

## CHAPTER 1

*“Fate dictates the meeting of hearts when that meeting is random and unexpected. Recognition pulls the individual souls to a shared journey. Love has them moving as one toward their combined destiny.” Samantha Jayne*

Deep underground in the Euro-Disney complex near Paris, two characters were suiting up for a very important assignment.

“Adventureland has better costumes,” grumbled Aladdin a.k.a. Special Agent Alexander Springfield as he donned the vest and pantaloons that would transform him into the hero of the Disney classic.

“The meet is set up for Peter Pan’s Flight. That’s in Fantasyland.” Special Agent Skyler Madison worked on getting into her own costume. They were a team and they were on assignment. They were also engaged and would, before the end of the year, become the department’s only husband and wife team in the field.

“This sure is nothing like any fantasy I’ve ever had,” said Alex frowning at the little gold vest. “If I were in Adventureland, I could be Indiana Jones... a heroic, manly intellectual. Instead, I look like a damn belly dancer.”

Skye laughed as she glanced over and possessively took stock of his tall muscular body. A lot of it showed underneath the loose shirt and vest and she thought it made him look hot as hell. His magnificent blue eyes defied an Arab ancestry, but otherwise he looked like a very sexy desert chieftain.

“Being characters is great cover, Aladdin. We’re perfectly disguised and can casually wander around forever without looking out of place. It’s an ideal operational situation.”

“I’m not going to wear those shoes.” He scowled down at the slippers with the long rounded toes. “They look obscene.”

“Actually they’re called pigases, pigache in French. You have to wear them. They’re regulation.”

“How do you know these things?” Alex admired his partner and future wife’s command of trivia, but sometimes it could be annoying. Not as annoying as the absurd slippers, but coming on strong.

“I read the regulations.”

“No, I mean the name of these things?” He held up Aladdin’s regulation footgear.

“They’re shoes aren’t they?” Skye shrugged and gave him her ‘that should be obvious’ look. “I know shoes.”

“Oh, yeah. Right.” And he shot back his ‘get a life’ look. “The things I do for my country.”

“To make the world safe for Mickey Mouse and Golden Arches.”

“Christ, I feel stupid,” he said as he stomped on the shoes. Standing in front of the mirror, he struck his best Arabian macho man pose...arms crossed over his chest, his legs spread apart. He was six feet four inches of muscular manhood and no costume could diminish his incredible charisma. He was handsome in the extreme and his appreciative audience of one stopped to admire what she saw.

“Darling, you look exotic and gorgeous. *Vous êtes un beau diable.*” Skye moved easily from English to French. She spoke five languages fluently and could pick up most conversations in any European tongue. Her mother worked for the state department while she was growing up and they were often stationed in the great capitals of Europe.

“Translation please?” frowned Alex.

“Handsome devil.” Skye winked one of her sparking brown eyes.

“Ah. Well I don’t feel like a handsome devil,” he said turning toward her. “And you better stick to English, darling. You know French makes me hot. Say one more word and I’ll want a piece of your fairy tail.”

“Control yourself. We’re on duty. No hanky panky between characters.”

“Hanky panky?” snorted Alex. “You sound like an inhibited temperate spinster with issues.”

“We’re inside the Disney grounds. Everything gets a PG rating.”

“But this is France. They have different rules when it comes to hanky panky.” He extended the words hanky panky, saying them in a low, seductive voice, making them sound decidedly less PG.

Laughing, Skye tested his control. “*Nous serons postérieurs dans Paris à notre hôtel bientôt assez.*”

Alex looked over at her intently, then slowly started toward her. “I told you to quit talking French at me, now suffer the consequences, wench.”

Moving quickly, Skye put a table between them. “I’m not a wench, I’m a virgin.”

When Alex raised his eyebrows, she smiled wickedly.

“All right, so that’s a stretch, but that’s why Jim called in his best. I can pull off any role.” Skye deliberately adjusted the bodice of her costume to cover more of her luscious curves. “Besides, Monsieur Beaulac speaks French and you don’t try to jump him.”

“Monsieur Beaulac is bald, fifty pounds overweight and only has three workable teeth. And what did you just say to me? I didn’t catch it.”

“I said we would be back in our hotel room in Paris soon enough.”

“Will you order room service in French? Then read from the guide book while we wait.”

“Yes, now finish dressing.”

Sighing, Alex went back to his small pile of costume accessories. Skye had to hold back a giggle when he picked up the little hat and frowned.

“And don’t scowl. If you go out looking like that, you may scare the tourists.”

“How come Barclay doesn’t have to play dress up? He could be Goofy or Dopey without even a stretch.”

Barclay was their high-tech genius who was a little light on personality.

“He’ll be up in the listening station, taping everything and making sure all the surveillance equipment works.”

“Do I have to wear this wig?” He poked at the black wig wondering why all the male Disney characters had hair like Elvis.

“You’ve worn disguises before.”

“Not that made me look like a cartoon character.”

“Darling, you *are* a cartoon character. Just feel fortunate you were too tall to be one of the seven dwarfs. Although I think you could have pulled off Grumpy well enough,” she said under her breath.

“I heard that.”

“You were meant to.”

“Why couldn’t I have been Prince Charming or something? You once said I looked like Prince Charming. Besides he goes with Cinderella, doesn’t he?”

“I’m not Cinderella. I’m the young and innocent Snow White.” Skye looked over at him and batted her eyes.

“Young and innocent,” he snorted. “Not in your lifetime.”

“And just what do you mean by that?” Skye looked at herself in the mirror as she applied the ruby red lipstick. The costume really did transform her appearance. Her honey colored hair was tucked into a black wig and her endless legs were surrounded by a long skirt. Nothing could disguise her succulent curves and stunning face, however. It wouldn’t be easy for her to pull off a virginal Snow White when she looked more like an exotic goddess. She was, however, a master of deception, an accomplished role player.

“Now, darling. I’m only saying that you wouldn’t have waited for your prince to come.” Aladdin grinned and considered his beautiful fiancée and partner. Leaning casually against a high table in the center of the room, he watched her expertly transform her lovely lips into a luscious red smile. He loved watching her. Loved everything about her, actually. “You would have

gone in and kicked your wicked stepmother's ass, slain the dragon, flattened the witch, organized the seven dwarfs to act as your backup and gone shopping for a new glass slipper.”

Laughing, Skye rolled her eyes. “I can see I'm going to have to brief you on the Snow White caper. You're getting your fairy tales mixed up.”

“Well, didn't she have a prince charming, too?” He grabbed her around her slim waist and pulled her to his nearly bare, well-sculpted chest. His intense blue eyes looked into her chocolate brown ones and held. She felt the connection, familiar but forever exciting. Her heart thrummed beneath the demure bodice of her costume.

“I could kiss you and end the spell or curse or whatever the hell plagued her,” he said in his low, compelling voice.

Little shivers in the pit of her stomach added another few watts to the already heavy electrical charge vibrating through her. But then the dedicated, disciplined special agent kicked in and put the brakes on her racing hormones. Skye sighed with exaggerated regret and put her hand on his hard chest.

“Darling, you've already done that. Now, don't kiss me or I'll have to redo my lipstick. When Jim approved your strategy for us becoming a team, I'm sure he trusted you to keep the personal out of the professional.” Smiling, she ran her finger down his torso where his open shirt revealed skin, going a little soft in the knees when she felt his response. “I'm going to need my legs for this operation and you're beginning to mess with their ability to operate effectively. We can play Snow White and Prince Charming later...when we're alone.”

“I think I'd rather play James Bond and Pussy Galore later, if it's all the same to you.” He looked into her beautiful brown eyes and saw she'd be ready and willing for anything later. It took all his discipline and training not to dive into the luscious lips that were only inches away from his. Knowing they were his and would be his for the rest of his life gave him patience and the extra bit of steel he needed to resist. “Seems to me every fairy tale ended in only one chaste kiss.” He gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “I don't think I want the day to end like a fairy tale.”

“Oh, I don't know. I rather like that ‘Happily Ever After’ bit.”

“Doesn't this Aladdin character have a girl friend?”

“He does. A very exotic woman named Jasmine. It was love at first sight.”

“And he was wearing this stupid costume?”

“I think you look completely erotic in it. Very sexy. I'm going to have to scrape the young French women off you.” Her hands ran under his shirt and

over his chest. Then she planted a ruby red kiss right over his heart like a Snow White brand. “I’d be more comfortable if you had Kevlar here instead of a bare chest.” Her fingers unconsciously went to an old scar on his shoulder and a cloud flashed over her face.

“Are *you* vested?” he asked softly, taking her hands and kissing the tips of her fingers.

“*Touché monsieur,*” she sighed. “No, I’m not. There’s tremendous security here. No one should be able to bring in a weapon.”

“You know from personal experience that there are ways to breach security.”

Skye nodded. She’d been involved in a hijacking earlier that year in which several men had brought guns onto her plane...through a very secure area.

“Let’s finish suiting up.”

Together they picked up their weapons, chambered a round, flicked on the safeties, and placed them in strategic locations on their bodies where they were both hidden and handy. Armed and ready for action.

Skye checked the clock. “Our marks could be entering at any time. I want to wander the park and get the feel of the place. We should be able to go anywhere, but let’s stick pretty close to Peter Pan. I’m not quite sure where they’ll enter and what their movements will be prior to the meet.”

“Just so we don’t have to go into the corridor of horrors,” said Alex, straightening his shirt as he headed for the door.

“Excuse me?” Skye followed him out into the elaborate hallway system that lead to the outside and the world of fantasy.

“I’m afraid I have to confess a deep seeded phobia, born of a childhood trauma. I’ll go anywhere in the park, but don’t make me enter the scariest attraction here.”

“Phantom Manor?” she asked, smiling. Sometimes her man was just so adorable.

“No,” he said giving an exaggerated shudder that really did make him look like a cartoon character. “The *Small World* pavilion.”

“What?” Her eyes danced with humor.

“Let me tell you, even the thought of going in there gives me the jitters. Play that horrible, insipid, repetitive music in my ear and I swear, I’ll reveal all the secrets I’ve sworn to die for, sign over all of my assets, and willingly give you the keys to my truck.”

“Good God, not your truck. Tell me.” Now Skye was laughing. The thought of Alex being that freaked out about anything tickled her.

“When I was a kid, we got stuck in the damn ride in Disneyland. We only went into the torture chamber in the first place because Rita begged us to. We’d just rounded the corner into what we prayed was the last room and our little boat stopped. We were in there...trapped...no way out...for over an hour.” Alex put his hand over his heart dramatically and went on with exaggerated horror.

“Everything was broken except the piped in music. That song. Over and over again, as those dolls spun around. Joy. Happiness. Smiles. Cheerfulness. We were all completely cockeyed by the time we got out...even Rita. I swear I couldn’t get that tune out of my head for a month. It was on an endless loop...bouncing off the interior of my skull. We probably should have sought therapy right away. You know, worked through our deep seeded angst. Because from then on, Rita had a weapon. She’d torture us by singing the song whenever she wanted to drive us mad. Sometimes she’d just very quietly hum the tune in the back seat of our station wagon and when I slugged her, I got the punishment.

“Then there were times when she was being just plain bitchy, she’d place herself barely out of my reach and sing the song over and over again. Even Dad would sometimes lose his cool.” Blake Springfield was the even-tempered one in the family. Although he was a very well known district attorney and a tiger in the courtroom, he was a fun loving, good-natured man at home. Alex’s mother, Wyatt, was a Chicago police captain and much more volatile.

“Don’t worry, darling. Our mission should all take place outdoors. I think you’re safe from terror and insanity. Now, shall we test our transmitters before we go out?” Back to business. But with an interesting tidbit stored away in her brain. “Barclay? Are you there?”

“Here, Skye. Are you there?”

Skye looked over at Alex and smiled. Barclay was one of hers. Brilliant, but a few bars short of a symphony when it came to human interaction. “I don’t know. It depends on where there is.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind, Barclay. I’m here.”

“Okay. Good. That’s good. Is Alex there, too?”

“Here, Barclay,” responded Alex.

“Okay good. Should we do testing, testing, testing?”

“No, no, no,” said Alex, tapping the earpiece where Barclay’s voice was coming in loud and clear.

“I think we just did, Barclay,” said Skye, giving Alex a little punch on the arm.

“Oh. Okay. Harriet always does testing, testing, testing.”

“That’s because Harriet is a brilliant technician, just like you,” said Skye tactfully.

Also, Alex thought, a little low on the human interaction scale. Must be the geek gene. “You bringing her to the wedding?” he asked.

“I...ah...I haven’t asked her yet.”

“Do you want me to?” asked Alex, smiling. He really did like the little guy and he was one of Skye’s favorites.

“Ask her to your wedding? Aren’t you going with Skye?”

Alex laughed. “Was that a joke, Barclay?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I mean do you want me to ask her for you?”

“Gosh, Alex. Would you? You scare her sometimes, but maybe if you e-mail her for me, she’ll be so impressed, she’ll say yes.”

“I scare her? How do I scare her?”

“Barclay,” interrupted Skye. “Why don’t *you* e-mail her? I think she’s crazy about you and is only waiting for you to ask.” Actually she was sure of it. Every time Harriet knew Barclay was in the building, she took off her thick glasses. She ran into walls, kept walking into the maintenance closet and thought Faye Brunswick was Skye, even though she was a full six inches shorter and twenty years older, but Skye knew signs of infatuation when she saw them. She was taking Harriet to get contact lenses the following week. Her treat.

“You think?”

“I know.”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Linda. Skye could hear her smiling. “Do you suppose we could get back to business?”

“Just testing the equipment,” said Alex. “Hey Linda, am I a scary guy?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“On what button Skye pushed, of course.”

There was amusement and affection in her voice. She’d been with Skye since the two of them were rookies and worked with her in the field whenever Skye was Special Agent in Charge. She was also one of Skye’s attendants for the wedding.

“Anyway, I’d say the equipment works. Just remember to turn it off if the two of you get, ah...well, you know...amorous. We don’t want to fry the equipment...again.”

“Ah, man. I kind of like that part,” said Barclay.

“Now that *was* a joke,” laughed Alex giving Skye a wink. Barclay sometimes peeked out of his shell. “Hang on Barclay. Don’t start the recorder yet. I’m going to give Snow White a big smooch, then we’re going out and get the big bad guys.”

He produced the tube of ruby red lipstick he’d palmed from the cosmetic tray, presented it to Skye, then gathered her in for a final, breath-stealing kiss. She decided to return the favor and deepened it...looking for buttons to push. Alex smiled down at her when they parted and blew out a breath. Buttons found, pushed and activated. He gathered in some discipline with the promise of more later. She grinned, took the lipstick, and drew on her mouth again while Alex wiped the red from his.

“If the toes of these stupid shoes hadn’t been curled up before, they would be now,” he said, his eyes flashing her a message...later.

“Hey good one,” said Barclay in his ear. “That was a joke, right?”

Maybe there was a seed of a personality in there after all, thought Alex. And if there was, it was due to Skye’s influence and leadership. She’d chosen him out of several compu-geeks at the department, put him into field operations, and made him feel like a hero as well as a genius. He’d throw himself in front of a bus for Skye. Actually, he’d probably trip and the bus would miss, but the sentiment was there.

“Is our backup in place?”

“All here and ready to come into the action if needed.”

Alex and the local liaison had placed a dozen or so operatives around the perimeter to be sure nothing or no one got through.

Prepared, covered and ready for action, Aladdin and Snow White went out into the sunshine of a beautiful late summer day.

They didn’t try to stay together, although they were in constant radio contact. Families crowded around the beloved characters and asked for autographs. As Skye had predicted, the young French women in Fantasyland seemed incredibly dense and needed Aladdin’s constant assistance in finding the attractions that were right in front of them. He’d smile brilliantly and dazzle them while Skye translated in his ear, along with some pithy comments about turning down his testosterone.

For her part, Skye, a.k.a. Snow White, attracted a great deal of attention. Children seemed to particularly love her. So graceful and lovely. Skye stood nearly six feet and made Snow White larger than life for the children surrounding her. Many had never seen such a tall, beautiful woman. And her smile could melt metal. The papas were pretty impressed as well.

Then she spotted them. Time for action. The waiting and watching were over.

“Aladdin,” she said under her breath, casually changing direction and moving quickly, smiling and waving at the guests, but not stopping to chat. “Suspect Alpha is at the entrance of Peter Pan. He’s looking left.”

“I see him. I’m closer. I’ll take him, you keep moving around and find Beta.”

Turning, she nearly ran right into him. She smiled and in perfect French asked if she could help him.

He merely glanced at her, shaking his head and dismissing her immediately. “Damn foolishness,” he said in Portuguese. “Idiot French people.”

Skye smiled at him and moved out of his way. He didn’t realize she also understood Portuguese. She didn’t speak it well, but she could easily translate. Interesting. It wasn’t a language one heard very often and the accent didn’t really sound European. As she did with all random facts she encountered when working a case, she filed it away for later.

“Moving with Beta,” she said, while smiling broadly at a family near the entrance of the Fantasyland Railroad Station. Her movements were causal. Completely unhurried and natural. She moved from family to family, her peripheral vision having Beta in view at all times.

And there it was. The meet. The culmination of weeks of work. Alpha and Beta were within an arm’s length of each other. Skye felt the adrenalin pulse through her. The end of the op was in sight. All the intelligence, planning, tactical maneuvering, and equipment came together for this incredibly satisfying finale. It all happened as she’d predicted and her team was in place and ready for the final act.

Alpha nodded to Beta, who walked over to him. Beta carried a backpack; Alpha had a slim envelope. The envelope would contain the numbers of the Swiss Bank account, already traced and frozen by Barclay. The team knew that the backpack contained several very sophisticated, very tiny tracking devices for missiles that could be used in attacking targets with incredible accuracy. Only a few governments had access to them and it was illegal in the extreme to sell them to non-sanctioned governments and never to individuals. They’d been stolen from a secure location in Arizona. The department had been on the trail of the thief and caught a break when they uncovered the buyer.

Skye could see Alex out of the corner of her eye. Alpha and Beta were between them. No escape. And from their body language, they didn’t suspect the surveillance.

“There’s a Delta. Repeat a Delta.” Skye heard Alex’s voice in her ear. The unknown, unpredictable twist in the plot had just happened and they would need to adjust accordingly. They both had extensive field experience and Alex easily spotted the third person. Probably a lookout or an individual brought in to create a diversion if necessary. “She’s in yellow...standing next to the concession. Holding a bottle of water. Looks too cloudy to be water. She’s watching our man.”

“I see her.” Skye moved in and passed the woman in yellow, turning and smiling broadly at her. The woman frowned and looked away. Definitely a third person. She just wasn’t getting into the spirit of the place. “Looks like an accelerant. Damn it. You take her. She could do some damage.”

“Ready?”

“Say *Abbra Ka Dabbra* and make my day.” Snow White, her ruby red lips transforming into a very wicked smile and no longer looking so virginal, glanced over at the tall Aladdin.

“*Abbra Ka Dabbra.*” Alex moved behind the woman with the bottle and quietly and quickly took her out with a hard chop to the side of the neck. As she slumped, Alex grabbed the bottle. Catching the woman, he looped his arm around her shoulders. Smooth, efficient, silent.

“Sick woman,” he explained to a few startled onlookers. “Fainted. Excuse me, please. Coming through.” He went immediately to the Cast Entrance where the French authorities were waiting with restraints.

Skye went up to Alpha, grabbed the backpack, hit the startled man in the face, and whirled him around, taking all the fight out of him with a strategic hit to the solar plexus. She moved him toward Alex who was coming back to their location. The contents of the backpack were the most critical asset right now and Alex needed to secure it. The men were secondary, although they intended to take them in.

She turned to get the other man, saw him recover his wits, reverse his direction, and start running. It was a good sign as far as Skye was concerned. When they ran, it usually meant they weren’t armed.

“I have a runner. Take this guy and the merchandise and seal off the exits. I’ll pursue.” She pushed the man and the backpack into Alex’s waiting arms then started after the running man.

“Damn it,” she cursed under her breath as her skirts tangled around her legs. Snow White never swore and she was aware of several families staring in her direction. Whoops, she thought. She ripped off the billowing skirts, revealing a form fitting black leotard beneath. Unencumbered, she was able to pick up the pace. This was going to be a foot race and a hand-to-hand take down...two things on Skye’s personal hit parade.

Her quarry darted around people, strollers, characters, vendors, and strategically placed food carts. Damn, for being so large, the guy was quick. There were no straight-aways and the path was so congested that it was difficult to use her long legs to full advantage. She could hear people comment as she tore out after her man.

“Wow, way cool!”

“Look at Snow White take off. Like a super hero or something.”

“I didn’t know she had a secret identity.”

“What a performance!”

“I’ve been here several times and have never seen this show.

Awesome!”

Several checked their programs to see what they called this exciting new addition to Disney’s live action entertainment.

Skye steadily gained on the man. People seemed to get out of her way more cooperatively and she was in better shape. Finally, she jumped over a small fence like an Olympic hurdler, hopped on top of a picnic table, and propelled herself into Beta. He went down with a whoosh and broke her fall.

The big man recovered quickly, however and used his superior size to push Skye off his back. He was fighting for his freedom and he knew it. It made him strong and vicious, but it was just the way Skye liked her adversaries. She chewed up strong and spit out vicious. She loved close hand-to-hand and was more than up to the task of subduing her target. Her black belt in Tae Kwon Do made her world class before she could drive and combat was as second nature to her as squinting against a bright sun.

She’d have rather played with him for a while, but they were in a public spot and a crowd was gathering. Assessing his position, his size, and his vulnerability, she took him out with a brilliant well-executed side kick, followed by a combination punch, spin, and kick to his face and chest. When he went down, she straddled him, flipped him over onto his stomach, grabbed his arms, and snapped restraints on his wrists. Like a rider hogtying a bull in a rodeo ring and just as quick. Her breath was coming a little more rapidly from her sprint, but there wasn’t a hair out of place on her black haired wig, nor a smudge on her makeup. Aladdin came up behind her and helped drag the dazed and semi-conscious man to his feet.

“May I help you with that Snow White?”

“Why thank you Aladdin.”

Alex grinned and looked around. “Take a pretty bow and let’s get this dastardly evildoer to a less public spot,” he said as the group of tourists who had gathered around them applauded, whistled, and snapped pictures.

“Thank goodness we’re nearly unrecognizable in all of this costume and makeup.”

“Yes and everyone here thinks it’s part of the show. Snow White transforms into Snow Storm, reveals she can fly, and takes out the witch’s idiot, misguided henchman.” He looked at all the cameras. “Linda will send in the sweepers to take care of the permanent records.”

As Skye and Alex took Beta to the nearest employee’s entrance, three people discreetly passed through the crowd with very powerful magnetic devices. Several disappointed tourists would find significant blank spots on their family vacation video, and pictures would be strangely black and blank. There was a little regret that other photos would be lost as well, but agents needed to stay in the shadows. Skye and Alex’s work was covert. They couldn’t have their pictures pasted in family albums or sold to the press. Not that any of the crowded guests would ever guess they just witnessed something newsworthy.

Their backup team, disguised as store clerks and concessionaires, followed them in. There was a celebratory feeling running through the group as they walked through the hallways. Both Linda and Barclay added their congratulations to the several they heard over the earpieces. A perfect takedown. Except for the surprise addition of a third person, everything went without a hitch.

“Let’s move them together and see how they interact,” suggested Alex. He liked to mix it up a little to see if anything perked. The time to do it was just after a collar, when emotions were high and their bravado was still pumping them up. He put perps together in an informal setting before the real interrogations began. Their expectations of success would be dashed. In their initial shock, they might reveal something of importance before they understood their true predicament. Sometimes there would be a falling out and high temper could be very revealing. Of course, he and Skye would be listening in.

Alpha, Beta, and Delta all sat restrained on the floor with their backs against the wall. The bottle the woman carried was carefully placed in evidence. A quick field inspection revealed it was filled with a highly flammable liquid and would have done a lot of damage if ignited. It had a little wick and they found a lighter in the woman’s pocket. Amateurish, but potentially a very effective and deadly diversion.

Alex made a show of leaving them to talk and went over to speak to the French liaison. Skye strategically placed a listening device in the jacket of the man she tackled. As adept as she was at picking pockets, she was equally

skilled at putting something into one. Voices were coming in loud and clear into their earpieces.

“I think these three and the woman in the car outside the gates are probably it. I don’t think we have a real refined group of terrorists here. Their meet was well planned and would have been seamlessly executed, but the bagman leaked all the way giving us the information we needed to stop them,” said Alex.

Actually, the thief and traitor had a very sophisticated and well-hidden Internet network along with an extremely complicated ciphering code as double protection against outside detection. The Justice Department would never have found the trail or translated the messages once they did if it weren’t for the department’s even more sophisticated weapon...Skye’s fourteen-year-old sister Sloane. Sloane was a card-carrying genius with an official IQ of 235, although everyone suspected she was just toying with the standard tests. She’d be finishing her Doctorate in Computer Science in the fall and as penance for hacking into some highly classified files the summer before, she’d been interning with the department.

A preliminary test of a new software package Sloane had developed to decipher encrypted messages using key words had uncovered the communications between the buyer and the seller. It was a stunning discovery. The test ended abruptly and the immediate universal installation of Sloane’s package was authorized by the Director himself.

“Those two,” Alex went on, indicating the buyer and his accomplice. “Appear to be driven by idealism. They’ll be tougher to crack. They wanted the merchandise for something and it couldn’t have been good.” The components had been missing for months and there’d been a great deal of anxiety over where they would end up. Weapons systems had replaced drugs in the high-end contraband market.

Skye let Alex handle all the details of who would handle the interrogations, where they were to be and how information was to be shared among the various law enforcement agencies. Linda was going to be staying in Paris to coordinate the questioning and extradition.

Skye observed the prisoners from a distance...watching their body language. It was obvious that each thought the other had screwed up...or worse yet, set them up. The seller positioned himself away from the buyers. It became clear that the woman was with the buyer and that she was some kind of leader. She was furious over what she interpreted as either incompetence by her colleague or treachery by the seller. Her eyes demanded accountability. Someone was going to pay for this monumental screw up.

Good, thought Skye. Angry people liked to vent. Criminals and terrorists seldom disappointed her and these three were no exception. The seller said little, but the buyers, thinking they were alone, talked rapidly in low voices. She translated as she listened to the exchange.

Skye recognized the language and made a mental note to have the departmental translators send her a transcript of the taped conversation to double-check her interpretation. Portuguese. She shifted her brain to try and get every word but she got only phrases.

*“Fale só em português.”* Speak only in Portuguese, translated Skye mentally. They ranted at each other for a while trying to assign blame. She pushed the earpiece further in...she wanted to be sure there wasn't another accomplice lurking on the complex or something else she should know about immediately. At first Skye was just listening. Interested. Then things heated up. Fast.

*“Que horas são.”* What time is it?

*“Quase tempo. Outra hora.”* Almost time. Another hour.

*“Bem é escondido.”* It's well hidden.

*“Será uma explosão glorioso.”* It will be a glorious blast.

*“Eles nunca saberão.”* They will never know.

*“Seremos vitoriosos.”* We will be victorious.

*“O mundo saberá nosso nome.”* The world will know our name.

*“É um mundo pequeno.”* It's a small world.

*“Eles nao nos pararão.”* They will not stop us.

Skye straightened and walked rapidly over to where they sat. Needing a visual confirmation, she stared right at them and had her answer immediately. She saw it on their faces. In their eyes.

The woman smirked, glanced at the clock on the wall, and looked away. Waiting for something. Counting the minutes to a moral victory. When she looked back at Skye, she couldn't hold back the subtle look of triumph. Her eyes said she won. They won. Damn.

Skye's smile came slow and it was both victorious and insulting.

“The world may not stop you, but I will. I understand Portuguese, you pathetic screw-up.” She spun around to go into action once again, but not before she saw the shock and fury on the faces of the terrorists. Not just purchasers of a dangerous weapon system, these assholes were bombers.

“Alex, Barclay, Linda,” Skye called in a calm but urgent voice they all recognized. Alex spun around and watched her stride out of the room. Linda and Barclay simultaneously said “here” in her earpiece. They knew that tone and were immediately alerted.

“I think there’s a boomer in Fantasyland. Linda, alert the security forces. We need to activate the evacuation plan. Everyone out of Fantasyland first. Barclay, get the Paris bomb squad here, then patch us into a direct line with them. Alex and I will try to locate it. According to our prisoners here, we have time. They said an hour. Everyone check your watches and mark the time. 1:45. We’ll work it until 2:30, then evaluate ourselves.”

Linda came over the earpiece. “Skye. Are you sure you translated the time correctly? Maybe you should be getting out of there now.”

“I’m sure of the translation. Also, the prisoners were waiting, but the tension wasn’t high enough yet. We have time.”

Her first inclination was to run to the bomb, not away from it and Alex was right behind her. He didn’t question her translation or her assessment.

“Where is it?” asked Alex as they hurried back toward the entrance to the park.

She looked up at Alex. She couldn’t help it. A small smile pulled at her mouth. He read her look perfectly.

“No. Please.”

“Yes, darling.”

“Oh God,” Alex moaned as they burst through the doors and jogged toward the building with the bomb. “Maybe we could just let the bomb do its job.” When she frowned, he said, “okay, okay.”

As they hurried through the park, they noticed the employees of Disney quietly and firmly beginning to get people away from the buildings and out of Fantasyland. Well-organized and well-executed evacuation protocol. Didn’t surprise him a bit. Disney had a well-organized plan for everything.

As they approached the front of the building where people movers were unloading and the line was being directed to the exits, Alex took a deep breath and steeled himself. He needed to fortify his courage, build up his ability to withstand torture, raise his threshold for pain and torment. When he knew he had an extra layer of mental and emotional armor, he followed Skye into the darkened interior of the *It’s a Small World* pavilion.

“Anything more specific?” Alex asked looking around at the spinning dolls from every country. “The ride was endless as I recall.”

“No, but I have a hunch. They spoke Portuguese. There are several countries whose population speaks Portuguese. Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and of course Portugal to name a few.”

Alex just stared at her. “To name a few,” he repeated. He was a worldly and well-traveled man, but this was pretty much news to him.

“The woman mentioned the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda, FLEC. Cabinda is a small tract of land separated from Angola by a

section of the Congo. There's been a small, armed insurrection against the government for the independence of the Cabinda Province for years and since Angola's independence from Portugal in 1975 it's gotten worse. Terrorists are usually very big on symbolism. Therefore, I say we'll find the bomb under the Angolan dolls. This is all speculation, of course." All the time she'd been talking, her eyes swept the interior.

Speculation, thought Alex. More likely right on target. Everyone who had ever worked with Skye would take one of her speculations over a two-day computer search any day. Her mind was like a computer. Filled with facts, data, information, statistics, little details, and extensive experience. When she cranked up and made the connections, out came valuable conclusions and ideas. He loved to watch her brain work. It might not be as sexy as the packaging, but it was alluring even so.

"Okay, makes sense, but how do you know which one is the Angolan doll?" He looked around. They all looked the same to him.

"By the costume, of course," she said over her shoulder as she raced into another room of the building.

Barclay let them know he was recording everything and had FLEC up on his computer in case they needed any additional information.

Alex followed her, checking his watch. "Less than an hour now."

"Fine. We'll search for half that. If we find nothing we evacuate."

"Agreed."

They walked quickly through the building. Tourists were everywhere, getting off the floating people movers and walking through the exits in an orderly, calm manner.

Skye looked around. "Over there," she said, running over to the dolls from the African continent.

"Have I permission to look under the skirts?" asked Alex, as he joined Skye's search of the area.

Skye just snorted her response. Bent over, searching among the props and set, with her shapely butt in the air, she no longer sounded like, nor looked like Snow White. Alex had to look away and move to a different country in order to stay on task.

"Voila, my little genius. Here it is," called Alex and then he was all business. No more fooling around. This was dangerous. This was real. What he uncovered was a big chunk of plastic explosives and it had a timer. He conveyed this fact to Barclay, who forwarded it to the Paris bomb squad and the others standing ready in the command center.

Skye talked to the people in charge of the ride to heighten the sense of urgency and accelerate the pace of the evacuation. Alex took the time to study the mechanism.

“Very simple, very amateurish. But sometimes they’re the most dangerous. More unstable, less predictable. Barclay, send someone down here with your computer repair kit, stat!” he said as he knelt down to take a closer look.

“Time on the bomb?” asked Skye, wanting to know how much she should push the timetable for evacuation.

He looked at the clock counting down. “43 minutes.”

They had plenty of time. When Barclay himself came running in, the clock had 39 minutes left and Alex had outlined in his mind how he was going to neutralize the bomb.

“You going to try to disarm the thing?” puffed an apprehensive Barclay. Alex was his ideal man, but this seemed like something beyond his typical day in the crime fighting gig. Alex laid out the familiar tools like a surgeon preparing his instruments for a delicate operation.

“Yes. In the meantime, I want you and the rest of the team to go out with the evacuated guests.”

“Guests?” Barclay looked around, clueless. He hadn’t recalled inviting anyone.

“That’s Disney talk for the tourists,” explained Skye, her eyes on the bomb. She had complete confidence in Alex and didn’t even question his decision to work on it. “I think the entire park should be emptied, but most particularly…Alex…radius?”

“At least 500 yards from ground zero,” relied Alex after he got a better look at the size and dimensions of the explosive. Barclay lost all of his color, not easy to do for someone who was naturally pale as a ghost.

“I’ll start packing things up. We’ll move the crew out, but I’ll stay with the communications equipment. You may need a consult.” He’d run like a hound dog when he saw Skye and Alex running and not before.

“Okay. You can start by getting me patched into what ever bomb squad team they have here. I may need some advice.”

Barclay nodded and was off.

“Linda. Have you been monitoring?”

“Yes,” came Linda’s calm voice. “Everything is proceeding here. We’re taking the prisoners out. The woman has some very interesting ideas on what she’d like to do you and all of your offspring. She didn’t take kindly to having her plans spoiled by a Disney cartoon character. I’ll be working with

park security on the evacuation. You just concentrate on what you have in there.”

“Will do.”

Skye knelt beside Alex. He’d already taken off the front panel of the bomb and was studying all the components. His hands were steady as a surgeon’s and just as delicate. He worked efficiently, but didn’t hurry.

“What can I do?” she asked him.

“Four things. Get me some light so I can look into the guts of this thing, keep the sweat out of my eyes, give me a countdown by minutes and promise me you’ll run when I tell you to.”

Looking around, she grabbed one of the hundreds of muted spotlights in the display. She freed the apparatus, removed the colored cover, and trained the bright light on Alex’s hands. The illumination didn’t waiver. Her hands were as steady as his. She called the time at 30-second intervals and periodically wiped his forehead.

“I feel like a nurse,” she said.

“That’s good, because I feel like a surgeon,” Alex responded as he gently turned the screws to another layer of the detonator.

“Is this a terminal case, doctor?”

“Let’s hope so.” He continued his delicate operation. “Oh shit.”

“Please don’t say ‘oh shit’ when you’re up to wrists in a bomb.”

“Sorry...didn’t mean to set you off.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about setting off.”

“Got that. It’s just that these morons decided that if one wire was good, five must be better.”

“Are you still on it?”

“Absolutely. But as a backup plan, we’ll take it down to 8 minutes, then run the 4-minute mile out of here. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

At 12 minutes Linda’s voice came over the earpiece. “Skye, we have a malfunction on the Dumbo ride. There are about 15 people stranded in the air at various heights. They’re bringing in a crane, but I don’t think we’ll make the 10-minute window. Barclay is saying that the bomb squad is on its way with a blast blanket and other containment equipment, but they’re about 8 minutes from the entrance and it will be another 2 or 3 back to your location. This is getting very close.”

“Understood. We’ll stay until the last few seconds.”

Alex glanced up. “I’ll stay until the last few seconds, you’ll still run at 8 minutes.”

She didn’t respond.

“Skye...” His hands were still nimbly taking apart the timing mechanism but his voice was sharp and angry.

“Just keep working.” Skye didn’t intend to go anywhere. If he blew up, she wanted to be right beside him, not at some safe distance.

“Skye. You listen to me.” He glanced over at her and she could see the anger in his flashing blue eyes.

“You die, I die,” she said. “Simple. Now keep working.” She looked at the timer. “10 minutes.”

He didn’t have the time to argue. The man in him wanted to grab her hand and run. But he was a Special Agent and there were still 15 people in the danger zone...17 counting the two of them. He went back to work, certain of his ability to disarm within the time frame. It really was an uncomplicated bomb. It was just that there were so many wires, so many layers.

He worked another five minutes and had all the wires exposed. Skye watched in silence, fascinated and confident. Continuing to hold the light steady, she saw at least a dozen wires that Alex had uncovered, stripped, and stretched.

“Okay, this is where the hero looks at the wires and agonizes over which one to cut,” she said.

Alex smiled. “No agony here.” He took a cutting instrument from Barclay’s little kit and cut them all. Then he wiggled his fingers, stood up, and stretched out the aches in his legs. The timer stopped its relentless drive to zero. The danger was over.

Skye communicated the end of the crisis to everyone and could hear cheering over her earpiece.

“My hero,” she said, standing up herself, feeling the stiffness in her knees and back, not to mention the sore shoulder from her flight into Beta. She hadn’t realized she’d tensed up so badly until she started shaking out her fatigued muscles. She looked at the clock. “Two minutes and 45 seconds. Hot damn, Alex, you’re good. In the movies, the timer goes down to the last few seconds.”

“This is real life, darling.” He blew a stray fake black hair off his forehead. “And as fast as those long, lovely legs are, two minutes would barely get you out of the blast zone.”

“True, but I knew I wouldn’t have to run.” She was shaking out a cramp in one of those long lovely legs and missed the look of rage that materialized on Alex’s face.

He looked down at her with snapping eyes. Now that the danger was over, and the bomb posed no threat, he was going to blow himself. While he

was working on the bomb, he held himself in check but his fuse had now hit the TNT. His voice was low, but the tone was very, very angry. “And, since this is real life, Skyler, could you please tell me what the hell you’re still doing here?”

Skyler. What the hell? He never called her that. She looked up at him and shone the light in his eyes, then smiled, choosing to ignore the dangerous sparks shooting through his furious glare. “I’m here to provide light. You needed an assistant,” she said in a reasonable tone.

“I could have rigged up something non human. And what the hell was that ‘I die, you die’ bullshit,” he growled between clenched teeth. He was trying not to shout, but his jaw hurt from the tension of staying reasonably calm. She could see the fury start in his eyes then flood onto his face.

Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms. “That’s the deal.” Now that the threat was neutralized, she realized that she was perfectly serious about that. She wouldn’t want to live in a world without him in it.

The music filled the silence as they stared each other down. *“It’s a small world after all...”*

The dolls were still spinning around them, merrily unaware of their near miss with oblivion. Their painted smiles mocked Alex as his temper simmered, then flared.

He thought about calming down and venting his anger later in the gym...maybe taking down a few punching bags or jogging about a thousand miles. Then he looked at the spinning dolls and decided not to. He cracked instead. Turning, he kicked one of the little dolls clear over the water. Reminded him of his football days when he and some of the other guys took turns practicing as the backup place kicker. There was enough velocity on the doll’s head to clear the goal posts at 50 yards. Field goal, three points. The rest of the dolls spun around in apparent delight.

“Will someone cut that goddamn music? I can’t believe it hasn’t driven someone insane,” Alex shouted to the ceiling at no one in particular.

“I think it just has,” laughed Skye, her hands on her hips.

“No darling, it’s you. You. You’re driving me insane. What the hell did you think you were doing? I told you to run. Goddamn it, I wanted you out of here!” He kicked another doll and this one shot through three countries before landing on a twirling gypsy.

“And I told you no.”

“My concern for your safety distracted me. What if that would have cost me an extra 30 seconds?”

“You’d still have two minutes and five seconds to spare.” Skye’s temper was beginning to bubble to the surface as well.

“That’s not the point.” He was in her face now, but she didn’t back up.

“Then what *is* your point, Special Agent?” she shot back.

“When I told you to run, you should have cleared the building.” He kicked another hapless doll to punctuate his point.

“You wasted your breath on that one,” she shouted. “We’re partners. You’re not in charge of my actions. Now quit kicking the goddamn dolls.”

“It’s either these dolls or your ass,” he sniped and deliberately, never taking his eyes from hers, kicked another doll and heard a splash as this one fell short of the shore on the other side of the small, small world.

Throughout their relationship, there were certain looks he should have recognized as the prelude to his own ass being kicked, but he was looking at her through a red haze and didn’t see the quickening of her breath and the lethal glare she shot him. It turned even more toxic when he punctuated what he thought of her point of view with a slow calculated kick to the head of a hapless tyke spinning close by.

“I said stop kicking the goddamn dolls.” And he didn’t hear the low, clear snarl of forced control.

Gripping her arms, he pulled her toward him. “When I say run, Special Agent. You run.”

Would he ever learn? It was a simple rule, but his mind wasn’t on *How to Handle Skye 101*. First rule. Don’t grab. Her automatic response was swift and deadly accurate. She pivoted and because he didn’t have a grip on her designed to restrain, she slipped from his hands easily. Her foot was aimed perfectly to land in his abdomen. She knew it was as tight as a drum and she’d inflict no damage, leave no bruise. Besides, she decided on a shove rather than a kick. The force of her powerful shove, however, sent him backward into about a dozen gaily spinning cherubs in oriental garb.

“And I say you shouldn’t have wasted valuable seconds calling me off, you self appointed, all mighty guardian of good over evil. Next time, Aladdin, *you* run.” Snow White stood in high temper above him, shooting brown eyed sparks, while he was sitting in a debris field of smiling heads and crushed bodies. Around him, apparently completely oblivious and unconcerned were at least a hundred other turning, happy children of the world. The music was still being piped in, the sweet voices of global youth singing in perfect harmony. “*It’s a small, small world.*”

Alex jumped up and circled the love of his life. Rarely could she take him down twice. He lunged, she turned away from him, he compensated, she tripped him and he grabbed her waist, taking her down with him, as together they took out another whole country.

“A piece of that ass belongs to me, Cinderella and I mean to keep it safe.” His grip on her wasn’t firm enough to contain her as she elbowed him in the wind pipe and spun out of his reach. She was on her feet again in a breath looking down at him.

“We’re partners, you son-of-a-bitching, psychotic doll kicker. We have equal status on this case. I’m not your fiancée in here. This ass should be no more important to you than the 15 guest asses riding around on Dumbo, the goddamn flying elephant. And I’m not Cinderella, you moron, I’m Snow White.” When Skye was on a tear, there was no one who was in her league. “The one who picked up after seven, count them, seven slovenly miners, then slept with all of them including Dopey before riding off with her witless prince with a smile on her face and seven little notches on her broom.”

Her hands were on her slim hips, her eyes were flashing. Alex’s anger began to dissolve under the sudden rush of lust. Damn, did she have to be so magnificent when she was pissed? So hot? So desirable? How perverse was it that he wanted to take her around the world right now, right here on the smashed bodies of grinning mini-robots.

“All at the same time?” he asked instead. “She slept with them all at the same time?”

“Yes.” When Skye’s temper flared fast, it always faded fast. “Grumpy needed an attitude adjustment; she gave Happy something to be happy about; she got Bashful out of his shell and Doc needed a ladder, but size doesn’t matter. Plus she found two more while she was cleaning and had them before breakfast.”

“And they would be.”

“Horny and Lucky.” Her ruby red lips twitched.

Alex’s anger fell away. She was just so beautiful...and...well...quirky. Besides, he knew she was right. If they were going to make this partnership work, he couldn’t be distracted by his feelings for her. He worked to get himself under control then let out a quick ironic laugh. “Christ, I can’t believe we’re having this conversation in the middle of the ride from hell, dressed in these stupid costumes from some twisted ten year old’s imagination and you just said size doesn’t matter.” He looked around, then back to Skye. “Damn it, never mind. Give me a hand, here,” he said reaching up.

Sighing, Skye automatically extended her hand, but he wasn’t through with her yet. *Alexander Springfield 101*. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her down. She landed on top of him with a whoosh, followed closely by an oath and a deep, throaty laugh. When Barclay, Linda, and the security forces of Disney came rushing in a few moments later, they found Aladdin making

time with the virginal Snow White. Or at least her top half was the recognizable and beloved Disney character. The skintight leotard she'd stripped down to revealed a very non-virginal butt planted between the legs of Aladdin.

"Now there's a picture to put on a postcard," laughed Linda.

"Jeez. Did the bomb go off?" asked Barclay as he turned in a circle and noticed the destruction.

"No," said Linda with a chuckle. "I think Skye did."

"Jeez, what did he say to her? You have it on tape?"

"I think he was taking her to task for not running."

"Well then, I'm with him this time," said Barclay seriously nodding.

"You say that over here where Skye can't get you."

The head of security was a middle-aged man with an interested gleam in his eye as he looked at the part of Skye he could see. "The Snow White, she has a short fuse, yes?" he asked. He was admiring the beautiful butt and he liked emotional, volatile women.

"Always has," responded Linda with a laugh and looked at Barclay. "I think this tape will be one we should consider for the 'Best of Skye' album."

"I beg your pardon?" asked the confused and aroused security chief.

"Never mind."

"Why does that doll look like Elvis?" asked Barclay pointing to a little guy spinning with an Aladdin wig.

"I think Alex wiggled out, too," said Linda still laughing.

"Huh?" Barclay was clueless, but was saved from another moment of confusion. Suddenly there was a beep from the bomb and a light went on near the face of the timer.

"Shit," said Alex, instantly alert and looking over at his dissected patient. It appeared as though it had come back to life.

Skye rolled off Alex and as one, they jumped up and immediately ran to the bomb, all business again. A team, running toward the danger.

"Evacuate, evacuate," Skye shouted. She snatched up the light as Alex bent over the device. People moved quickly out of the building. Linda worked on getting everyone clear, while Barclay went back to the communication center.

"Something is heating up again," said Alex as he studied the exposed mechanism. He gently turned it over to reveal another mechanical apparatus. "Barclay, patch me into the bomb squad."

"Right away," said the familiar voice. "Here they are."

"*Bonjour. Nous entendons vous mettez a l'amende.*" A deep, French voice came through their earpieces.

*“Faire vous parlez anglais, s'il vous plaît?”* Skye asked them to please speak in English. She didn't want to waste time translating for Alex.

“Yes, of course. I will speak English. This is Chief Couverture”

“Where are you?”

“Turning into the parking area. About 5 minutes from your location. There are many people out here trying to leave.”

Alex came into the conversation. “I'm holding something here. Looks like a backup detonator.”

“What was the first detonator?”

“Simple timer.”

“The explosive?”

“Third grade plastic explosives.”

“Second detonator?”

“Looks electronic. Activated by the failure of the primary detonator.”

“Pull it out, monsieur.”

“Repeat please.”

“Pull out the detonator. But be very careful. The detonator is its own explosive device. It can take your hand off.”

Alex shrugged. The guy was the expert and it made sense to him. He took hold of the detonator and carefully but quickly pulled it out.

“Now what.”

“Is there water in the vicinity?”

Alex looked down at the river running through the attraction. “Plenty of it.”

“Submerge it. Quickly. Get it away from the plastic.”

Alex would rather have stuck the detonator up the butt of one of the spinning dolls, but he tossed the device into the water. It made a small, satisfying plopping noise.

“I noticed you did that with your right hand,” smiled Skye as she sat back on her heels.

“Well, since I'm left handed, I rather people call me lefty if the thing went off.”

She leaned over and gave him a kiss. “I've never made love to a one-handed man before.”

“I could give you a hand,” said Barclay over the earpiece. Skye and Alex looked at each other stunned. Was that a joke? They decided to find out.

“Was that a joke?” asked Alex, grinning broadly.

“I'm not sure. Linda told me to say it. But really. I'd be glad to give you a hand.”

Skye shook her head and mouthed ‘not a joke.’ “I think we can go off line now Barclay. I hear the bomb squad coming in.”

Alex wiped his hands over his face and ran his fingers through his hair, now restored to his own thick, wavy brown. As the bomb squad burst into the room, he mumbled. “Just in the nick of time. They can take care of the really bad stuff...like dealing with the media and the government officials. Let’s fade, Snow White.”

“As soon as you show them the bomb, we can get dressed and move on to the interrogation.”

Alex stood up, pulling Skye with him. He kept her hand in his.

“Well done, Agent Madison.”

“Why thank you, Agent Springfield. Same to you. It was a pleasure working with you.”

Skye and Alex worked as Special Agents for the Intelligence Division of the United States Department of Justice. They’d been working the case in cooperation with French officials because the guidance system had been stolen in the United States. Their team worked in the shadows and behind the scenes, always in cooperation with local law enforcement but never officially connected. The final act of all their operations was to fade.

Skye took off her wig and shook out her curly, wheat colored hair. It transformed her back into the stunning, contemporary beauty she was. Alex was trying to show the chief of the bomb squad the explosives, but the man’s eyes kept going to Skye’s shapely legs. Some other members of his team were equally fascinated. When Skye stretched and her costume strained over her generous breasts, Alex gave up. They’d take it all in for analysis anyway.

“*Mécanisme simple*,” said the chief, wanting to minimize the American’s heroism in front of this stunning beauty. He inflated his singular charisma and turned to Skye. “So, Snow White. I think I’d like to take you through your part in this adventure. Perhaps over dinner?”

“Monsieur Couverture.” Skye smiled noncommittally at the explosives expert. She recognized the type. Cocky, brash, bold, and confident. Skye supposed one had to be if a man made his living sticking his hands into explosives. This one was youthful and very handsome.

She said something in French. It better be a refusal, thought Alex. A scathing one. And how did that French pervert know she was Snow White? She only had on half the costume and he seemed to be obsessing over what was under it ever since he entered the building.

It was obvious to Alex that the man was lusting after Skye. He felt his hands fist and forced himself to relax. He’d only known Skye for several

months and still wasn't quite reconciled to how other men looked at her. He doubted if he ever would be. This Frenchman had no way of knowing she was his fiancée, soon to be his wife. He wondered as he crossed his arms over his chest if she'd go for moving up the date of the wedding. Rolling his shoulders to release some of the tension, he tried to think like an agent instead of a lover.

It was almost working, but he could feel his blood boiling again when Monsieur Couverture threw his arm over Skye's shoulder and moved in closer. Goddamn it. Did the asshole have to be so free with his hands? And why was she so friendly with him, for Christ's sake. It was a professional relationship, after all. He knew what was contributing to the heat he was feeling in his chest. She was speaking in French. Casually flinging it around in general conversation. Distracting him. That was the language she usually reserved for love. For making love to him. To his ear it sounded so sensual...so intimate. He liked it when she whispered words to him when she was pliant and sexually aroused...when she was naked in his arms. The heat in his body was now being fueled by another source entirely. He cleared his throat.

"Sorry, Aladdin," smiled Skye, completely unaware of his jealous reaction and attributing the strain she was detecting to post op tension. He had, after all, just disarmed a bomb. Twice.

She still felt very jittery inside and hadn't yet had time to process the anxiety in her heart. God, he just went right at it. No hesitation, no thought. She had every confidence in him and his abilities, but he wasn't a munitions expert. What if there had been something about the bomb that was far more sophisticated than the simple apparatus he thought it was. Well, at least in this instance if he made a mistake, she'd be beyond caring right now. Her body bits would have mingled with his. She'd think about that later, right now she had an egotistical Frenchman to deal with. And to scrape off her side.

She smiled at Monsieur Couverture and said, "we'll speak English so our bomb expert here will be able to understand."

"As it should be. Monsieur..."

"Shultis. Richard Shultis," said Alex keeping his arms folded.

"Yes, as I was saying to Ms. Sharpee you did a competent job. It was a very simple device, but you saved many lives. And imagine a world without this attraction."

"It would be a small, small world," snorted Alex.

Skye, Linda, and the rest of his squad chuckled, but not Monsieur Couverture. He clearly wanted to be the alpha male, particularly with the

luscious mademoiselle watching. He recognized another alpha dog on his turf and he was ready to bare his teeth. Being French, however, he'd do it with finesse and grace.

"Indeed, Monsieur Shultis." He looked at Alex's costume with disdain. It showed some very impressive muscle definition, but it was a silly sight. He thought he could score some points there. "You look like a belly dancer. Be careful or my men will start putting francs in your belt."

Alex glared at Skye who swallowed her smile and just widened her eyes.

"How long will you be in Paris, chéri?" He wanted her attention back on him.

"Not very long. Our work is nearly complete." She wasn't going to share with this local bomb jockey what their mission was.

"You will have dinner with me?" He gave her his irresistible, seductive smile. It worked on nearly every woman he tried it on and there had been legions.

"I'm sorry, Monsieur Couverture..."

"Claude."

"Claude. First of all, I have a lot of work to do. Secondly," she pulled out the diamond ring on a chain around her neck. It hadn't been an appropriate part of her Snow White costume so she'd stashed it under her blouse. "I'm to be married in October."

Alex smiled. He liked how the diamond flashed and sparkled. Impressive. He noticed the oh-so-macho Monsieur Couverture's eyes pop and was glad he'd moved the caret weight up a few notches. Take that you fop.

Claude hardly skipped a beat. Giving a distinctly French chuckle, he took up Skye's hand and kissed the palm. "That only means we'll have more in common chéri." He flashed a ring on the fourth finger of his left hand. "I have a very intimate restaurant I'd like to show you and afterward...well. You're in Paris. What the colonial doesn't know won't hurt him."

"No. But what he knows may hurt *you*," snapped Alex, fire in his eye. He usually let Skye handle her own brush-offs, and he would have this time as well, but it was the intimate gesture of kissing her palm that pushed all of his buttons. He was already on edge from his argument with Skye and his date with the bomb. French or not, kissing her palm was far too suggestive. That was his palm. And his pilot. There was a palm pilot joke in there somewhere, but he was too distracted to put it together.

"You would tell the fiancé, monsieur?" His eyes flashed back with challenge. He looked at Alex with contempt. "How indiscreet." And boorish,

he thought. How American. He didn't notice that Skye had pulled her hand out of his.

"I *am* the fiancé, monsieur." It was hard to pull off superior in pantaloons and a little gold vest, but Alex tried his best.

Claude didn't appear in the least impressed. He just gave Alex his most incredulous stare. "I see. And in what fairy tale do you live that fantasy? Beauty and the Beast?"

Skye put up her hands. "Gentlemen. We have work to do. Claude, thank you so much for your offer. It's nearly irresistible. But I must decline. Monsieur Shultis, I suggest we change out of the costumes. They're no longer regulation and we wouldn't want to damage the reputation of the park, or disillusion any of the guests." With that, she spun around and walked out of the room.

Alex nearly punched Claude for the drooling look he gave her retreating butt, but he didn't want to deal with the paper work. "She's mine, asshole," he smirked with satisfaction. "*Le mien*" And followed her out.

Catching up to her, he could tell he was going to have to do some making up.

"That was more information than Claude needed to know, Dumbo," she said through clenched teeth.

"Hey you're the one who popped your rock out from between your breasts, Snow Flake. Maybe you should have let him go diving for it himself. His eyeballs were already making the journey."

"What the hell are you so steamed about? I was handling it."

"You let him kiss your palm."

"He's French for God's sake!"

"That entitles him to a body part?"

She just glared up at him, refusing to answer.

"Shit," he said, looking at her ridiculous costume combination. Virgin and vixen. Irresistible. How could he blame any man with eyes for staring? Appreciating. And she *had* pulled out her diamond. His claim on her. Suddenly the pissed off attitude faded and fell off him. What the hell. Monsieur la Clod may have tasted her palm, but he got the whole entire banquet. And he was getting in the mood to feast.

"So. What do the Italians get?" he asked. Turning her back, she wiggled her butt. He laughed and shook his head. "Then what do I get?"

"You're not a country."

"No, but I got a snazzy vest and some pretty fru-fru pants." Taking her arm, he turned her into him. He braced himself just in case she wasn't

through with her mad. She surprised him though, and threw her arms around his neck.

“Then you’re entitled to the entire package.” Pressing her body to his she kissed him with entirely too much heat for a woman named Snow. His response, in turn, would have melted a glacier.

“Are you sure Snow White never got it on with Aladdin?”

“I’m positive.”

“Maybe we can live a fantasy and write a sequel.”

She gave him another kiss and pulled away. They really did have work to do. “Tonight,” she said. “Tonight we’ll channel all this excess adrenalin into a fractured fairy tale.”

She looked up at Cinderella’s castle as they made their way through the now deserted park. It was a little surreal.

“I’ve always had a fantasy of my own.”

“Hey, now you’re talking,” said Alex with enthusiasm.

“I’ve always wanted to go to one of those old castles in Scotland. Not the modern day mansions or places that have been built to look like a castle, but something old and authentic. With huge fireplaces and drafts and suits of armor in the entryways. And ghosts. Genuine ghosts.” She smiled up at him. “Maybe I was some kind of duchess or something in another life.” Standing there with her hands on her hips, half Snow White, half Italian goddess, she couldn’t have looked less like a duchess or something.

“Duchess, hell. You were a queen. Although right now you look like the vision from a deeply conflicted schizophrenic’s dream of the perfect woman,” he added.

She looked down at herself and laughed. “Shall we get back into civilian garb and do some blending?”

“Another costume change?”

“Exactly,” Skye nodded. “We need to transition from Disney to tourist. Then once we’re out of here, we can transform into our public roles.”

“Damn. Three costume changes in one day. “

“Four if you count naked.”

“Oh I’ll count that, all right.” He took her in his arms and smiled into her eyes.

*“Maintenant que c'est par-dessus, je veux recueillir ma récompense. Votre costume a fait vous paraissez chaud comme l'enfer,”* she said in a sultry, soft voice that had Alex’s pulse racing.

“Translation?”

“Now that this is over, I want to collect my reward. Your costume makes you look as hot as hell. *Je veux éteindre le feu que vous avez allumé dans moi.* I want to extinguish the fire that you lit in me.”

“Think you can transition from Disney purity to triple-X delight?”

“What’s my incentive?”

“I’ll let you borrow my cute little pants.”

“Think I’m woman enough to get into your pants?”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” he said bumping her then taking her hand in a comfortable gesture of companionship. “Good job today, by the way.”

She smiled, warmed by his praise. “You, too.” Stopping near the employee entrance, she gave him a very non-virginal kiss. “That will have to do until we get into that naked thing.”

“You doing okay?” he asked when he noticed her stretching her shoulders and wincing.

“Fine. Feeling fine.” Now that it was all over, she noticed her shoulder had taken a beating in her flight through the air and subsequent landing. Her quarry had broken her fall, but the velocity of the hit gave her some stiffness and probably a nasty bruise.

Alex looked at her with concern, but decided to wait and take inventory of her body later. Her whole body.

They emerged after a few minutes from their respective dressing rooms, still tall and attractive, but dressed casually with cameras, caps, sunglasses, and bags of merchandise. Together they left the theme park. No one would have recognized them as Aladdin and Snow White. They melted into the crowded parking lot and blended with the tourists who were still standing around gossiping in groups about the evacuation. It was interesting to hear all the various versions of the event from different points of view.

“Darling, keep that up and I’m going to have to kill you,” said Alex as he opened the door to the car they’d rented.

“What?” asked Skye innocently as she slid into the passenger seat.

“You were humming *It’s a Small World.*”

“Damn, I can’t seem to get the tune out of my head.”

“It’s insidious.”

“A diabolical Disney plot,” she laughed as they sped away.

They reappeared at a secure location in downtown Paris. They checked on their prisoners, arranged for the interviews, and began some of the mountains of paperwork that would explode from this incident. When they emerged from the nondescript building, daylight had dissolved into a beautiful dusk, highlighted by hundreds of lights. They drove to the hotel in

relative silence, Skye enjoying the sights and sounds of Paris. Alex enjoying Skye enjoying the sights and sounds of Paris.

Tired from a good day's work, residual tension, and little jet lag they decided to stay in for dinner. Ordering room service, they ate on the terrace of their suite at the Hôtel de Crillon. Alex watched her against the backdrop of the lights of Paris and the rising moon. With its 18th century décor of Louis XV furnishings, Italian marble and Baccarat crystal chandeliers, the hotel was a perfect setting for Skye's timeless beauty, thought Alex. He smiled. Damn, she made him fanciful.

"Want to go out?" he asked when they'd finished the last of the champagne and strawberries.

"No. I want to take a bath and soak out some of these kinks."

"You sure you're okay?" he asked again, this time with more concern. She'd just come back to duty after an extended medical leave and the run and physical take down today were not a walk in the park. He noticed a few times while they were eating she absentmindedly rubbed her torso. One of their recent disagreements had been over her health and her ability to handle the physical rigor of this operation. She thought he worried too much. He thought she was head strong and stubborn and would push right through her limit in order to get back into the field.

"I'm fine. I just feel a little achy. That bastard got in a few shots. I'm looking forward to interrogating him when he gets extradited back to the States." She stood and stretched. Alex watched her intently for any signs she might have reinjured herself. Because he was watching, she didn't allow herself to give in to the throbbing in her shoulder. He'd see the bruise soon enough...she intended to get into the Jacuzzi and lure him in with her.

"And you can quit looking at me like I'm a lab specimen."

Alex laughed. "That wasn't a lab specimen look. I was just trying to assess my chances of getting a little tonight."

"You would settle for only a little, my love?" Leaning over she lightly brushed his lips with hers, then used her tongue to trace the line between them.

"One could hope for more, of course."

"*Frotter mon dos, mon Aladdin chéri et je froterai votre lampe magique.*" French always got his motor running and she knew it.

"Translation, please," he asked as he stood and folded her in his arms.

"Scrub my back, my darling Aladdin and I'll rub your magic lamp."

"Ah. Well, that's a fantasy I can live with." He carried her into the bathroom, prepared to share her bath.

