modern art with a classical aesthetic, a contemporary reinterpretation of the canon," said one.

Nick drew out his cell phone, thumbed in his passcode. If Ms. Bradshaw hadn't forgotten her cell phone at home, he would be listening in on every word of her dinner conversation. Instead, he was stuck looking at the location of Dudaev's limo on a special GPS app on his cell phone. The blip on the screen, fed to his phone by a small GPS transmitter he'd fixed to the underside of the limo, told him they were still at the restaurant. How long did it take to eat a damned meal?

What Dudaev had in mind for Ms. Bradshaw, Nick wasn't certain. The son of a bitch wanted to fuck her, of course. That went without saying. But if he tried to recruit her, and she had the strength of character to refuse . . .

What's it to you, Andris? The woman isn't your problem.

If she had the bad taste to get mixed up with a killer like Sachino Dudaev, that was her mistake. The Agency wasn't there to bail her out. Then again, Dudaev wouldn't get far, regardless of his plans for her.

Soon, he'd be dead.

Nick felt a sense of anticipation at the thought. Hell, no, he didn't enjoy killing—most of the time. He was willing to make an exception in this case. The Agency wanted to terminate Dudaev because he and his organization posed a serious threat to US security. But Nick's reasons were far more personal.

He felt his cell phone buzz, glanced down. The green blip was moving.

It's about damned time.

A few minutes later, the limo pulled up to the curb. A uniformed driver hurried around to the rear driver's-side door and opened it. Dudaev stepped out like a conquering hero and walked behind the vehicle to the rear passenger door, where he stood, smiling, waiting for the driver to open it.

The knot in Nick's stomach became a ball of rage.

It had been a little more than two years since he'd seen the son of a bitch. Dudaev had done well for himself. Dressed entirely in black—Italian shoes, Armani suit, diamond ring—he waved to his guests, acknowledging their applause, then turned and reached back to help Ms. Bradshaw.

She emerged one long, silky, slender leg at a time.

Holy . . . hell.

Nick's mouth went dry.

He'd spent three weeks listening to her and had looked at dozens of photographs, but he hadn't really seen her, not like this.

Shit.

She wore a strapless dress of beaded royal blue, its hem barely low enough to cover her ass. A sapphire the size of a robin's egg hung from a necklace of glittering diamonds, more diamonds hanging from the end of the stone in a tassel that just touched the dark cleft of her breasts. Dudaev's gift. She looked up at the bastard as he helped her out of the vehicle, her brown eyes warm, her red lips curving in a smile, her shoulder-length platinum blond hair arranged in tousled waves.

A whisper moved through the crowd.

"Those boobs have to be as fake as that necklace."

Fake or real, her tits were in serious danger of becoming another gallery exhibit. How the hell did that dress stay on?

"I think she's an actress."

She was certainly beautiful enough to make it in Hollywood, but an actress wouldn't have shied away from the cameras the way Ms. Bradshaw did.

"It figures the rich, old goat would get to sleep with a chick like that."

Yeah. That thought sickened Nick, too.

He tore his gaze from Bradshaw and moved casually on to the next sculpture, trying to fade into the background.

They reached Sasha's hotel just after one in the morning.

Holly watched while Kirill, Sasha's chief bodyguard, searched her clutch, examining her cell phone, looking inside her compact, checking inside her emergency box of tampons, and opening her lipstick. "The color is called Heat Wave. I can pick some up for you if you like it."

Kirill glowered at her.

"For your wife, I mean." Holly met Sasha's gaze. "It was a joke."

Sasha chuckled. "Kirill is not one for the jokes, I think."

Kirill motioned her forward. "Put your hands behind your head."

She looked up at Sasha, putting a pout on her face. "Do I have to do this?"

"I am sorry, but Kirill is most particular about security," Sasha answered. "I am a very powerful man. There are some who would do anything, even send a beautiful woman, to get to me."

"Fine, but if there's going to be a pat-down, I want you to do it." She smoothed her hands down Sasha's chest.

"He won't touch you, my sweet. I promise." There was a hint of steel in Sasha's voice—a warning for Kirill.

Holly turned toward the grumpy security guard and did as he asked, giving him a little smile. "Do I look like I'm carrying a gun? Where would I hide it?"

Two spots of red appeared on the dour man's cheeks as he ran a metal detector over her. It beeped as it passed over her breasts.

"It must be the underwire in my bra," she said. "Should I take it off?"

Kirill looked like he was about to demand that she do just that, when Sasha muttered something to him in Russian.

"Your shoes, please, miss." Kirill pointed to her feet.

Holly stepped out of one pump and then the other, handing them over. "Okay, but be careful. These are Christian Louboutins. They're very expensive."

Sasha settled a big hand on the nape of her neck. "If he makes so much as a single scratch, I will buy you new pair."

Kirill examined the shoes, then handed them back to Holly.

She slipped them on one at a time, holding on to Sasha's arm for balance. "I didn't realize being an art collector could be so dangerous."

"Money attracts danger, and art is money." Sasha turned to the door of his hotel suite, swiped his key card.

“Ladies first.”

Holly stepped inside and glanced around. She’d stayed in the Roosevelt Suite once before when she’d gone out with that South African banker, but she wouldn’t tell Sasha that. “This is amazing!”

He gave her a grand tour, his arm around her shoulders. The furniture was masculine and had a historical feel, with dark leather sofa and wing chairs, walnut cabinets, and polished wood floors. A portrait of Teddy Roosevelt from his Rough Rider days graced one wall. A four-poster bed stood in the spacious bedroom.

Sasha guided her to the windows that gave them a view of the city lights. He caught her chin, pressed his lips to hers in a soft kiss. “You have only tasted a little of what could be your life with me. I can fly you around the world, show you places you have never seen. Paris? Rome? I will buy them for you. I can take you sailing on my yacht—Star of the Black Sea. It is a beautiful ship.”

“That all sounds so romantic.” She’d heard it all before. He’d even shown her photos of the yacht.

He smiled. “Shall we have some champagne?”

On a sideboard just inside the door, a bottle sat chilling in a crystal ice bucket.

“You’re such a gentleman, Sasha.”

He’d been a perfect gentleman all evening—if being a gentleman were measured in grand gestures, spending money, and bad kissing. He’d reserved an entire restaurant for the two of them, their table set with old English roses. The chef had served course after course of delicacies, each with its own wine. Everything had been delicious, from the prosciutto appetizer to the coconut sorbet dessert.

Sasha had asked her about her job and what she wanted out of life, making it clear that he had much to offer her—excitement, glamour, even work if she wanted it. When she’d asked him what kind of work, he’d told her that he sometimes had need of someone he could trust to deliver packages and that he paid handsomely for such service. Holly had told him that she was happy with her job at the paper and had steered the conversation back toward art.

After dinner, they’d taken the limo back to the gallery, kissing in the privacy of the back seat. He had no skill as a kisser, going with too much tongue too fast. She’d been relieved when they’d arrived at the gallery and he’d had to put that clumsy oral appendage back in his own mouth.

The gallery opening had been fun, with lots of people Holly knew from Denver’s cultural scene and tasty little hors d’oeuvres she’d been desperately tempted to eat. She knew Denver’s art scene well and had brushed up on art history just for the occasion. Not that she could hope to match Sasha’s knowledge on the subject—he truly was an expert—but at least she’d held her own.

He drew her closer and kissed her, again leading with his tongue. “Can you feel it? You belong with me.”

Oh, please!

Beneath the glitz and the whiff of danger, Sasha was . . . boring.

His cell phone buzzed.

He drew it out of his pocket, frowned at the display. “I apologize. I must take this call. Please, make yourself comfortable.”

She gave his tie a tug. “Don’t take too long.”

“I promise.” He smiled down at her, then put the phone to his ear and answered in his native tongue, disappearing into the small office and closing the door behind him.

Holly slipped out of her heels and glanced around. Behind the closed door, Sasha began to shout, clearly angry and in the midst of a serious conversation.

She saw her chance—and she took it.

She opened her clutch, took out the box of tampons, and retrieved the nitrile gloves hidden inside one of the plastic applicator tubes. Slipping the gloves on as she went, she hurried to the bedroom and opened the closet door, searching behind his suits for the room’s safe, listening as Sasha continued to argue. She punched the hotel’s default password into the safe’s keypad and opened the door, memorizing the placement of the contents at a glance. Makarov MP pistol. Two loaded magazines. Cash. Files. Passport. Red aluminum RFID-safe case.

She opened the RFID-safe case and found it—the stolen USB drive.

Sasha’s voice boomed from the office beyond, making her pulse spike, and not for the first time she wished she understood Georgian. She spoke French, Russian, and some Arabic, but not a word of Georgian, which was a bummer because she had no idea what was making him so angry. Had someone outed her?

Focus!

If he were to come out and discover her, she would die.

She took the special adapted smartphone from her handbag, popped it out of its case, and plugged the flash drive into the concealed USB port. A log-in prompt appeared on her screen, and she entered the password. The retrieval program kicked on and asked her if she wanted to download the data and upload the virus. She pressed “Yes,” her gaze drawn toward the bedroom door and the living area beyond.

While the data was downloading, she tucked the phone and disk drive back into the open safe and hurried into the living area, reaching into her bra. Careful not to break the slender wires, she loosed the tiny listening device, its compact body made to look like a button, and pulled it free. She knew exactly where she wanted to place it. Her gaze fell on the portrait of Roosevelt with its thick gilded frame. She hurried over, lifted the portrait away from the wall, then affixed the device to the back edge of the frame and activated it.

“Bully!” she whispered to Roosevelt, sure he would approve.

Knowing she was running out of time, she opened the copy of the New York Times that sat on the coffee table and turned to the entertainment section so that Dudaev would think she’d been reading this entire time.

Behind the closed door, Sasha fell silent.

She froze.

Oh, hell!

When he began shouting again, she ran to the bedroom and pulled the phone and flash drive out of the safe, looking back toward the office as the seconds ticked by and the phone finished uploading the virus. Ninety-four percent. Ninety-eight percent.

Done.

She tucked the flash drive carefully away, closed the safe, and smoothed the suits back into place, then ran for the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

She took a deep breath, willing her heartbeat to slow. She peeled off the gloves and flushed them down the toilet, her gaze landing on her own reflection. Her cheeks were too pink, and there was a sheen of perspiration on her forehead. She dabbed it away with a tissue.

He'd quit shouting now. Was he finished? If so, she had only seconds.

With practiced calm, she left the bathroom, looking quickly for anything she might have missed, and found her clutch gaping, the box of tampons open. She closed the box and snapped the clutch shut.

As they'd taught her in training, death was in the details.

She slipped her pumps back on and sat on the sofa, and had just picked up the newspaper and rubbed newsprint onto her fingertips when he opened the door and stepped out. Willing herself to relax—a predator like Sachino Dudaev would sense her adrenaline—she put a concerned frown on her face. “Is everything okay?”

He moved toward her, a heavy scowl on his face, fury in his brown eyes.

Holly felt her pulse spike.

Had the call been someone warning him about her? Had she been exposed?

“I apologize.” He bent down, pressed a kiss to her forehead, then walked over to the sideboard, his back toward her.

She closed her eyes, exhaled.

He went on. “The art world spans the globe, and that sometimes means calls come at strange hours. I promise—no more business tonight.”

He seemed tense as he opened the champagne and poured them each a glass. “Veuve Clicquot 1996 Grande Dame. It was the best they had.”

What had he been shouting about? She wished she knew, though she seriously doubted it had anything to do with art.

She got to her feet and joined him. “I'm sure it will be wonderful.”

Though she'd recovered the stolen intel, her task wouldn't be complete until she'd uploaded the virus to his computer to destroy any files he might have copied. Unless he went to the bathroom in the next few minutes, she would have no choice but to let the night take its course, even if that meant having sex with him. If she got lucky, maybe he had a bad case of erectile dysfunction and was out of Viagra.

Hey, a girl could dream.

Sasha turned to her and offered her a glass, looking into her eyes in a way that was no doubt supposed to be sexy but made her want to laugh. “To beauty.”

Holly clinked her glass with his and sipped, the bright taste dancing across her tongue, bubbles tickling her nose. “Mmm!”

Sasha drew her down on the sofa beside him, the fingers of his free hand possessing hers. “You were tonight the most stunning exhibit in the gallery. Every man in the room wanted you. Every woman wanted to be you.”

“What a sweet thing to say.” Holly resisted the urge to pull away.

What was her problem tonight?

She’d always gotten a thrill out of playing with dangerous men, manipulating them, turning their own lust and stupidity against them. They looked at her and saw a sexual plaything, a pretty toy they wanted to claim and control. They took her to dinner or to their beds, never knowing that she controlled them. The fact that her job was extremely risky—and would have both shocked and horrified her father—had only added to her sense of excitement. But tonight . . .

Tonight was no different. The only thing that mattered was doing her job.

You are the spider. He is the fly.

She took another sip of champagne, looked up at him from beneath her lashes. “Thank you for a magical evening.”

He leaned down until his forehead almost touched hers, his gaze on her boobs. “The night isn’t yet over. I had hoped you would stay.”

She let her lips curve in a slow smile. “If . . . if it’s not too soon. I wouldn’t want you to think I’m the kind—”

He kissed her, a hard kiss, again leading with the tongue. She worked with it, trying to turn off her mind and just react with her body.

He drew back, reached for the champagne bottle, and refilled their glasses. “Let’s go to the bedroom.”

Feeling a little light-headed, she rose to her feet and followed him, her heart beating erratically. She took another sip of the golden liquid to calm herself.

“I want to see you wearing nothing but my necklace.” He turned her to face away from him, and she felt his fingers take hold of the concealed side zipper. He drew it down, letting her dress fall to her feet, exposing her black lace bra and thong. His hands stroked the bare skin of her buttocks, cupping her, his body pressing close enough to prove that he, unfortunately, did not suffer from erectile dysfunction.

The fingers of one of his hands took hold of her bra strap. “May I?”

“Yes.” She felt a strange rush of breathlessness.

Was she aroused by him? No! She couldn’t be.

Then why was her heart beating so strangely?

Though she’d enjoyed sex with one or two of the handful of men she’d had to sleep with as part of her job,

she didn't find Dudaev attractive in the least. For starters, he was old enough to be her grandfather. Second, there was that mustache. But mostly there was that bit about him being a murderer and a thief and a . . .

She needed to stop drinking. It was getting hard to think.

His fingers released the clasp, and he pulled her bra away, tossing it aside.

Wearing only his sapphire necklace, her black lace thong, and her Christian Louboutin pumps, she stood still before him, a shiver sliding through her as his gaze moved over her.

He reached out, cupped one of her breasts. "Oh, you are beautiful."

But something was wrong. The room was spinning.

Oh, damn!

"Sasha?"

He stared at her, a strange look on his face. He seemed angry, and he was stammering, some of his words coming out in a language she didn't understand. And then he was holding a gun.

"What . . . ?" A burst of adrenaline hit her bloodstream—and dissipated.

Drugged.

She'd been drugged.

Dudaev was going to kill her.

This is so going to suck.

She took a step away from him, felt herself begin to fall, and then . . .

Nothing.

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