

SYDNEY JONES SERIES BOOK 2

CHANCE

A NOVEL



CAROLYN M. BOWEN

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ALSO BY CAROLYN M. BOWEN

FICTION

Cross-Ties

The Long Road Home

Primed for Revenge

Sydney Jones Series Book 1

NONFICTION

Cross-Stepping Your Way to Success

For Lily

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CHAPTER ONE

Trouble in Paradise

The daily grind at the law office kept Sydney Jones on her toes. The highlight of her day was the return home and a relaxing evening with Walker, head of security at her office and personal bodyguard. For their dining and special events, Walker hired security out of his own pocket so he could give Sydney his full attention.

Sydney's favorite place was home, where Walker grilled or cooked some delicious dishes for their meals, followed by lovemaking into the wee morning hours.

Tonight, she needed to talk to Walker about their trip to Savannah for the Georgia State Bar Association meeting. She'd received the invitation because apparently, her firm was up for some awards, according to the accompanying news release.

Her father-in-law, Mr. Joseph Jones, would be in attendance, as he was a long-time member of the Georgia State

Bar Association. She didn't think the timing was right to tell him she was in a relationship although it had been three years since Ray's death. There was also the possibility that he would be appalled that she was dating someone from a different ethnic group. She had no idea; but either way, she didn't want to shock him at this event by introducing Walker as her boyfriend.

Her planned speech was one easily changed for the award given. If only she could deliver an eloquent request to Walker to act as her bodyguard only in the presence of Mr. Jones and bar association members without hurting his feelings.

After they put away the dishes from their meal and poured a fresh drink, Sydney said, "I've been meaning to talk to you about our Savannah trip."

Frown lines formed across Walker's forehead anticipating a question from the tone of Sydney's voice. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I haven't told my father-in-law about us, and don't want to surprise him with the news in Savannah. Will you play along for the weekend in front of him and other bar association members? I hate to ask you, but it would mean a lot to me for you to accompany me as my bodyguard."

Walker knew the deep feelings of respect she had for Mr. Jones and replied, "Don't worry. I've got your back." He lightly touched her cheek with his fingertips and kissed her teary-eyed face.

Sydney sighed with relief and relaxed as he wrapped his muscular arms around her. They walked side by side to his

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downstairs bedroom in her townhome, where they spent most of their time at home. She watched as he placed his cell phone on the charger, taking one last look before plugging it in. He'd been doing that a lot lately. She wondered why the sudden interest in checking messages; and when she'd awakened during the night, she saw his phone light up with incoming text notifications.

She hoped it wasn't the government trying to get him back in a leadership role for the U.S. Special Operations Command, known as MARSOC, formed over a decade ago as part of the global fight against terrorism. She knew the CIA had contacted him recently about special assignments they needed him to perform with his military background. She hoped he'd stay steadfast as her security chief and decline their offers; they were building a professional and personal life together now.

Walker knew Sydney had taken notice of the rapid-fire cell calls and messages he'd gotten lately. He'd hoped the caller would get the message he didn't want to talk, and quit calling and texting.

Not Roxanne; she was on a mission to gain his help for making a comeback in the music industry. The late-night calls were getting more brazen and erratic emotionally, with her slurred words promising him the moon. She wanted a bodyguard to support her latest move in the media to reclaim her crown.

Roxanne was a singer-songwriter whose music took her to the top of the pop charts. Unfortunately, her status plummeted as rapidly as her stardom. She couldn't catch herself on the way down. Walker saw it coming and gave notice of his leave.

Roxanne spent more than she was earning from record sales. She'd developed a drug habit as a way of coping with reality when her career nosedived. She'd lost her ability to write new songs, and her band members had long since moved on to hotter stars. Yet, she wanted to keep up the persona of being a successful artist.

The idea of enticing Walker to act as her bodyguard would help paint the picture, she wanted the public to see. She knew he was halfway in love with her when he was head of her security back in her glory days. It wouldn't be too tough to convince him the affection was returned. They could move in together; in the condo she'd bought when flying high. When in public, his presence would call attention to her, and perhaps a record label would pick her up again. She'd call her old publicist and see if she would help plant news stories about her on the web and highly rated entertainment news outlets. For old times' sake, and a boost to reinvent her career, she might help an old acquaintance.

Roxanne knew where Walker was working. The news was all over Atlanta about Sydney Jones and her new law firm. She'd get his private number from the security office and contact him.

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Putting on a stellar performance as a con artist, she gained the information from the receptionist. She waited until after hours to contact him, for she planned to use her sexiest voice to entice him over to her place for a drink and catching up.

When she called, he was cordial but unflappable in not accepting her offer to meet. She expected their meeting to be a breeze to set up and was disappointed by his rejection. She wasn't one to quit when this meant the difference in getting her career back on track. She'd keep trying to convince him to meet her until he gave into her wishes. She called him late at night when she figured he was relaxing after his day. Using her most soothing and sexy voice, she tried to coax him over for a nightcap.

Walker pressed his fingertips to his temple as he listened to Roxanne's slurred words for the umpteenth time. She wasn't going to quit, and Sydney was already suspicious of his late-night calls and texts. She was accustomed to his undivided attention and wouldn't expect anything less. He called Roxanne and said, "I'll see you tomorrow morning after checking in at the office."

"Good," she said. "We've got a lot of catching up to do."

Walker drove Sydney to the office and checked in with his security staff before the meeting with Roxanne. He really didn't want to meet her but decided it was the best way to convince her he wasn't interested in a new job. Roxanne needed to quit and get on with her life so he could have peace with Sydney.

A quick high was what she needed to get in the mood to convince him to provide her security. She rummaged through the notepad where she kept her contacts for making the buy. She didn't keep the contacts on her phone in case something should happen, like losing her phone again.

She tried to remember which ones she didn't owe money to. Through some friends from her past, she'd been able to establish a line of credit. But since her income had plummeted, she'd been careful choosing her supplier. She knew they could get testy about selling her drugs she couldn't afford, but she needed the high.

She made the call and a delivery was en route and would arrive early enough for her to have a snort and be poised for Walker's arrival.

The doorbell rang and she rushed to greet him for her delivery. She opened the door and the delivery guy pushed his way into the condo, demanding money for this and previous orders. She said, "This was to be added to my account!"

"You don't have a charge account," he growled.

"I need this now," she said. "I'm having an important meeting that'll put me back on top."

"Too bad," he said. "My orders are to collect what you owe. Then give you the drugs."

"I don't have any money," she said, adding in a breathy, wispy whisper, "But I can get it by the end of the month."

"You're pissing me off," he said. "And I don't like that."

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He looked around her condo for valuables and came up empty-handed. All she had were platinum record plaques from the past and they were worthless on the market.

He turned to leave but she shot past him, almost tripping over the long, teal negligée she wore. She said, “Leave the drugs, please.”

He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, his dreadlocks swaying as he continued toward the door. She gripped his jacket in a tight fist and held on as he moved toward the exit. He turned and jaw-jacked her onto the unyielding marble floor. The crushing blow knocked her headfirst onto the rock-solid landing. A gaping hole in her skull spewed bright-red blood with every heartbeat until her last.

When he left the condo, her crimson blood looked ghoulish encircling her dead body. His boss wouldn't be happy, for now the money she owed was uncollectable. It was an accident. He was thankful he'd not taken off his gloves to leave fingerprints.

Walker drove over to her high-rise condo where he'd spent time when her career first took off. He pushed the elevator button to take him up to her suite and braced himself for the meeting. He rang the doorbell and waited. She didn't answer right away. Concerned, he tried the doorknob and was surprised when it opened. He gasped when he spotted her lying on the floor in her own blood. He pulled her hair away, checked the pulse on her neck, and found none. He quickly dialed 9-1-1 from her house phone and left it off the

hook as he exited and closed the door behind him, making sure it was unlocked for the paramedics.

He drove to the nearest gas station and parked to settle his nerves. He wondered what happened at Roxanne's home. Apparently, she wasn't kidding about needing a bodyguard. Someone had it in for her and cashed in this morning. She'd not been dead long; he'd noticed her body was still warm to the touch. He wished he'd arrived sooner; he could have protected her.

He usually didn't drink during the day but decided to grab a beer since he was there. The smell of her blood was still in his nostrils, and he didn't intend to return to the firm with the memory fresh in his mind. Besides, Sydney was apt at picking up his moods. What would he tell her—or did he even need to?

He decided on a fresh change of clothes and was glad he kept extras at the office. He'd go directly there and change before checking in with his security staff. He popped a fresh piece of spearmint gum in his mouth to camouflage the smell of the beer and recalled the crime scene.

He knew he'd not taken precautions about leaving fingerprints at her condo. It would only be a matter of time before the Georgia Bureau of Investigation contacted him, as it was a high-profile murder, one they'd normally work.

Lt. Thomason was called into the meeting about Roxanne's murder. GBI was taking over the investigation from local authorities. The crime scene was secure,

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and evidence was stored in the storage locker. Thomason grabbed the nearest chair and eased into the conversation, questioning if DNA evidence or fingerprints were found at the crime scene.

When the name Walker was interjected as a suspect, he was intrigued. He listened to his background report, eloquently summarized by the new kid in the agency; a real fireball, some said. Thomason wasn't surprised Walker had worked for Roxanne when she first became famous, nor by the list of corporate bigwigs he'd handled protection for prior to going into personal and tech security protection.

He could tell them now; Walker was an innocent bystander. It didn't take a genius to figure out he was head over heels in love with his present employer, Sydney Jones. He didn't want to be the one to question him about his whereabouts on the morning Roxanne was murdered. With Sydney looking over his shoulder, he couldn't make mistakes, especially with her love interest.

He didn't need to worry. His captain informed him that the CIA had intervened in Roxanne's case for national security reasons. He couldn't wait to see how it played out. He'd bet Walker was innocent, but even if he wasn't, his highest and best use to CIA operations would take precedence over an investigation and court of law anyway.



CHAPTER TWO

For the Country's Good

Walker felt his past was catching up and pitching him into a black hole right when he was pleased with his current position and life. He'd deliberately made a change from providing security for corporate executives. There were some he'd like to put a bullet in himself. Their egos matched their wealth, and if the public knew the debauchery they prescribed to, their stock would likely fall. At the very least, the public's perception of their brand would suffer.

A friend from his military days asked him to check with Sydney Jones's law firm. She was looking for a head of security. He was impressed, as he'd heard about her kidnapping and family issues. Her parents' death resulting in a financial windfall along with an unscrupulous boss placed her safety in jeopardy. She needed a bodyguard and head of security

for her new law firm. Walker told his friend to recommend him and he'd follow through.

He didn't expect a vibrant, exotic beauty and a smart, successful woman. He was just looking for his next gig, where he didn't have to worry about the defiant behavior of his employer or the option of returning to military operations. The CIA continued to recruit him with the tagline of "for the country's good."

He'd responded that when they could pay him corporate wages, he'd consider their offer. He thought nothing more about their interest as he dug into his latest protection detail.

Walker didn't plan to fall in love with Sydney. He blamed their closeness in proximity, horrid circumstances in her life, and no friends but a paid confidant to comfort her. There was no one to hold her in their arms, and that's what the lady needed—to cry and release the pain in her life.

Sydney struck a chord in his heart. Her beauty, along with her spark to keep going through the hell in her life, enamored him even more. Did he love her? Yes! He was impressed with her ability to get up and fight for what she believed in. Call him a softie if you like, but this woman touched his soul.

When he closed his eyes at night, he could still smell her womanly fragrance and touch her soft skin in his mind.

The government had him now. It didn't take him long to realize they'd framed him for Roxanne's murder, then got his case dismissed when he agreed to become their agent.

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The problem was, Sydney may still think him guilty of murder. The agency didn't give him time to discuss the dismissal of charges against him. All he could tell her was the government needed him and he was catching an early morning flight.

Their night wasn't spent discussing his recent legal problems. They loved one another all night, in the purest sense of the meaning.

He took one last look at her sleeping peacefully, checked her security alarm system, and left her townhome in dawn's early light.

Damn the CIA, he thought. How much more did he need to give them before he would be released from their clutches for good?

He'd hopped the direct flight to Cuba from Atlanta and slept, dreaming of happier times with Sydney.



CHAPTER THREE

Crazy Making

Sydney was reeling from Walker's abrupt departure. Apparently, he'd signed a confidentiality agreement with the government stating to never contact her again. She didn't believe Walker murdered Roxanne; the government had taken over the investigation and released a statement ruling her murder a suicide. The local news station read their prepared statement.

It's a sad day when a star's lights dim and slowly burn out. Unable to withstand the pressure of the limelight, Roxanne took her own life. It happens too often with young artists who make it big when entering the stage, then suddenly fall from grace. Life can be cruel and leave them wanting their youth and lifestyle from the past. May she rest in peace. She will be missed by friends, family, and adoring fans.

Sydney's emotions were in a whirlwind. One moment she was relaxed, with goals to achieve, the next nauseous, temperamental, and subject to tears, even when dealing with her staff. She blamed it on Walker and his taking the deal from hell with the government rather than fighting for his day in court.

Her office manager and friend, Sarah Levins, suggested there was more to her moods than her recent life events. She said, "Sydney, have you had a pregnancy test? Your symptoms resemble my sister's when she first became pregnant."

Running her fingers through her long, straight, ebony hair, she replied, "No. I've not considered that possibility. I'm on the pill."

"You may want to get a home pregnancy test to check before seeing your doctor."

"Well, that's one step forward for treating my crazy mood swings. I'll buy one tonight; but I don't think that's the problem."

Sydney stopped at the pharmacy on the way home for the tester. She poured a glass of chardonnay to relax after a hectic day at the office. She took a frozen Italian dinner out of the fridge and microwaved it for dinner. She was reminded of Walker's cooking and could smell his homemade spaghetti sauce as the timer went off on her cardboard dinner.

She wondered what he'd think if she *was* pregnant. She'd take the pregnancy test first thing in the morning, when her urine was more concentrated for accurate results, according to the pamphlet included.

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The next morning, she awakened early and remembered the pregnancy test. She unwrapped it and followed the directions, thinking, *This shouldn't be happening*. She was on the pill; a strong one, according to her doctor.

Within minutes of using the tester, she read the results in disbelief: positive. She was pregnant with Walker's child. And he'd never know—or probably care—now that he had a new life.

Sydney looked back over her and Walker's life together. Yes, she could have gotten pregnant at any time. They had lots of sex. But if she put money on it, she'd believe their recent vacation to St. Lucia sealed her fate.

The whole week was magical, and the love she saw in his eyes was unmatched by anything she'd experienced in her life; not even from her late husband. They had mad, satisfying sex, and even when she felt bruised from their lovemaking, it wasn't enough. She wanted the surreal experience of their lovemaking to go on forever.

She was torn about the pregnancy and her options. Should she have this child as an unwed mother to continue the family line? Or, should she wait for Mr. Right and get married, and then have children, in the proper order of doing things according to southern societal customs?

The door was closed for an abortion. She could spend hard time in prison, according to the new law recently passed in Georgia. And the options were closing in neighboring states. She didn't know if she could abort Walker's child, unlike being raped by a thug.

Plus, just look at her life. It was dangerous. Although she hadn't hired a personal bodyguard after Walker's leaving, she had an around-the-clock security force protecting her and her company. How could she bring a child into this lifestyle?

But, did she have the guts to give up her baby for the greater good and never be able to see it again?

She started searching online for adoption agencies that would place her child in a loving home. When she started filling out the questions about ethnicity, she decided not to lie about it. They'd probably get a very dark baby. She was of Indian heritage, and Walker was as black as black can be. She probably had some black running through her veins as well.

Her Native American ancestors prodded through the spring-fed Northwest Florida Rivers with some expanding to the far reaches of the alligator infested everglades before settling. Along the way, blacks and Indians meshed each battling trials inherent to their ethnicity.

Sydney thought, *I'm probably going to deliver the blackest baby in history, and they're not readily adopted.* And, how could she explain this to her whitish colleagues and southern country gentleman father-in-law, in Atlanta? Or did they really need to know?

She needed to see an OB-GYN and was relieved her former personal physician who thought she was a slut from her previous medical history, wouldn't be involved. She'd ask Sarah Levins who are sister used during her

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pregnancy. Perhaps she could do the same if her experience was gratifying.

Sydney dove into work to take her mind off Walker and the cruel hand the government dealt them. She was frustrated he didn't get his day in court. Although she couldn't represent him because of their relationship, there were top-notch attorneys in Atlanta who could. He—they—never had a chance.

She checked with the Georgia Bar to do some pro bono work, which always made her feel better. She had a foundation set up to cover costs involved in representing those cases. She decided to take the case of Nancy Lynn, a woman in dire straits.

Nancy Lynn was the mistress of Liu Chang, a member of the Chinese Black Societies. Chang was found dead in his high-rise condo, and Nancy Lynn was the prime suspect.

Nancy Lynn had a Southern country upbringing. She was an attractive blonde who'd settled in Atlanta after a brief stint trying to launch an acting/modeling career in Hollywood. She'd decided on Atlanta because motion picture studios were relocating there, and more movies were being produced using local talent.

She was also a Georgia native and former beauty queen, having grown up in a rural farming community within a hundred miles of the bustling culture of metro Atlanta.

Nancy Lynn was paying her dues with the Boutin Acting Agency to reap better representation down the line. She took

mundane assignments, even playing an extra in major movie productions to further her ambitions. She did whatever it took to create a breakthrough for her acting career.

She'd met Liu Chang at a reception given in a downtown hotel banquet room. Her modeling agency sent her to the event to act as a hostess, basically to just smile and greet the guests. The event was a welcoming of parties who had contributed to a charity drive in the wake of catastrophic damages from a hurricane hitting the neighboring southern state of Florida. Liu Chang's corporation was a top donor to be recognized at the event.

She greeted him and noticed the expensive cut of his tailormade suit, fitting every inch of his well-toned body. When their eyes met, she recognized his unabashed interest in her. They chatted briefly before he was seated for dinner.

Upon leaving, he stopped to say goodbye and left a business card. He asked if she'd like to meet him for a drink in the hotel bar and she said yes. Their relationship developed from there. She moved into his condo and travelled with him except when he went back to Beijing, where he had family.

She was aware he was married and had a son. He'd told her it wasn't unusual for Chinese men to have a mistress; many had more than one. The powerful and elite men in power were expected to have their dalliances. However, it would raise suspicion if she accompanied him home. Foreigners were not usually welcomed by his colleagues, not to mention his family.

He provided Nancy Lynn with a robust amount of money for her spending on clothes and accessories. She had multiple charge cards with no limits for her shopping pleasure. However, all her cards were frozen upon his death. She figured it was the Chinese mafia's doing, for he'd never leave her homeless and without funds to provide for her care. The detectives investigating her case seemed unlikely to restrict her financing, not knowing whether she was entitled to it, regardless of the source.

On the surface, Liu Chang's banking technology business looked legitimate. Even she wouldn't have known it wasn't, if he hadn't told her in one of their private moments. She had no doubt the detectives from GBI became aware of the corporate structure while investigating his death.

Pinpointing her as the number one suspect was a ridiculous assumption. She had no motive; everything was taken away from her almost immediately after his death.

With the lack of suspects, she was surprised she wasn't in jail pending trial. Obviously, they didn't have solid evidence against her now. Lt. Thomason did tell her not to leave town until their investigation was over.

Out on the streets, with no money, she had little choice but to ask for legal aid. When Sydney Jones's law firm agreed to represent her, she felt better for the first time since Liu Chang's death.

Now she had to tell her story, knowing *harlot* was an accurate description for herself.

She was surprised when Sydney Jones herself agreed to her request. An attorney in her firm trying to make a name for himself was what she expected.

Nancy Lynn met Sydney at her office. Sydney eased into conversation with her and noted she was well-spoken and had learned some Mandarin, which she spoke when frustrated. Nancy Lynn was smart. Sydney wondered how she ended up prostituting herself to a member of the Chinese mafia.

Sydney had the investigative report from the GBI stating the role her client, Nancy Lynn, was suspected in playing in this murder. The evidence against her looked circumstantial to Sydney's trained eye. She was hoping to have any charges, if pressed against her, dismissed for lack of evidence.

The case centered on Nancy Lynn's fingerprints being present on the glass he was supposedly drinking from when he collapsed from poisoning. Of course, her fingerprints would be all over the place, and it was likely she handed the glass to him, as he was accustomed to being served.

The DNA evidence was flimsy at best. Nancy Lynn lived with Liu Chang in his condo. In Sydney's opinion, the only reason she was a suspect was to take the heat off investigating a member of the mainland Chinese criminal group commonly known as Chinese black societies. By arresting Nancy Lynn for murder, the mega corporation could continue their business while unknowingly being investigated by the GBI. A serious injustice to her client.

She would run her proposition by Lt. Thomason, her friend, to see if she was correct. If they needed time, perhaps she could help them in return for not formalizing charges against Nancy Lynn for his murder. Meanwhile, she would continue collaborating with her client to make a case.

Sydney comforted Nancy Lynn with the knowledge she'd be the lead on her case should she be charged and, in the interim, have a private investigator discreetly reviewing the evidence. Sydney handed her a business card and told her to call if she remembered anything important to their investigation.

Nancy Lynn had big dreams. She had pushed to make them a reality. She failed. The possibilities of acting in a first-tier movie was a difficult role to land. Perhaps, after clearing her name as a suspect she would make a phone call to a client and movie executive who might help her.

The headline news delivered the story about Nancy Lynn being a suspect in the murder of Liu Chang. The photo they ran with the story was a good headshot of the actress. They probably downloaded it from her website to make the timeline of the news cycle.

Sydney was busy sorting through messages about the case when her admin announced an anonymous call concerning the case. "Put it through," she said.

Sydney listened as the caller asked that she meet downtown at 8:00 p.m. near the Ferris wheel. She reluctantly agreed when the caller said it could mean life or death for

Nancy Lynn. She knew better than take an appointment from an unknown caller. She'd learned from Walker not to place herself in harm's way without backup. Throwing caution to the wind, she quickly mapped the quickest way to get there on her phone and noted a parking garage where she could park.

She waited around in the office until time for the meeting. She reviewed the cases in motion provided by her office manager to make sure all were on track. She was well pleased with the lawyers who had joined her firm. They were all go-getters.

With just enough time to get to the meeting, she left the office garage and motored to the location. On arriving, she alarmed her Porsche and walked across the street. As she neared the car with flashing lights, the streetlights lit the path. She could see the driver of the automobile waving her over to his vehicle and cautiously proceeded toward him.

Within steps of being at the driver's downed window, she saw the glimmer of a chrome-plated pistol aimed directly at her. He fired and the bullet buzzed by her sounding like an angry bee. Without thinking, she withdrew her Glock and fired. He slumped over the steering wheel.

She hurriedly reached through the driver's window to check the pulse on his neck. He was dead. She decided to not stay around to find out more about him. Walker had taught her to flee from suspicious sites. He may have someone following him or a backup somewhere nearby.

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She quickened her pace, just short of running, to her car. She immediately locked her car doors and phoned Lt. Thomason of the GBI to tell him what happened. She saw no bystanders on the semi dark street to collaborate her story; and was uncomfortable staying at the crime scene given she was setup. She started her car and eased out of the parking garage toward home.

She knew Thomason would come by her townhome with the lowdown after investigating. Hopefully, he would congratulate her for a clean shot and being smart enough to leave the scene to avoid being shot at again. She didn't need to be arrested tonight. From their previous meetings, he knew she would defend herself. And, that's exactly what she did tonight.

Tonight's setup made her think there was more about Nancy Lynn's case than immediately met the eye. Why would anyone want to kill her attorney?

She had kept keen notes on the movement of the investigation, thanks to Lt. Thomason. She expected a news update disclaiming Nancy Lynn as a suspect as soon as GBI had the real killer. Now she was left wondering if others were coming after her, and if she should warn Nancy Lynn to take precautions, for she might be in danger also.

Lt. Thomason rang the doorbell, punctual as always after some extraordinary event relating to her. She welcomed him in. "Sydney, what have you gone and got yourself involved in now?" he asked.

“I was meeting an informant about Nancy Lynn’s case.”

“Well, we both know how that turned out—he’s dead.”

“I had no choice; it was him or me.”

“You were right about that. We found the gun he dropped when you shot him.”

“Who is he, and why would he want to kill me?”

“He’s from mainland China, and not associated with the Triad. You were lucky to see his pistol on the semi-dark street. I told you to steer clear until we finalized our investigation. I can’t protect you from the hoodlums you take appointments with outside your office. By the way, have you heard anything from Walker? You really need a bodyguard if you want to continue your clandestine activities.”

“Walker is as dead as my late husband, as far as I’m concerned. I have no idea where he is or what he’s doing. I do thank you for your concern and will be more open should anyone contact me about this case.”

“It’ll be a first, but I’m holding you to it. You have no idea who you’re messing with. They’re dangerous, with the *danger* underlined. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then, goodnight!”

Sydney was glad to see him leave. She was afraid she’d be handcuffed and taken off to jail. She went to the fridge and pulled a soda from the shelf and poured a glass. She sipped, trying to relax, thinking about happier times and places. Walker always came to mind.

She touched her stomach and wished he knew they were expecting a child. With or without him, she'd raise his offspring. Ever since she'd felt the baby move inside her stomach, she'd known she couldn't place her child up for adoption.

Although she knew rumors were flying around the office about her and her sex life, it made no difference. She knew what they had was real—even if for a short time.

The gossipmongers upped their theories about her pregnancy, with the most elaborate being she'd unfrozen sperm from her late husband and had it implanted. Ray died young, and they had agreed not to have children. He'd known early in life he was a carrier for a disease he'd inherited from his mother's family genes.

Sydney went upstairs to her bedroom and took a leisurely bath in her claw-footed tub, a find of her mother's when she was decorating the townhome. She always felt safe and secure knowing her mother had chosen the tub. She just wished her mom would have had more time to enjoy it herself before the car accident that took her parents' lives.

Sydney slept soundly through the night. She awakened in the morning feeling ready to conquer the world. She went to the bathroom and when she opened the door, she saw a man around six feet tall, with wet hair, in his undershorts.

She screamed as she slammed the door shut and ran for the phone, "What are you doing here? I'm calling the cops!"

“No, I’m not going to harm you!” he called as he opened the door. “Please don’t call the police. I’ll be gone in two minutes.”

She remembered leaving her purse with her handgun downstairs on the front entry table as she frantically dialed Lt. Thomason’s number. He answered and said an agent would respond quickly and to go somewhere in her home and lock the door until they arrived.

The intruder was long gone before GBI showed up. When an agent arrived, they checked her security system and it was disarmed. Shit, she’d been hacked. Were the Chinese behind this too?

She called Lt. Thomason and thanked him for the quick response and her theories about why her security system wasn’t working. He agreed and reminded her to lay low until their investigation was complete.

Lay low, she thought. She was invaded in her own home. He was lucky to walk out alive, with her penchant for protecting her sanctuary. From now on, she’d include loading her pistol in her morning routine.

She had to say, she didn’t feel threatened by the intruder. He was more scared than she was. She wondered what his story was and how he’d pinpointed her home for a bath and change of clothes. He lacked Walker’s height but had taken clothes from his closet to change into. Although leaner and shorter than Walker, he pulled on a shirt and shorts and taking his dirty clothes, quickly left.

CHANCE

She dressed for work and looked forward to driving her new convertible sports car with the top down for the early morning commute. This was her fresh breath of air when the highway was less congested with morning commuters.

She called Nancy Lynn to suggest she be watchful of any suspicious activities around her. Not going into detail to alarm her, she said, “Let me know if anyone wants to meet with you concerning Liu Chang.”

“Sure,” she said, sounding puzzled.



CHAPTER FOUR

Walker in Cuba

Walker's flight to José Martí International Airport in Havana, Cuba, lasted for a little over two hours. As the plane hit the tarmac, his thoughts of Iraq and fear of stepping on landmines crept into his mind. His feeling had more to do with the CIA's plan for him than being assigned to a communist country. Under the shroud of secrecy, he was to find the agent assigned to Havana and report back to command.

The CIA agent hadn't checked in according to protocol and was now considered missing by the US government. Walker had been sent to check up on his sorry ass and follow up on his assignment. He'd rather be at home with Sydney, grilling something delicious on the patio, followed by lovemaking extraordinaire. But the CIA dashed his plans

and made him their puppet for however long they required his services.

Walker took a taxi to the agent's last known address. He knocked at his door and observed his surroundings, thinking, *Oceanfront isn't a bad gig for an agent*. When there was no response to his knocking, Walker pounded harder on the door. Still no answer. Walker took out his CQD knife and eased it between the lock and doorframe and opened the door slowly.

He was quick to picture the cottage in his mind, making sure no one was lurking inside that could do bodily harm. He walked through the unit with his Glock 19 ready to fire. The place was empty except for the agent lying on the bed with his body ready to be fed to the fish.

Good God, he didn't want to be here. The agent had run into something—or someone—he couldn't handle. How in the hell was he to know who killed the agent? He could've been messing around with someone's girlfriend or wife; and he'd heard that leads to serious consequences in Cuba.

Government business, at this point, he doubted. Agents were trained to shield their identity, and someone coming into his home to kill him just didn't meet that criteria. The killer was probably known by the agent, as there was no sign of forced entry. This looked like a personal vendetta, not agency business.

Walker phoned his superiors and knew he wouldn't sleep there, this night or ever. He had a thing about sleeping

where someone was killed; probably an idea planted by his grandmother, God rest her soul.

He was informed to lock the door on his way out and the agency would take care of the agent's final resting place. He didn't want to know the details. His biggest challenge now was to get to a hotel, and it looked like, on foot. He was glad he hadn't let his body go soft while protecting Sydney. Tonight, he needed to run several miles to reach the inner city to book a room for the night. Yes, the CIA owed him, and he'd let them know in the morning, when they quit lying about his assignment in Cuba.

Upon entering the city, Walker hoped procuring lodging still worked the way it did in the past—the old-fashioned way: walking around. The last time he was in Cuba, hosts painted anchors on their houses. A blue anchor meant foreigners are welcome, while red denoted rooms for Cubans only. Suspecting he could fit either description probably landed him for this assignment in the first place. With a high percentage of Cubans of Afro-Caribbean ethnicity, he fit in with the local population.

He landed a room at the second host home he went to, where the owner wasn't frightened by his size. Probably because he had a machete hidden behind the door, thought Walker. Although the crime rate was low in Cuba, a homeowner who rents rooms to produce income can't be too careful.

Walker's sleep came more from exhaustion than sleepiness. His finding at the agent's cottage, the lack of information

from his superiors, and the jog into the city to find lodging drained him mentally and physically.

He had a fitful night, swatting bloodsucking mosquitos and tropical insects buzzing his head, not to mention the mattress. He'd flipped the mattress over when he saw the sagging in the middle, knowing his body frame wouldn't conform to that shape. Then he saw the termite-infested lumpy mattress made from flour sacks, likely stuffed with old Haier refrigerator boxes, and quickly turned it back over. He knew a mattress cost a year's wages in Cuba, and reconstruction results depended upon the purveyor; some good, others not. He was probably sleeping on a mattress the owner was conceived on, over 30 years ago.

A good night's sleep was what he intended to have on this gig, since they took him away from his loving abode with Sydney. They owed him. Even for a short assignment, he wanted a cottage with actual windows, not wooden slats protecting the natural elements from intruding upon his sleep. And, by God, a real mattress where he wouldn't sink into the springs of the bed, leaving markings on his hind side. Any cottage—except where the agent was murdered—was fine with him if it met these criteria.

He'd yet to be briefed on his new assignment. Maybe since he'd found their misplaced agent, he could go home now. He'd been in Special Ops long enough to know it was highly unlikely. They had him now, and they wouldn't let go if he was of use for their clandestine operations.

Walker checked in with the agency the next morning, leaving a message for the commander to call him. He wanted to find out the extent of his assignment, to gauge how long before he could see Sydney to explain what happened at Roxanne's. The government owed him, since they'd ruined his life, and he'd make his demands known.

Walker received a call from the operations officer in charge of the Cuban crisis, as they called it. He spoke plainly and told Walker his assignment. He was to investigate the links between the Chinese and Cuban governments, specifically in relation to the sonic attack that hospitalized over twenty workers at the American embassy in Cuba. The president didn't want to look foolish when suggesting a well-orchestrated move to get the US out of Cuba was carried out.

He further noted similar health problems with diplomats had arisen in China. Medical personnel examining the problem hadn't identified the causes of their medical conditions, ranging from nausea, hearing and memory loss, to symptoms likened to brain concussions. Speculation centered around sonic weapons, with researchers pointing to infrasound. In response to this attack, the president took immediate action, removing two diplomats from the US embassy in Cuba and recalling diplomats from China.

Walker listened with an attentive ear, hoping the length of his mission would be discussed. What he heard was he was to infiltrate the group/s responsible and investigate Cuba's ties to China. No date for his withdrawal was mentioned; instead,

he received dead silence from the other end in response to his question.

Making his mission more difficult was the new temporary embassy staff, the minimum personnel needed to perform core diplomatic and consular functions. He'd like to talk with workers present during the sonic attack, but all had left the country.

The operations officer did concede to his lodging requirements, with the property manager to contact him later in the day with specifics. He would be housed along the waterfront, where he could keep an eye on ships entering and leaving port. Walker chuckled to himself, thinking a room with a view along the shoreline of Havana's coast made an improvement over last night's lodging; but it was far from enough.

Just for the hell of it, he decided to investigate the previous agent's death and notes he'd made about his contacts. The agency was quick to send an encrypted email with the information he requested.

From the looks of things, the agent had been in the country for six months and appeared to have some interesting leads. Walker would quietly see if there was a reason anyone would want to kill him. He thought it was probably a jealous husband or boyfriend who did him in, from the female garments left at his cottage the night he was murdered. Still, it was worth a look; it might save his ass if it wasn't a sexual tryst gone bad.

He met his contact at the cottage arranged for his stay. Walker was pleased with the appearance of a real bed, a stove

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with a coffee pot sitting nearby, and a small but adequate bathroom. He wouldn't spend much time there, but when he did, the necessities were important.

Walker wanted to ask if he knew the previous agent but decided against it, not seeing his name in the agent's contacts. He thanked him politely and flung down his travel bag close to the door in case a speedy exit was required.

His European motorbike was to be delivered later in the week. He had little choice but to call a taxi, for he'd gotten enough jogging and walking in the previous night. His first outing was to the Malecón, a massive sea wall running along the northern edge of the city. He was told spending a night sitting along the seaside boulevard was the best way to interact with locals. He hoped to discreetly meet one of the contacts he'd recognize from the photos the agency emailed him.

The taxi splashed through the puddles left from the fierce waves pounding against and intermittently overlapping the seawall along the coastal road. The cabbie drove around the Malecón, circling half the city until he asked to be let out. When paying his fare, he realized negotiating in advance would have been the smart thing. He now believed what he read about how high demand equaled large dividends for the Cuban taxi driver. Being a nonnative, he was unsure of the meeting place, and decided to walk toward the more congested area.

The driver said traffic was closed off during most weekends when the streets were filled with partygoers. Walker supposed his chances of meeting his contact were better during the weekday.

He scanned the passersby for a man wearing a red baseball cap and was just ready to call it quits when a man came up behind him fast, smashing into him. Poised for danger, he quickly maneuvered away to get a better look. His contact was staring him in the eyes and motioned for him to follow.

Finally, he stopped and positioned himself on the Malecón seawall in a more protected area from the raging seas. Walker followed suit, wondering who, if anyone, was watching. They quickly exchanged cell numbers, using aliases as contact names. If either should be picked up by the communist government, there'd be no direct link to them—just a wrong number.

His contact, Euquerio, meaning “surehanded,” went straight to the point. Yes, the former agent was killed when learning the truth about the sources causing the medical illnesses at the embassy. His informant was the mistress of one of the top-ranking military commanders. She was found with him and taken to an undisclosed location for questioning. He wasn't sure what happened afterwards, but hadn't seen her in the bars she'd frequented. He suggested not looking for her, for if alive and found, she'd attract the government to him.

Walker asked Euquerio if he knew what she'd told the agent. He said no. Walker wasn't sure if the answer was out of the desire for self-preservation or ignorance. He saw it as a dead-end street just the same.

CHANCE

The murdered agent had spent months developing his contacts and died with the answers his higher-ups needed. He didn't want the same thing happening to him.



CHAPTER FIVE

A Toxic Potion

Ming Chang was tired and embarrassed about her husband's career and life in the US. The elders thought she should feel honored to make such a marriage to a billionaire and be comfortable, in following with traditional customs. Their marriage was one of the few arranged for financial reasons, for both families had prospered under the rule of the communist government.

Ming was not comfortable with any of their traditions. From her view, her husband was shirking his responsibilities as a husband and father. He was living the high life in the United States while she cared for their son and parents. She saw the media news with him smiling and escorting the same blonde woman to events his banking technology company supported.

She'd love to live in the land of freedom, too. He'd doused her ambition with a wave of his hand at his last homecoming. He preferred to live a life without boundaries, with no questions asked by her.

Since he spent most of his time in the US, there was no reason she and their son shouldn't join him. After all, with his Black Societies connections, nothing was impossible.

The boiling point came when she saw his smiling eyes rested upon the blonde beauty he was frequently photographed with at an event in Atlanta. She recognized "that look," for he had once gazed at her with the same intensity, and what came afterwards was memorable. She could still feel the sensual touch of his hands on her now.

If nothing else, she needed to take a stand for the daughter now lost forever because of the Chinese one-child rule. And there was no better time than the present to set that in motion.

She asked her cousin Zhang Wei over for dinner and asked if he'd heard any news about her husband in the States. His face reddened and he shifted in his chair, clearly uncomfortable with the questioning. She got the answer she was seeking. He knew.

Ming immediately set his mind at ease and let him know she knew about her husband's infidelity. Together, they came up with a plan to frame his mistress for his murder.

Zhang Wei often traveled to the US representing his father's business in Atlanta with portals to South America

through the world's busiest airport, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. His arrival and departure would not raise flags, as he often frequented the States. He booked his flight to carry out the pact with his cousin and left Beijing.

He settled into his midtown hotel and waited to carry out their plan. Under the cover of darkness, while Liu Chang and his mistress were out on the town, agile as a tiger, Zhang Wei propelled himself into the Buckhead townhome of Liu Chang and exchanged his bottle of Moutai Prince with a bottle laced with the toxic Chinese flower Gelsemium. He'd mailed the ingredients to a traditional Chinese herbalist with family ties, along with the Moutai Prince, and asked for a potent concoction.

He knew Moutai Prince was Liu Chang's favorite brand, with its fresher, lighter, and more delicate variation of Moutai. He'd heard him say so often in the past.

He removed the bottle with deadly poison from his satchel and poured out enough to look and feel the same as the opened bottle of Moutai Prince on his bar. There remained plenty in the bottle to ensure his death.

Zhang Wei knew it would only be a matter of time before an impending death announcement. What he didn't anticipate was his mistress, Nancy Lynn, contacting the best attorney in the South to represent her.

He called Sydney Jones's law office and asked to speak with her about an important case she was handling. He was directed to her. He told her he had information about Nancy

Lynn's case and would meet her downtown later that night to give her the tip.

She bought it, hook, line, and sinker. If all his correspondence went so easy, he'd be an even wealthier man.

He waited until nightfall and drove down to their meeting place with the idea that if Sydney Jones was out of the picture, Nancy Lynn would face the death penalty. A sweet recompense for him and his cousin.

He parked on the downtown street and wondered if he should shoot out the streetlights, as they lit the street too brightly for his good. But that might alert Sydney Jones about the danger she would soon encounter. He waited in his rental car until she arrived. His pistol was ready to fire on sight, for he wanted her to go down away from his vehicle.

He recognized her from a distance; an exotic, beautiful creature. He hated to kill her, for such a beauty deserved to live. But he had a pact with his cousin Ming, and they had an eternal connection. Sydney Jones must die tonight.

He cocked his pistol, and with his finger resting on the trigger, he waited for a kill shot.



CHAPTER SIX

Motherhood

Walker decided to check out 23rd Street, where several bars and restaurants were located. Locals gathered there for drinking, chatting, and dancing on weekend nights, according to Euquerio.

He was looking for members of the Cuban military off duty and enjoying the night with drinks and women. After a few weeks, he could tell if there was an ongoing relationship he could penetrate with a promise of safe passage and visa to the US. Obviously, his former counterpart made it a more personal invitation. One he wouldn't imitate.

Music and dancing were Cuba's calling card; one being exported to London and other large cities to promote Cuban tourism. He understood. Watching the salsa dancers was mesmerizing. He had to mentally shake himself to keep from being bewitched.

Acting alone on this caliber of a mission wasn't what it was cracked up to be by his superiors, especially with his obvious size and towering height. A diversion was what he needed, and his Cuban informant had already picked up on his deficiency.

Euquerio offered his cousin Isabella's services—at a hefty price—to accompany him on his weekend forays around town. She was of Spanish descent, born in Cuba, with an itch to escape the communist country for the freedoms the US offered.

Isabella was smart, and completing her doctorate in medicine, as education is free for a lifetime in Cuba. She hoped to practice in the US, where she could have a better lifestyle and more opportunities for advancement. The government-run healthcare paid less to doctors than cabbies earned chauffeuring tourists around the island. She'd be an eager participant for his mission, given the chance.

Walker knew she'd be an asset, allowing him into places he'd stand out alone. They met at the Floridita Bar, a famous Hemingway watering hole where his favorite rum-and-lime-juice cocktail, daiquiris, were expertly poured a dozen at a time.

Decorated in red plush velvet and dark wood, the place was throbbing with live music. Many tourists from European and South American countries were lined up to have their photos taken beside a life-sized bronzed Hemingway statue appropriately posed at the end of the bar. Under different circumstances, with Sydney, he'd have done the same.

He and Isabella found a table discreetly removed from the boisterous conversations at the bar. With Hemingway's presence dominating the tavern, they talked about the long-time relationship between Hemingway and Cuba. Both agreed the ode to Hemingway was appropriate, as two-thirds of his creative life was spent on the island.

Isabella filled him in about the local legend, Papa Hemingway, and his beloved *Finca Vigía*, or Lookout Farm. She was clearly fascinated about his everyday life and literary accomplishments, whether saltwater fishing from his 38' fishing boat, *Pilar*, or downing a few at his favorite taverns in Havana. Walker listened intently, as her knowledge of the literary giant and his near-death escapades was thorough. He had no idea Hemingway had made his home on the island from 1939 to 1960 and wrote seven books, including *The Old Man and the Sea*, *A Moveable Feast*, and *Islands in the Stream*, from his Caribbean abode.

A flickering sign of mourning crossed Isabella's face as she talked about his widow gifting the Cuban people with his island sanctuary. His love of their Caribbean culture and the sea on their blockaded coast was a memory cherished by the natives.

Isabella recalling Hemingway's ties to the island made the time fly as he scanned faces in the tavern for possible informants. Their evening drinking daiquiri cocktails at the Floridita Bar paid off. He identified a couple of possible sources to further pursue for information. Apparently, the government staunchly supported the role Hemingway played

in their tourism; some high-ranking military leaders and their women were social and interacting with the tourists.

When the evening crowd began to diminish, Walker asked Isabella to hop on the back of his motorbike to take her home. He wanted to see her safely to the door in case his identity was blown, placing her in danger. She happily replied yes, and took a scarf from her handbag and covered her long, auburn hair for the ride. They agreed to meet the next night. He'd pick her up for the ride to Havana's Barrio Chino, or Chinatown.

He deposited her at the front door. Her cousin Euquerio opened the door and came over to his bike with a questioning look. He stood up to take out his wallet to pay for the evening and the next one. Euquerio thanked him and said, "Talk later."

Walker rode back to his seaside cottage and carefully examined the exterior before entering, to see if anyone had been snooping around while he was gone. He'd inserted an invisible magnetic tape on the door, so he'd know if anyone had attempted to enter. He was home free. Now, if he could only fall sleep.

When his head hit the pillow, he was dreaming of Sydney and their life together. If only he could talk to her; but he knew any communication was against the rules and could place her in unknown danger. He took her photo out of his wallet and kissed it, saying, "One day, we'll be together again."

Sydney was growing larger and slower with the baby she was carrying. She'd opted for a home birth, away from the prying eyes of others interested in her affairs. She'd planned to have a member of her security team on the premises during and after her baby's birth. She didn't want to worry about her alarm system not working, possibly allowing intruders or well-wishers to lurk about. She'd be in no shape to defend herself or the baby for a while. As much as it reminded her of having Walker nearby, she'd suck it up and secure her home.

If not for the baby she carried, she'd be filled with hatred toward him for walking out with no way to contact him. But she knew it was in her and the baby's best interest to not dwell on what might have been. Someday, for the baby's good, she hoped she could forgive him. She knew it wasn't healthy; and what if the baby turned out to be his spitting image?

She'd decided to take a short maternity leave from the law firm to recover from childbirth and spend time cuddling with her new baby. With or without Walker, she and the baby were connected. She was a soon to be mom, and wanted to be the best. She'd read books about giving birth and taking care of an infant. She'd investigated hiring a nanny before her maternity leave ended. She'd already placed a nanny cam in the baby's room and there were cameras throughout the townhome. When she returned to work, one of her computers would have live video streaming of activities in her home. Her baby would be safe.

Her CEO, Nancy McNally, was ready for her maternity leave and assured her at every chance that the law firm would

be fine in her absence. Sydney believed her, and knew without a doubt the legal cases would be handled expertly by her top-notch attorneys. She was beginning to think about changing the corporate setup of her law firm to a partnership, where she could offer advancement and incentives to the top litigators. She didn't want the firm to become the training ground of attorneys for other large partnerships in Atlanta.

She walked on the treadmill in her home gym daily, as the doctor ordered, to help prepare for birthing her baby. These days, she was walking slower than usual. She readied herself for the office and felt a gnawing pain deep within her belly. Before she could get dressed, another pain tugged at her insides, and she knew she was in labor. She quickly called the midwife, who promised she was on the way.

Sydney changed into a nightgown and laid on her bed. The pains were still coming, and she needed to pee. She stood up beside the bed to go to the bathroom and her water broke, spilling out onto the hardwood floor. Not wanting to leave a mess for the midwife to see and clean up, she went to her bathroom and pulled several towels from the closet to mop up the mess. Feeling better, she bent over and cleaned the floor and took the towels back to the bathroom and shoved them down the laundry chute.

She returned to her bed and threw a bed liner pad she'd bought for childbirth over her sheet. She almost wished she'd decided on a water birth in her oversized, old-fashioned tub but had decided birthing on dry land, on her comfortable mattress, was more her style.

She called her head of security, Brian Odom, to let him know she'd gone into labor. He said someone from her security team was on the way. She hoped he got there first, to open the door for the midwife. Otherwise, she'd have difficulty negotiating the stairs to let her in.

The guard had a house key and the security code to enter her townhome. It wasn't long before her cell phone rang, and the guard said he was entering. She told him she was okay and to be prepared to let the midwife in, for she should arrive shortly.

It was a long night for Sydney. The midwife calmly coached her to breathe and when to bear down to push the baby out. Between pushes, the midwife wiped her head with a cold cloth and told her to relax until the next pain. The relaxing music Sydney had programmed for childbirth was a distant background to the screams as Sydney got closer to birthing her baby.

Sydney was fatigued, and wondered if she'd be able to give birth. The midwife continued encouraging her to rest between pushing and said, "On the next pain—push with all your might." She did. The midwife said, "Good job!" and held up her new baby. With a quick slap from the midwife to its bottom, the baby cried. The midwife laid the baby across Sydney's chest and saw tears trickling down her face. After giving Sydney and the baby a moment, she said, "Let me clean up the little fellow."

Sydney's eyes grew larger with surprise, for she'd not known the baby's gender until then. The midwife asked what she planned to name him. She answered, "I need to look at him before deciding."

The midwife brought him back to her cleaned, diapered, and dressed in his newborn onesie. Sydney said, "I'm going to name him after my dad, David Stewart. He will be called David Asher Jones."

The midwife smiled and said, "Good, strong name."

Sydney nodded. She didn't know if the baby's eyes would change color, but right now they were blue, like her dad's, and that was good enough for her.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Backroads of Georgia

It seemed like hours had passed since Ray Jenkins started toward Nancy Lynn's hometown. He was wondering if his GPS had gone squirrely, for usually there were major gas stations or mom-and-pop country stores along the highway. There had been nothing for over 78 miles as he watched his odometer click off the miles he'd traveled. Up ahead, seemingly out of nowhere, he saw a traffic light and to his left, a gas station and diner.

His cell charger had died over an hour before on the long and isolated highway. He felt suspended in time, not knowing his whereabouts. He took a chance on the diner allowing him to plug his charger into one of their outlets while he grabbed a bite to eat.

A young waitress with snarly hair pulled together in a messy bun was standing behind the counter swiping the bar with a dingy cloth crumpled in her hand. He said, "My phone died, and my car charger has quit working. Can I plug my cell phone into your outlet?"

She pointed toward the corner, where a jukebox and high chair were stored and said, "There's a plug behind the booster."

"Thank you. Do you know how far I am from Cuthbert?"

The girl looked puzzled and said, "No, I'm not familiar with that town."

Ray decided he was in the twilight zone where mechanical items quit working and no one knows where he's going. He sat down on the tattered bar stool at the counter and she handed him the menu with a greasy laminated covering. "Some coffee, please," he said.

He looked over the menu and ordered two eggs over easy, hash browns, with a side order of sausage. On closer observation of the dirty grill, he wondered if he'd made the right choice. A large, cast iron boiler was steaming with what he could only guess was grits. The outside of the pot had goeey-looking residue running down and stuck to its sides, showing signs of not being washed often. He was glad he'd not ordered anything that came from that kettle.

A man with a scraggly, unkempt beard, dressed in overalls, was sitting in the back of the diner. He looked up and said, "Just turn left at the traffic light over there and stay straight and you'll end up where you're looking to go."

He stood up and pointed toward the red light outside the diner and asked, “That one?”

The man said, “That’s the right one. Turn left.”

He thanked him and took a few bites from his plate, trying to give his cell phone time to charge. He’d already decided not to use the GPS until he followed the man’s directions. If he was wrong, he could turn on his phone and get directions to the next city. He didn’t want to be lost on the backroads of Georgia again.

He found the rural address where Nancy Lynn was staying with her parents until her legal problems were resolved.

Taking in the tiny southern town at a glance, he knew why she escaped to Hollywood and then Atlanta. She was a beauty, and there was nothing this town could offer her except the possibility of marriage and children. He wondered why she returned to her hometown. He’d soon find out.

He liked looking people in the eyes when questioning them for Sydney Jones’s law firm. There were always telltale bodily signs that couldn’t be picked up over the phone. In this case, phone service was sporadic—mostly nonexistent—in her rural hometown, which was the main reason for his travelling to meet her.

Sydney had wanted him to look around the town to see if anyone was tracking Nancy Lynn’s whereabouts and to warn her to be careful when she left home.

Since someone was trying to stop Sydney from representing her, she feared for Nancy Lynn’s safety. He was to bring

her back to Atlanta if suspicious behavior was noted. After experiencing the isolation of her hometown, he thought it in her best interest to relocate to the safe house in Atlanta. The condo was stocked and reserved for Sydney's clients needing a reprieve from impending disaster.

He needed Nancy Lynn to feel safe leaving her family's home with him for the drive to Atlanta. If he could pick up a phone signal, he'd call Sydney to let her convince Nancy Lynn to ride with him. She probably knew the way a lot better than him anyway.

He cleared his head before knocking on her parents' wood frame door. He needed to have an impartial stance before questioning her about the murder she'd witnessed and likely get charged with.

She answered the door wearing a cotton shift dress, something she probably only wore at her parents' home. Although the garment hung on her like a potato sack, she looked beautiful.

He introduced himself and flashed his credentials. She looked at him suspiciously but when he mentioned that Sydney Jones sent him, she visually relaxed and smiled.

He asked if there was a quiet place they could talk. She showed him into the small farmhouse kitchen and asked if he wanted a glass of iced tea.

He nodded his head and said he just needed to ask her a few questions. She sat down across from him and waited.

He asked if anyone had contacted her since she'd arrived. She said no, but that she'd seen a dark-colored sedan driving

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slowly down their farm road, but it didn't turn off into the lane leading to their house. She said her parents were visiting out-of-town relatives and wouldn't be home until later in the week, and she knew the landowners living along the road where she grew up. The car was not one from around there.

He told her Sydney had a safe house in Atlanta, making it closer and easier for them to monitor her safety. She seemed surprised, and he quickly punched Sydney's number on his phone while praying he had service. Sydney answered. He quickly brought her up to date and asked if she'd confirm the Atlanta safe house and recommend Nancy Lynn travelling with him now. He handed the phone to Nancy Lynn and watched as she listened, nodding her head in agreement. She handed him his phone and said, "Let me get my things and leave a note for my parents that I'll call them later."

He walked toward the front door to wait while she packed her bags and within minutes, she returned with her suitcase. Apparently, she'd not been there long enough to unpack. He took her bag and was ready to leave the house.

The questions he had planned to ask could wait until he had her safely in Atlanta. He stuck his head out the door and looked around before motioning for her to follow him to his town car.

He opened the door for her and went around to the trunk to deposit her suitcase. He got in and started the car, and drove slowly down the dirt lane and turned onto a wider, red clay road. He'd be glad to get back on the highway to travel faster. He had little choice but to go through the tiny town

with only a few stores on its main street. The only way in or out of this farming community was by circling the town's square, where an imposing monument portraying the city founders commanded attention.

He was breathing easier being on a main highway when a sleek, black sedan fell in behind them. He motioned for Nancy Lynn to duck down and said, "Slide down in your seat; we've got company."

Nancy Lynn didn't utter a word. She slid down in the plush, oversized seat with panic written on her face. He didn't want to add to her fears, but knew trouble was on their rear bumper.

He kept his eyes on the road and hands tightly gripping the wheel, anticipating a rear end collision. The sedan tapped his rear bumper hard, swaying the large automobile off onto the shoulder of the road. Then the car accelerated fast past them. He gave thanks that his sturdy, older-model luxury car was built like a small tank. He mentally recorded the license plate of the sedan and after several miles, told Nancy Lynn she could scoot back up in her seat. They rode silently.

He parked in the condo garage and escorted Nancy Lynn to the safe house while keeping a watchful eye for interlopers. She was sweating, and he was glad the air-conditioning was blasting when he opened the front door. He looked around to check for intruders before going to the refrigerator to see if it was stocked. She didn't need to be going out on her own until he learned who was after her and why.

CHANCE

They sat at the small kitchen table and drank a cold Coca-Cola. He gave her guidelines for staying safe and showed her the security system and code. But for right now, she needed to sit tight and let him investigate.

He asked a few questions that might lead to answering who was after her and why. He knew Sydney planned to have her removed from the suspect list in the murder of her lover, Liu Chang. Even so, she could still be in harm's way on her own and hunted by a killer.

Nancy Lynn was either too frightened to talk, or didn't know who could be behind wanting to harm her. He didn't see any help coming from her for finding who and why she was a person of interest.

He said goodnight, and left his business card, saying, "Call me if anyone tries to contact you—and don't leave."

Nancy Lynn nodded in agreement with tear-filled eyes. He returned home and called in a favor with Lt. Thomason to find the identity of the driver of the black sedan. He confided the reasons behind the request, and Thomason was intrigued with the direction the case of taking.

In minutes, he called back to say the car was rented to a Chinese national, Juang Huang, who wasn't affiliated with the Chinese Black Societies, adding he'd investigate his visit to Nancy Lynn's hometown. Thomason contacted his team to detain him for questioning as a person of interest in Liu Chang's murder.

When Ray Jenkins hung up, he was even more baffled about the connection to Nancy Lynn. Juang Huang had

traveled some distance from the city to track her down in the backwoods of Georgia. They were missing an important piece of the puzzle if the Chinese mafia wasn't a piece of the action.

Juang Huang was at a downtown Atlanta hotel and was taken into custody without incident. Lt. Thomason was pegged to interrogate him about his business in the United States and his interest in Nancy Lynn.

Huang was a snappy dresser, and seemed little concerned with being detained. He asked to make a phone call, a right he believed was owed for his inconvenience. He phoned his attorney, who had a contact in Atlanta who'd take care of the problem.

He sat at the bare metal table staring at the dingy, white-washed walls until Lt. Thomason arrived for questioning. He was asked about his reason for being in the United States.

He replied, "I'm here to accompany a family member home for burial."

"Who?"

"Liu Chang, my sister's husband."

"Who sent you?"

"My sister. She wants him to have a proper burial."

Thomason waited a minute before continuing, reflecting on the recent discovery of the Black Society's decision to back away from Liu Chang's business in the US. Apparently, now his family was responsible for setting things right.

“I see,” he said.

“What prompted your trip to a rural farming community near Cuthbert? That’s an out-of-the-way day trip for your purpose here.”

“I was checking on my brother-in-law’s mistress. And, since you don’t know who murdered him, she may be in danger, too.”

“How did you know where to find her?”

“Pretty easy, actually. Without my brother-in-law’s money she’d be on the streets, and would most likely return to her relatives. Searching on the Internet for next of kin led me to her.”

Thomason didn’t buy his lies about concern for Nancy Lynn’s safety. There was more to the story, or he wouldn’t have rear-ended Ray Jenkins, Sydney Jones’s private investigator. A detail he chose to omit from his questioning.

Thomason paced the interview about the family and his sister’s knowledge of her husband’s mistress.

Juang Huang’s voice took on a husky tone when he said, “Sure, she knew about his affairs, but it is common for wealthy men to consort with prostitutes and have mistresses. She has a good life in Beijing with her family and accepted his flings as part of our culture.”

Thomason knew when affairs of the heart were involved, sparks fly, and sometimes more. In China and other regions of the world, the old ways were dying as women were more educated and empowered and wanted more from marriage.

If he was on a call of duty for his sister, she might be the one behind his murder and after Nancy Lynn. But how could he prove it when she was a foreigner not on US soil?

Sydney Jones was right; Nancy Lynn most likely didn't murder Liu Chang. Losing his financial support put her on the streets—literally. He would investigate freeing up some of her assets when the case was officially closed.

Thomason concluded his interrogation and said, “Your brother-in-law’s murder is still under investigation. You’ll be released from our custody and expected to be on the next flight to Beijing, along with the corpse.”

He assigned an agent to keep tabs on him until he boarded the flight home with his brothers-in-law’s body.

The next morning, he received word Liu Chang’s body had been loaded on the airline and Juang Huang was on his way home. Thomason was relieved but in the back of his mind, he knew it wasn’t over. Someone else might arrive to finish the job. It was enough that someone tried to kill Sydney Jones relating to this case. Someone wanted Nancy Lynn to get life without parole or even the death penalty, and would go to any lengths to achieve it. Ming Chang was likely the mastermind behind the plan.

He just hoped the grieving widow would bury her grudge and go about her life. For as long as she remained in China, she was untouchable. But the minute she set foot on American soil that would change. He’d personally take care of her killing streak. Hopefully, before she met Sydney Jones. He

CHANCE

knew very well how that would end. Sydney was always packed and loaded.

After leaving the GBI headquarters, Juang Huang called his sister, Ming. He figured the agents were probably listening, so he spoke in their native tongue. He hoped there was no translator nearby to decode the message, at least until he exited US airspace. He made it plain that she was not to have any contact with anyone associated with her husband in the States. She needed to drop her vendetta and see to her family. He'd talk after he got her husband's body to its rightful place in preparation for his funeral. Their cousin's body had already been sent back to mainland China, awaiting his family's instructions.



CHAPTER EIGHT

A Star is Born

Sydney Jones's law firm was running like a well-oiled machine. Her attorney litigators were winning big cases often. She picked and chose the cases she'd represent for her clients, and they were in good hands with her new staff attorneys and competent management staff.

She was working on a personal injury case for a movie studio located in Atlanta. One of their construction set workers was injured while building full-scale scenery for their next movie. It wasn't a life-threatening injury, but the recovery time could be lengthy and rehabilitation costly.

The studio was willing to negotiate, but didn't want to be taken by Ray Grantham, the attorney representing their worker. Speed in resolving the matter was paramount, as the production designer and director of production were at each other's throats. There was no way the director would allow

the set constructor back on the job, fearing an even greater lawsuit. The show must go on, and although this worker was more creative and skilled than most, there were others the designer could hire to get the job done on their production schedule and within budget.

Sydney had the numbers the studio was willing to pay and from her staff's investigation, it was a reasonable payout for injuries of this nature. She just had to sell it to Ray Grantham, the attorney representing the worker. The buried news reports that had surfaced indicated he'd ride this case to stardom, if possible. She just had to point him toward the legal reality. This case wouldn't take him to the top of Kennesaw Mountain.

After much bickering about her hoity-toity legalize, the worker's attorney, Grantham, agreed to the studio's terms and conditions. The negotiations were completed and signed by all parties, with payment promptly delivered.

The studio was pleased with Sydney Jones and invited her to a screening of the movie when it was completed. She accepted.

Sydney was glad when Lt. Thomason called to let her know Nancy Lynn was no longer a person of interest or suspect in the murder of Liu Chang. She couldn't wait to tell her the news and about the casting interview she'd quickly set up for her at a major motion picture studio in Atlanta.

She'd called one of the local studio executives she'd met while working on a case at the studio. Dominic Houser said

CHANCE

he'd seen Nancy Lynn on headline news and wondered what the outcome would be. He was glad her case had been dismissed. She was a natural beauty and with some hard work and luck, she might make it in the film industry.

Sydney thanked him profusely and was excited Nancy Lynn would have a second chance at the career she wanted. She made a quick decision to call her and meet for dinner downtown.

Sydney's secretary made reservations at one of Atlanta's top restaurants, the White Oak Kitchen and Cocktails, well-known for its contemporary spin on Southern comfort foods. She thought Nancy Lynn would especially enjoy their menu as a reminder of home.

Nancy Lynn was excited to hear from Sydney. It had been a long time; six months of her life spent as a recluse, while hoping and praying for a miracle. She'd love to meet her at the restaurant nearby and thank her personally for the good news, and let her know Lt. Thomason had unfrozen her bank account and returned her car and personal belongings.

Sydney had just parked when she saw Nancy Lynn walking toward the restaurant door. She called out to her and she turned and waited for her to catch up. When the two entered the restaurant, all eyes were on them. Nancy Lynn was beautiful, as usual. They were quickly seated and ordered drinks while looking over the menu. The waiter suggested the house specialties and a light appetizer. They agreed; his

recommendations sounded good, then they ordered their favorites from the menu.

They sipped on their chardonnay, and Sydney noticed Nancy Lynn relaxing as they talked. She didn't realize how lonely Nancy Lynn had been since the murder of Liu Chang while laying low from whoever was after her.

Sydney explained she could stay in the midtown condo indefinitely. When her income became steady, she could make rental payments to her office.

When she told her about the casting, she'd set up with a local movie studio, Nancy Lynn's eyes danced with merriment just before tears started trickling down her face. Sydney smiled and said, "You're going to be okay; you just wait and see."

Nancy Lynn dabbed her eyes with a tissue Sydney handed her from her purse. "Thank you," she said. "I don't know how I'll ever repay you for all you've done."

"Think nothing of it," said Sydney. "It's my job to right wrongs."

"I hope you won't mind staying in touch," said Nancy Lynn. "You've been the best friend I've ever had."

"Consider us friends," said Sydney. "Call me anytime you want, and I'll do the same. Maybe we can catch a movie together sometime. Hopefully, one with you in it."

Nancy Lynn smiled and said, "If dreams come true, it'll happen."

CHANCE

The rest of the evening was spent enjoying their drinks and dinner while other patrons glanced toward them from time to time. They smiled.



CHAPTER NINE

Sweet Isabella

Almost a year had passed since Walker arrived in Cuba. He'd picked up Isabella on his motorbike at dusk during the weekends to continue his surveillance of top-ranked military leaders and their women at the popular local meeting places around Havana.

When out on the town, Isabella would whisper the names of the men and women who gathered regularly to enjoy the nighttime parties along the streets and open-air parks, and occasionally restaurants and bars. When she received a tip about a possible meeting or event where he could obtain a lead, she passed it on to him and they'd plan to attend.

Growing up on the island, she'd attended school with many they saw regularly singing and dancing in the streets. He could tell by the way her body swayed to the music; she'd love to join them. He was glad she was able to rein in her

emotions, for he didn't want to draw attention to them. Her beauty would genuinely draw men to her. In the end, she remembered she was a paid informant and cuddled next to him rather than kicking off her strappy heels and enjoying the party.

During the week, he pursued the leads they gathered during the weekend. His superiors were pleased with his efforts so far, but he knew he was not as close as the former agent had been when he was murdered.

When darkness settled in and the fog cloaked the harbor, he wore his hooded, pitch-black jogging suit and walked along the wharf and harbor. He'd left his electronic devices at the cottage, as they lit up when used. Carrying a small notepad and pencil, he recorded the names of the ships docked. He paid special attention to foreign ocean-going vessels, especially those from China and Russia.

Since his arrival, one ship from China had ported twice in the harbor. His command of the Chinese language and the dialect of the working class came in handy for sorting through the conversations he overheard when close enough to recognize the speakers. One night, he saw a man in the Cuban military standard talking with who appeared to be the captain of the ship, by the space the dock workers gave him. He wasn't close enough to hear, but saw the soldier hand the captain a funnel-shaped package. The next night, the vessel wasn't there. Most likely the ship sailed on the morning's high tide.

CHANCE

He went alone back to his cottage and sorted through his notes. The Havana nights were long and humid, and his thoughts always gravitated to Sydney. He missed her, and hadn't touched a woman since their hasty goodbye. He wondered if she'd moved on and found another companion and lover. He wouldn't blame her if she did; after their steamy lovemaking, she probably regained her balance and blamed him as the murderer of Roxanne. He didn't waste their precious time before leaving to explain the truth about that morning.

Having Isabella close at hand on the weekend, with her sweet-smelling, gorgeous body, weighed heavily on his desire to keep his hands off any woman until he held Sydney again. At night in his dreams, Isabella began encroaching where Sydney had once ruled. He needed to be more careful around Isabella, especially when they had drinks together, or he could make a life-changing mistake.

Isabella made it no secret she wanted to escape to the US, and probably saw him as her ride. He could easily smuggle her out on his return to the States. Add marriage and his job requirements, and she would have access to legal immigration. Yes, he needed to be careful, he thought.

Isabella called him during the week; unusual, as they met and talked on the weekends. She wanted him to know what a friend confided about the Cuban embassy. He asked to meet her and learn firsthand what she knew and from whom. Isabella convinced him it was too risky. Her friend

might disclose his interest in the incident to the Cuban soldier whose arms held her during the long, steamy nights.

He recorded what Isabella told him and planned to investigate on one of his sojourns outside under the cover of darkness. Getting into the embassy would be difficult, as it was guarded. He needed to convince one of the guards that he was called to repair one of the sensors in the secure area. He was glad he knew enough about security systems to walk the talk.

He waited until the graveyard shift to make his move. He'd brought his blade and a pistol with a silencer, just in case things went south. He camouflaged his usual demeanor with a baseball cap and techie-looking plaid shirt and jeans. He hoped his plan worked, because he didn't want to have to deal with dumping a body.

Walking softly and crouching low to ambush his prey like a leopard in the jungle, he sneaked into the off-limits secure area of the embassy. Seeing just one guard stationed on the premises, he took a chance for a nonviolent approach. He politely informed him about the technical problem he was sent to repair. The guard nodded in the affirmative and waved him in after telling Walker to take the stairs to the equipment area.

Walker breathed a sigh of relief, thinking he was halfway there for investigating the theories he and his commander had discussed. From all accounts, the Cubans and Chinese were quietly working together to get rid of Americans in Cuba.

He looked around and decided the layout of the building and thickness of the walls would make a sonic attack unlikely from the pinpointed location. He looked for canisters holding arsenal they could use. There was nothing lying about. The area was probably swept clean after the attack. Convinced there was nothing more to see, he took photos and left, pulling his baseball cap over his face and waving when passing the guard.

Walker wanted to follow up on the Chinese connection he'd witnessed at the harbor and Isabella's friend's comment about the Cuban and Chinese governments working together. He decided a trip to Chinatown would be a good place to start. He and Isabella could go on the weekend and he could look around.

Isabella was excited when he told her about their weekend adventure. She wanted to take him to the best places to eat and drink. She was beginning to see their outings as a date night rather than what it was—a fact-finding mission.

Isabella was ready to go when he arrived at her cottage. He had just braked when he heard the door slam when the wind caught it, and in seconds her long, tanned legs were straddling the seat behind him.

They rode in silence as the wind whipped against them, making the palm fronds along the street twist and turn. Near the entrance of Chinatown, Isabella pointed to the imposing Pórtico del Barrio Chino (Chinatown Gate), erected in 1999 and paid for by the Chinese government.

He parked the motorbike and as they walked, she talked about the Cuban government relaxing foreign investments in the 1990s, making several Chinatown renovations possible.

They ate a simple but tasty meal at the restaurant Isabella suggested, paying \$9; about half what a tourist restaurant would charge. They walked around Chinatown with Isabella pointing out specialty shops and tourist attractions. Looking around, Walker recognized one of the men he saw at the wharf talking to the captain of the Chinese ship. Isabella knew him and wanted to introduce them. She knew the woman he was with—his wife. He declined. He wanted to watch him from a distance and learn more about his activities, plus shield her from his spying.

Isabella knew where he lived and would point it out on the way home. He'd have a starting point for tracking his movement.

After exploring Chinatown, he asked if she wanted to go to his cottage so they could talk in private. Finding out more about the man he recognized was important to his mission; not to mention the loneliness he felt, for he only knew her and her cousin Euquerio on the island. Thoughts of conversation with a beautiful woman instead of a solitary night made him smile.

Isabella's eyes widened with surprise when he opened the door to his cottage. The home she shared with Euquerio's family wasn't nearly as nice. She walked over to the bed and sprawled out like a cat, slowly brushing her fingertips

against his new mattress. He wondered if she knew how beautiful she looked.

She had a point; the bed would be more comfortable than sitting at the table with chairs poking aluminum spokes into your backside. The vintage relic of times past wasn't comfortable even for dining. But he wouldn't complain. The cottage was a mansion compared to the lodging he was lucky enough to find on his first night in Havana.

He kicked off his shoes and joined Isabella in the middle of the bed. He wished she wouldn't wear a delicate scent of tropical florals when they went out. The smell was intoxicating, and he wanted to breathe in and touch her sexy body.

He took deep breaths to regain his composure. Satisfied, he asked what she'd learned.

Isabella confided what she knew about the soldier they saw in Chinatown. Family secrets were not as guarded as in the States. Even the military were much freer around their family and friends. They sometimes even boasted about their escapades.

He thanked Isabella for the background information, and she reached over and cuddled his face with her palms. He hadn't been touched by a woman in a long time and his body took over as she gravitated toward him. The sexy, sultry heat in her eyes said she wanted him. He responded. Their lovemaking lasted most of the night.

As the sun was rising, peeking through the bedroom window, he remembered their evening and wanted to kick himself. This would complicate their relationship, and he

didn't need any distractions from his mission. He'd been in Cuba long enough, and progress had been slow for solving the mysteries he was sent to investigate. He didn't want to be open to Isabella's expectations of emigrating to the US with him, and last night added complications.

Isabella quietly dressed, and he offered her coffee and toast with marmalade. She took the cup of coffee and declined the toast. The silence between them hung like a heavy mist in the air. He needed to say something—but what? He knew they'd both enjoyed their evening; or she was a talented actress. Should he thank her for the evening pleasures?

When she clutched her handbag, he knew she was ready to go. She most likely had classes, as she was finishing up her medical degree at the university. He didn't want her to be late.

He dreaded riding up to her cousin's house in the wee hours of the morning with Isabella. If he was lucky, he'd be asleep and not waiting by the door expecting payment for last night's outing—not to mention what he'd figure happened afterwards.

Walker thanked his lucky stars; Euquerio was still slumbering when they arrived. He'd catch up with him later in the day to make their agreed upon payment. From now on he'd make monthly payments, in case there was a repeat of the previous night.

He and Isabella continued their outings to the popular hangouts. The locals were colorful and festive in their singing and dancing. Isabella and he now danced in the streets when

they went out. She'd convinced him they'd stand out less by joining in. Memories of Sydney were fleeing. The longer he was away, the more he believed he'd never convince her he didn't murder Roxanne.

Isabella was excited about her upcoming graduation. She wanted him to attend, and he finally agreed to as an observer, away from her family and friends. They spent their nights together pleasing one another until completely saturated with bliss. He would miss her when he returned to the States.

Isabella reconnected with her friend, Maria, wanting to find out more about her husband's activities with the Chinese. Walker told her to stay clear of anything relating to her husband, for it could place her in danger. He knew with her graduation, she was ready to leave Cuba. She was trying to expedite his leaving, believing it was her escape, too.

Isabella discovered the contents of the funnel-shaped box he saw Maria's military husband hand over to the Chinese captain. The package was a camouflaged box of Cuban cigars from his commander in chief.

Walker felt like kicking something. He'd been on a wild goose chase since arriving on the island. The only thing he'd accomplished was to make love to the most beautiful woman on the island. He didn't want "failed to perform" on his records with the agency. Who knew what might happen? They might try to frame him for another murder for good riddance.



CHAPTER TEN

Fleeing Cuba

Euquerio was driving a fare to a local hotel when he passed Isabella walking home from school. She was being followed closely by a military jeep. He feared for her safety, and thought it was time for Walker to leave and take Isabella with him.

Euquerio arranged a meeting with a member of the family of the woman who was in the cottage with the CIA agent when he was murdered. He was walking a tightrope, juggling his love for his country and a clandestine arrangement with the US government spy agency. He wanted Cubans to prosper, and money flowed when the door was opened for Americans to visit and trade with Cubans.

He'd discovered, quite accidentally, that the woman with the murdered agent was taken, starved, and beaten until her reputation as a prostitute was confirmed by a high-ranking military official. Believing her relationship with the agent

was a personal one, she was released. Days later, her body was seen bloated and floating on the ocean by a local fisherman.

Euquerio was nervous about pinpointing the location for the meeting. Being a taxi driver, he thought it best they met in his cab and he'd drive to the countryside and back while they talked. Being known for taking tourists on excursions was the perfect cover, and he'd be glad when it was over. When telling Walker about his plan, he agreed, and they set the time.

Walker left the cottage and jogged to the pickup point out of the way of spying eyes. Euquerio was rolling to a stop when Walker opened the back door, jumped in and said, "Keep moving."

The man waiting in the backseat wasted no time in giving him the details Walker had waited almost a year to hear. He was very specific with dates and times of the covert operations between the Cuban and Chinese governments.

The Chinese were in cahoots with the Cuban government for the specific purpose of removing the American embassy from Cuba. They shared their technology to enable the attack. The Chinese didn't want the US to infiltrate the communist country. Although the Chinese government could call in the \$1.11 trillion of US debt for collection, this was a targeted attack to accomplish a specific result—Americans out of Cuba.

The well-designed shanghai was effective for achieving their goals. The Americans were duped. The democratic process would take years of investigation and study before

the mystery could be solved. The pushback from the United States was as expected, with personnel removal from the embassy and tighter trade and travel sanctions. Exactly what the Chinese government wanted—US presence contained.

The US government would spend years with their top researchers combing the data for answers, and top security agencies investigating leads. In the meantime, Cuba would have less US influence. Their well-played strategy produced a win for the communist government.

The cab driver, Euquerio, was driving them back to the city when they saw a military jeep blocking the sandy coastal road. An alarm went off in Walker's mind, alerting him to get ready to defend himself and those with him. A Cuban soldier came up to the driver's-side window and said, "Get out; we need to inspect your cab."

Euquerio slowly opened his door and moved away from the car. Walker nodded to the man beside him to duck, pushing him down with his left hand. When the soldier went to open the door, Walker drew, aimed, and fired.

Walker said, "Get in, and let's go!"

Euquerio was shaken, but cranked the old Chevy and pressed down hard on the gas pedal. The car lurched forward and gained speed, unlike what you'd expect from an older American model. His taxi was pristine, and surely one of the finest you could ride in around Cuba, thought Walker. And, apparently, he'd tuned the engine to go faster, if needed.

He dropped off the informant in a nondescript location close enough to walk home.

After the informant exited the cab, Walker asked, "Where's Isabella?"

"I'm not sure," said Euquerio.

"Help me find her, and bring her to my cottage," said Walker. "I'll be doing the same. If you don't hear from me again, she's with me and we'll be fine. She'll send a blank postcard when we're settled."

He dropped Walker off a way from his seaside cottage and accelerated to the max home to see if Isabella was there.

Walker was running toward his cottage, hoping Isabella decided to pay him a surprise visit. She knew where the key was hidden and could be waiting for him inside. He paid attention to his surroundings as he maneuvered in a crisscross pattern toward his cottage. Looking over his shoulder more than once or twice, he saw no military vehicles.

He opened the cottage door with his key and hurriedly packed the few things he'd collected and extra guns and ammunition. He grabbed his vest for Isabella to wear in case of fireworks. Where was she? he wondered.

Walker quickly called his commander and told him he needed an exit out of Cuba after sundown. He was bringing a passenger with him who'd helped in his investigation and was now in harm's way.

His commander agreed, and told him a pickup vessel would meet him in international waters. He was to take the skiff the former agent had hidden close to his cottage. He was not to use his running lights until he'd cleared the

Cuban coastline. There was a navigation system and radio onboard. He'd get a signal when the vessel neared.

"Damn it, why won't Isabella answer her phone?" he said under his breath. Within minutes, Euquerio's taxi came barreling up the street, and before he stopped, Isabella was out and waving goodbye. The taxi kept moving, and sped off in the direction of the market.

Isabella carried her satchel over her shoulder and fear shrouded her face. He asked, "Is there anything of yours in the cottage?"

She shook her head.

"I suppose your cousin told you what happened?" he asked. "We've got to leave when it gets dark. We're taking a skiff into international waters, where we'll be picked up by a US operative."

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"We've got to leave the cottage and hide near the skiff until dark," he said. "I don't want to chance my identity—or yours—being comprised and getting us arrested."

He looked down at her feet and was glad she was wearing sensible shoes, as high heels and floating vessels didn't mesh well.

He followed command's directions, trudging through heavy tropical foliage and vegetation, bending and holding back brush for Isabella to creep behind him to their getaway spot and ride. They huddled close to the skiff. Walker placed his vest on the ground for her to rest on while they waited as the sun set. He hunkered down on his knees and kept a

steadfast watch toward the ocean and behind them. When darkness fell, he untied the skiff from its mooring and said, "Climb aboard."

He eased the boat out from the shore, wading almost waist-deep before rolling his 6'5" frame over the side of the small vessel. He checked the navigation system and took the oars to row them away from the shoreline. He noticed the government food rations and blanket tucked beneath the starboard side. He hoped they wouldn't need to use them.

If they were lucky, there'd be no Cuban military vessels patrolling the coordinates he was given to navigate. He was glad Isabella tightly wrapped her long, auburn hair with a scarf. She could pass as a young male now if not observed too closely. This would lessen their chance of being spotted as spies or defectors on the open seas.

The skies were pitch-black, with the quarter moon barely visible. The only sound was the waves lashing against the skiff as they rocked further out to sea. He checked the navigation system to be certain they were on course. They were.

Isabella pointed to a vessel moving slowly on the water with bright spotlights searching the ocean's surface. Walker killed their running lights and kept the motor purring toward their pickup point. When he saw the vessel turn toward the harbor, he waited until they were out of sight before switching on the running lights.

The skiff pitched and heaved over the waves at a steady pace with the wind in their favor. He checked the coordinates to see if they were nearing the pickup point. With the

sunrise peeking through the clouds, it wouldn't be long. They'd traveled a distance during the night.

Just over the horizon, he could see a fishing vessel approaching. The ship was too far away to discern the country of origin. When it got closer, he could identify the flag with the binoculars from his backpack.

They were in international waters now, but he wouldn't feel safe until they'd boarded the fishing vessel, *Madeline Jane*, sent to extract them and drag the skiff behind them into an American port. The commander said they'd be taken into the port of Miami to board a flight to Atlanta, where accommodations were made for their stay. He kept thinking Key West would've been a closer landing from Cuba, but perhaps heavily patrolled, escalating their chances of being captured by the Cuban naval forces.

The fishing vessel was nearing, and he could see the American flag flying from her mast. Before he fired the flare gun, he wanted to be certain this was the right boat.

Isabella had been silent most of the way. She'd gripped the wooden boat seat to keep from falling overboard as the skiff rose and fell, riding the crescents of the pounding waves. The few words she said were lost in the wind. Suddenly, she shouted, "I can read the name of the ship. It's the *Madeline Jane*!"

Walker smiled and said, "That's our ride."

He fired the flare gun and the sky lit up like the 4th of July. There'd be no doubt; they'd seen them, he thought.

The fishing trawler stayed the course directly toward them. His radio beeped and it was the captain of the vessel, confirming their pickup. The ship came alongside their skiff and Walker motioned for Isabella to take hold of the hemp rope and swing herself onto the boarding ladder and climb aboard. He'd tie the skiff to the boat and propel himself into the vessel. When he landed safely, the captain headed the trawler eastward toward Miami. They were headed home.

Walker called command when they arrived in Atlanta to find out where their lodging was located. Their hotel was an easy drive into downtown from the airport. Not knowing how long they'd be in Atlanta, they took a cab to the hotel.

He didn't know what the agency would do with him next. But he wanted to get Isabella settled where she could practice medicine like she dreamed.

He hoped his gig with the company was up after spending over a year in Cuba. He knew that had to be too easy. They had him in their clutches, and he bet they wouldn't let go.

Walker called command early the next morning. Knowing what came next for him was better than worrying. There were also matters concerning Isabella he needed to discuss. He wanted to see her relocated to an apartment with a job before leaving.

Command was cheerful when he answered. "How'd you like to work out of Atlanta?" he asked.

"Well, I was hoping my gig was up," said Walker.

“No, sorry, your country still needs you.”

“Where this time?” he asked.

“First, let’s get you settled. Then we’ll talk about your future with the company.”

“Why am I being assigned to Atlanta?”

“The world’s busiest airport is there. You can hop an international flight to anywhere at the drop of a hat.”

“I see.”

Walker gave him information about Isabella, which he already knew. The commander feigned interest in her working with a medical group or hospital. Then he said, “You know a medical degree is a precious commodity in the CIA?”

Walker chuckled. He didn’t want Isabella in harm’s way anymore.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said.

“No, we’d like you to continue working together as a team.”

“I don’t think she’d be interested after spending years in medical school.”

“Perhaps she’d like to practice in Cuba,” he said. “We can arrange her deportation.”

“You’d do that after what she’s done for the agency?”

“That’s exactly why we want her to be your partner. Look at the bright side; she can set your broken bones and stitch up your wounds.”

“But, what about her plans, don’t they matter?”

“Not anymore. She’s in the US now.”

The only good news was they'd be moving into a new home in an affluent metro Atlanta neighborhood the next day. Isabella thought his cottage in Cuba was plush; she'd think this was a castle.

The agency had safe houses all over the world, and this was theirs for a while. Most likely to play a role in the larger scheme of things they'd be investigating. He'd know more after they were settled and enjoyed a few days of rest, according to the commander. Walker understood his meaning of relaxation. He was to convince Isabella to partner with him for company business.

Walker knew he'd never sell the idea to Isabella. She was headstrong, with a mind of her own. She'd dreamed of being a physician in the US for a long time. He didn't know how to get her to compromise until they could free themselves from servitude to their now masters. His only hope was to point out what could happen to her if she didn't. She'd recognize the danger of being deported. After interrogating her, she'd be killed, and her family would be in danger too.

They enjoyed their first night in the States and he told Isabella about their new home. She couldn't believe the news. Her eyes sparkled with laughter and joy. She kissed him and danced with delight.

"I'm sure there's a hospital or medical clinic nearby," she said. "I'd like to check out my options for working as a physician."

Walker knew he would burst her balloon when he opened his mouth. But it had to be done—the sooner, the better.

He told Isabella what the commander had said. She sat stone-faced on the edge of the hotel bed with tears filling her eyes. “How long do you think they’ll keep us?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but we’ll be talking to the commander tomorrow,” he said. “Let’s get a good night’s sleep so we can ask questions.”

He held her close until she drifted off to sleep. They both could use a break, a permanent one, after the Cuban experience, he thought.

They took an Uber ride to their new home, where two cars were garaged for their use, as needed. On their entering the exclusive neighborhood, Isabella’s eyes were glued to the window, taking in the upscale scenery as they motored by.

When arriving at their destination, he removed their backpacks from the trunk and paid the driver. From previous experience with the company, he knew everything they needed, clothes, shoes, and personal products, would already be in place. He hoped they did a superior job selecting Isabella’s, for her personal style was above average, even with the limited selections in Cuba. The good news was, her heritage wouldn’t stick out in Atlanta, for it was a melting pot of ethnicity from around the world. She could still wear the colorful clothing patterns she enjoyed and dine at Cuban-owned restaurants—if she didn’t get too friendly and blow her cover.

Walker opened the door with a key from under a planter and allowed Isabella to enter first to take in their new residence. She walked slowly through the large foyer into the oversized living room and stopped. "How many people will be living with us?" she asked.

"This is our home. We're the only people staying here," he said.

She turned to face him with a look of disbelief. "Then it's true Americans live like royalty."

"Not all Americans," he said. "Much like any country, there are people not as fortunate."

"But this is for us?"

"Yes, for this assignment."

"I'd rather us have our own place than be tied to your government."

"I agree."

On the dining table was a fresh floral arrangement and documents supporting their mission. They looked at the paperwork then at one another, wondering how they could accomplish their assignment.

Command called midmorning, and Walker put him on the speakerphone so Isabella could hear and participate in the discussion.

His first question was if Isabella planned to remain in the States. She answered, "Yes," knowing the consequences.

He explained that documentation for an alias was being created for her with the name Isabella Walker. She'd still

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have the credentials to practice medicine and that had to be her cover as she and Walker investigated a case with Chinese connections in Atlanta.

Walker was the new owner of a security technologies company that would place him in the direct path of their person/s of interest. The Chinese businessman also lived in their affluent neighborhood, where they could keep a closer eye on his activities. The documents supporting their mission would be sent encrypted after their phone call. Command suggested Walker take online courses in new technologies to broaden his knowledge. He agreed.

With command's statement about Isabella being deported if she didn't agree to working with the agency, Walker and Isabella didn't ask any questions. They needed to think through their predicament before showing their hand. The good news was, Isabella would be able to practice medicine. He was surprised an unexpected harbinger of goodwill was offered. He hoped their new home would add to her delight. On the other hand, he wasn't sure about her taking his name as an alias.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Upping the Stakes

Sydney Jones was trying to put the past behind her and with a three-month-old it wasn't easy, especially when he was the spitting image of his father. Her way of overcoming the feeling of betrayal was seeing her son, David Asher, as a gift. He made her smile and she loved him dearly.

Back at work now—with Daniela, a full-time nanny from Barbados living in Atlanta, now caring for David—she was taking on new cases at the firm. She'd gotten more studio work since meeting the executive producer after introducing Nancy Lynn. On occasion, she'd accompany him for special events and enjoyed being in his company.

Although she felt he was what he seemed, she asked her private investigator for a background check. She was cautious after her past mistakes in trusting the wrong people. The

results were pleasing; a smart, good-looking man with no past entanglements was a breath of fresh air.

She met Nancy Lynn a couple times a month to check in with her. She was still renting her condo, although her income had risen considerably from her last movie deal. There were more in the works, according to the executive she sometimes dated.

She hoped Nancy Lynn would be smart with her money. Perhaps she should mention her new CPA and investment banker the next time they met. She didn't want her to end up with pennies and broke after her glory days in film.

Sydney was always looking over her shoulder, prepared for a fight or flight. When she took her son outdoors, one of the security guards from the firm accompanied her. She was afraid of being distracted when with him, and fearful of not seeing a threat to his life. Her son's safety was her greatest concern.

Her fear about retaliation from across the ocean was abating. Lt. Thomason assured her the Chinese Black Society was not involved with their investigation of Nancy Lynn, nor the hit man sent to silence her. They were keeping their hands clean, staying off the radar of the US government. Sydney wanted to believe him, but there was something impeding her belief that it was over.

Her firm was referred a personal injury case, one of their specialties, with a technologies company in Atlanta. Having a rock-star attorney with a computer science background, it was an almost everyday occurrence. Her only concern with taking the case was that the company's parent company was a Chinese national group.

She was aware of the courtship between Atlanta's global marketing groups and Chinese businesses. They were star companies to attract to the largest metro area in the United States.

She needed to suck it up and get over being marked to die by a hit man from Beijing. They'd take the case as a reputable company doing business in Atlanta and supporting the local economy.

She talked to her CEO, McNally, to let her know she wanted to overview everything relating to the case. There'd be no surprises when they went to court.

The legal suit was brought by a subcontractor who was injured doing a job at the Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. The plaintiff was suing the general contractor, Beijing Jīn Róng Group, for loss of work, medical expenses, and damage to reputation as a technology's expert. He said adequate information wasn't made available by the contractor about the grid system at the airport, thereby causing the accident. Without an accurate blueprint and diagrams of the working environment, injuries could be expected.

Sydney couldn't wait to read the deposition from the Beijing Jīn Róng Group and the private detective's report. Her next question was why the city of Atlanta would allow Chinese companies to perform technical work at the busiest airport in the world. American companies thrived on doing these types of jobs. She was glad her star attorneys weren't biased; or at least, didn't show it. On this case, she was going to have to step back and believe in the legal system to right all wrongs.

Information flowed slowly about the case. The firm's private investigator, Ray Jenkins, was busy digging up dirt on the plaintiff, to show some negligence on their part. As part of his investigation he interviewed the attending physician, Dr. Isabella Walker, regarding the injuries the worker sustained from the accident.

She was reluctant to speak with him and referred him to the hospital administrator for approval to discuss a patient's confidential file. He went through the procedures and was denied access to the doctor and the patient's records. Sydney wouldn't be pleased.

He made the dreaded call to Sydney and expected the worst. He wanted to please her, for she was one of those people you wanted to make happy. He was surprised when she said, "Don't worry about it. I'll let you know when the plaintiff puts medical personnel on their list to call during the trial. Then you can legally get the information."

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She made him feel good, when he had failed her miserably. What was there not to love about this woman?

Feeling loved was not what Sydney was feeling now. The mention of the name Walker made her boil. She could feel the flames from the soles of her feet to her blushed terra rosa-colored face. Who is this Dr. Isabella Walker? Could she be related, even married to Walker? A coincidence? She thought not.

Yes, she wanted every detail about this case, and the Dr. Isabella Walker who examined and treated the plaintiff in a trial her firm was defending. Her desire to win the case just skyrocketed. Damn Walker and the Chinese for reminding her of the past. They'd best get prepared, for her firm would be ready to defend this case.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Spies and Lies

Walker and Isabella were becoming like a loving, married couple, sharing the ups and downs of their day with one another. Their stay in the Metro Atlanta exclusive community was easy compared to the experience in Cuba, with a military presence on every corner.

He'd taken the online technology courses command had "recommended" and was slowly infiltrating the Chinese company he was assigned. Living in the same neighborhood helped, especially with Isabella's outgoing personality, inviting neighbors over for backyard parties. She was becoming fast, best friends with the wife of the man they were assigned to watch.

After her day at the hospital, Isabella came home a little off her normal cheerful self. He asked what happened. She

said, "An investigator from Sydney Jones's law firm came to the hospital today to ask me about a patient I treated."

"And, what happened?"

"I told him I couldn't discuss medical records because of patient/doctor confidentiality. I informed him any questions should be directed to the hospital administrator."

"Did he contact the administrator?"

"Yes, and the administrator told him no without a court order. But I have a feeling that's not the end of it."

"You're probably right; Sydney Jones doesn't take no for an answer."

"Thanks. That's kind of what I thought, because the investigator acted put-out."

"Who is the patient, and why is Sydney Jones interested in his records?"

"The patient was injured on a job at the airport," she said. "He had severe burns on his upper body and face. Apparently, she's not representing him but the company he worked for."

"Do you know what company?"

"No, but I'm sure it's in his records. I was busy providing medical attention and didn't review it."

"If you don't mind, check his file. The technology company we're surveilling has a job at the airport to retrofit their system."

"You've got to be kidding me!"

"No, I wish I were. You may be called as a witness about his medical condition, and I don't want you involved, for your own safety. If possible, stay far away from any court proceedings."

“I’ll talk to the hospital administrator to see what options he suggests. Maybe he can take care of it himself.”

“Do, for if it’s the same company we’re investigating, they play hard, to win. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, I’ve read your reports to command.”

“Then it’s settled. You do what you can, and we’ll hope for the best.”

Walker had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. When Isabella mentioned Sydney, he had conflicting emotions and a feeling of doom if Isabella got mixed up in her case. How well he knew, Sydney played to win.

He did as command directed and had no contact with Sydney. Yet, they’d assigned him to Atlanta, where they could accidentally meet. Being diligent in sticking to directives, he’d stayed away from her favorite restaurants and shopping mall.

Exasperating was the word coming to mind, for he had no idea what she’d do if they met and didn’t want to find out. He guessed it was time to tell Isabella about Sydney in case of a worst-case scenario. And, knowing her, she’d push the limits. By now, she knew Isabella was the attending physician and she’d want to know more.

When Isabella came home from the hospital, Walker greeted her, noticing the tiredness around her eyes. She’d had a rough day and he wondered what caused it, hoping it wasn’t about Sydney’s case.

Isabella went to change into something more comfortable and he waited until she returned and poured her a glass of

wine. She'd brushed her hair, releasing the bun she wore for work, and her auburn hair framed her face. She was a beautiful sight, and he wondered what she'd do if not stuck with him on this mission. Most likely she'd date a doctor or medical professional like herself. He figured once in the States, the sky would be her limit. And, it would've been, if not for the CIA's matchmaking.

Isabella sat on the kitchen bar stool and turned to kiss him. Her show of affection was heartwarming. He was a lucky man, even if they were stuck together by chance.

She moved slowly away while looking him in the eyes. He melted with the sadness showing on her face. She'd lost a patient that day she thought would make it. She did everything medically to revive him and she failed. He held her tightly while she cried, thinking she faced life and death every day in her job. She shouldn't have to when she returned home.

He made their dinner while she sat on the stool and talked. Talking was therapeutic, for by the time the meal was ready, she was smiling again.

He decided now wasn't the time to discuss Sydney and their past together. Isabella had already experienced a hard knock today, and he'd not add to it. They enjoyed the rest of the evening together, turning in to bed early. He made soft and gentle love to her, hoping to take her mind off work.

Walker was getting closer to collecting the information command wanted about the Beijing Jīn Róng Group, the technologies company they were investigating. He'd

contacted one of the consultants they'd called in for support in the personal injury case they were being sued over.

Being an American company, they felt he would add credibility to their defense. After having a beer together at a local watering hole, the consultant told him the technology company would be in the clear, as they'd taken safety precautions on the jobsite. The contractor suing for personal injury should've made an onsite visit, as was called for in the job announcement, prior to sending workers to the jobsite. Updated blueprints and schematics were available from the contractor. Due diligence was what was required and expected of the subcontractors. A seasoned professional contractor would have known. Hell, a newbie would've not missed the addendums to the contract, for it was where money was made or lost.

The consultant shared his feelings about the Beijing Jīn Róng Group. Although his meeting with the president had been cordial, he had an underlying sense of danger. They were interrupted several times during the meeting, and as they were speaking Mandarin, he was unable to follow the conversation. Something had upset his colleagues, and his meeting was cut short so he could attend to the matter.

Walker was glad he'd met Ryan at one of the local technology summits, for he was a reliable source for information. He just wondered who or what upset the president. In the back of his mind, Sydney came to mind.

Sydney was reading the latest report from her private eye about the personal injury case her firm was handling. She'd asked Ray Jenkins to do a background check on Dr. Isabella Walker.

The opposing attorney was doing an exceptional job of keeping her off the witness stand; she wondered why. The hospital administrator would be their medical expert instead of the attending physician relating to the case. If necessary, she could always subpoena her during the trial, if beneficial for her client.

She was more interested in Dr. Walker for personal reasons. And the answers were on the pages in front of her to read. It had been over a year since Walker left Atlanta to an undisclosed location. She had questions to ask him about his abrupt leaving, the dropping of the charges against him as the murderer of Roxanne, and why he hadn't contacted her if he was in town. Their baby was another matter, an unnecessary disclosure if he was tied up in some shady, clandestine deal that could put him in danger. She and David Asher were doing just fine without him, and sharing him with Walker wasn't something she was inclined to do—at least not now.

She was as prepared as she'd ever be to learn the truth about Isabella Walker. Did Walker move on and fall in love with another woman while he was gone?

The report said she was from Spain, educated at the University of Barcelona and married to Dan Walker, owner of a security technology company in Atlanta. On closer

inspection of the photo included, she believed Isabella looked more Cuban than Spanish. Isabella no doubt had an MD to practice medicine at the hospital, but it was doubtful she was from Spain. The report looked like something the CIA would concoct for one of their agents—or maybe two, her and Walker.

If Walker was investigating her client as the government, Isabella's involvement could jeopardize their cover. She decided to walk softly around any involvement relating to them. It could get dangerous, and she had David to think about. She and the attorney handling the case would stick with the facts the Chinese company provided and let the legal system work.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Bundle of Surprises

Walker was completing the last security check for their CIA assignment, delaying the last notes for personal reasons. The personal injury case involving their mark wasn't settled. Sydney's law firm was handling the case, and Isabella could still be involved. He wanted them to be out of the way before the government stepped in to arrest the company's leader for cyberterrorism. He had the evidence, and had tampered with their system to stop their cyberattacks from stealing US company proprietary secrets without leaving tracks.

Isabella had the weekend off from the hospital and wanted to take in some of the spring festivals around Atlanta. He saw no harm in it. An outing would do her good, with the trees and flowers in bloom around the city; she'd see the city at its best.

They ate a leisurely breakfast before he suggested they go to the Chastain Park Spring Arts & Craft Festival. With nearly two hundred artists and craftsmen, she'd be in heaven looking over their designs. They could lunch at any of the food booths and enjoy the sights on the grounds.

Isabella came out in her brightly colored spring sundress and straw hat. She was picture-perfect, and he couldn't wait to show her off to the crowd that normally congregated at the event.

They rode with the top down and enjoyed the cool breeze blowing through their car. The company had done a good job of selecting their vehicles. The sports car fit Isabella's personality and was a fun weekend drive.

He grabbed the blanket from the trunk she insisted they needed in case of an emergency and walked alongside Isabella into the park. He was certain she'd never seen such elaborate designs, for she was in awe as they went from booth to booth. They stopped and ordered food and he spread the blanket on the ground for them to sit and eat.

He felt Sydney's presence before seeing her pushing a baby stroller with a bodyguard trailing. He wanted to stand up so he could see inside the carriage but at the same time, hoped she didn't see him. He wondered when she had the baby, and could it be his?

She walked past him, turning her head to look at a hanging piece of art at a nearby booth. He wondered if she was headed to the kid's area he'd read about online in the festival's announcement. He'd love to get a peek at the baby

to see its size and skin tone. Yet, with his height and frame, there was no way he could hide.

He reached over and lightly stroked Isabella's face as she lay against him. Living with her had been less complicated than with Sydney, even working as CIA agents. Looking back now, he realized he never had a day off, for she was always in danger. He wondered why she'd have a baby knowing her lifestyle could jeopardize the child's safety.

Seeing her brought back memories of their happier times, before the agency got a hold on him. If he was a drinking man, he'd be downing several beers and remembering what might have been. He wondered if she believed he murdered Roxanne, but knew with his directives, he'd never get a chance to explain. The only good he could see coming out of this was his absence might slow her down for taking cases that most attorneys would run from. Then he remembered the baby, and hoped that stopped her.

The next week, the CIA would spearhead the arrest of the president of the Beijing Jīn Róng Group, Su Geming. He was head of the technologies company Sydney was representing in a personal injury lawsuit. He wondered if she'd be their attorney when charged. He hoped not, for it could get bloody. He decided to follow the proceedings, even if his and Isabella's part in their arrest was completed. Seeing Sydney with the baby made him think it could be his, and added to his decision.

Sydney made herself stay and enjoy the festival when she wanted to run away after seeing Walker with the beautiful Isabella. In the past, that could've been them relaxing on the festival grounds, sharing food and enjoying the music. She'd pretended to not see them, for she didn't want him to see David or do any explaining about his paternity. She'd be glad when the personal injury suit ended so she wouldn't be reminded of him and Isabella daily.

She got her wish. By the end of the week the case was over, and she breathed a sigh of relief. The consultant she'd recommended was the icing on the cake. His credibility sealed the win for them with the jury. He was worth every penny they paid him, and the technologies company didn't question his exorbitant fees. They knew his testimony was needed to remove any doubt of their negligence on the job. Now she could have peace.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Company Business

Walker was on pins and needles waiting for the government to arrest the president of Beijing Jīn Róng Group, Su Geming. As far as command was concerned, he and Isabella had done their job. But it wasn't time to ask for their release from the agency—not until Sydney was out of the picture. He needed access to their intel to monitor their moves.

Command said, "Take a few days off before your next assignment. Go somewhere—enjoy life. You've earned it."

He couldn't until he knew the identity of the attorney representing Su Geming of the Beijing Jīn Róng Group. He'd bet his last dollar it would be Sydney, for danger gravitated toward her and she accepted it with a vengeance.

The Atlanta Federal Bureau of Investigation arrested Su Geming, the president of Beijing Jīn Róng Group, and

confiscated their corporate computer systems and files. Walker had to wait for the six o'clock news on Atlanta Channel 7 to see if Sydney had stepped into their minefield. He couldn't call command and ask questions, knowing they'd said no contact with Sydney, or he'd see prison time on a bogus murder charge.

Isabella came home from the hospital and went upstairs to change into something more comfortable. He hoped the news broadcast would come on before she came downstairs for conversation and relaxing time with him.

He didn't like keeping secrets from her, but their relationship wasn't a normal one. They were forced together by the agency with their own agenda for their lives. There were times he wished it was different, especially when they were bonded sexually in bed.

He wanted her to have the ability to choose him above all others. Not be stuck in a relationship for the government's benefit.

The news came on and his attention was on the TV screen. The CIA had coordinated the arrest with local feds and there, beside Su Geming of the Beijing Jīn Róng Group was Sydney, saying, "Everyone deserves their day in court."

"Good God, doesn't that woman have even a grain of self-preservation?" he thought.

Now, on top of his duties to the CIA, he felt the need to shadow her dealings with the Chinese. He wanted to kick something, for all she had to do was say no. Shaking his

head, he knew his life was going to get more complicated, as always, with Sydney.

Like a breath of fresh air, the sweet, soothing Isabella entered the room and asked about his day. He said, "Mine was fine; I just saw on the news the accomplishment of our mission. How was yours at the hospital?"

"Our mission is over?" she asked.

"Yep, I was told we should relax for a few days."

"So, we're still stuck working for your government?"

"We'll ask once things have calmed down from this big arrest."

"And, what do you think they'll say?"

"I don't see any way out, but I'll try to convince them to let you go."

"You'd do that for me?"

"Yes. I want you to have the good life you've dreamed about in the US, and I'm not a part of that."

Isabella flipped her hair and said, "Are you saying that to be free of me?"

"No, not at all. But we both know why we're together—to accomplish a mission so you're not deported and me jailed."

"Well, speak for yourself. I thought our relationship was real."

"We'll always have the company looking over our shoulders, if together, and it blurs our relationship."

"So, you can't see me for who I really am?"

"No. Yes. Maybe? I don't know. Would we be in a relationship if not for the company?"

“I’m definitely attracted to you, and have been since Cuba. Maybe our being together was meant to be. Why don’t you relax and enjoy it?”

“My being relaxed won’t happen as long as the CIA has their clutches in you or me.”

“Will you at least try?”

He smiled. “Yes, just for you.”

He moved over and draped his arms around her, lightly kissing her pouty lips. “All better now?”

She reached up and stroked his face with her beautiful, tan fingers. “I think I got my answer,” he said.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A Deadly Blow

Sydney had just walked through the doorway when David came toddling from the kitchen to greet her. She reached down and lifted him for a kiss and his chubby little arms hugged her back.

“How is my big boy today?” she asked.

He squeezed her tighter and said, “I love you, Mommy.”

Daniela, the nanny, standing a few steps behind, said, “He’s eating better and hasn’t run a fever today.”

“Good. Maybe it was just a light bug he caught when playing with other kids at the park. But I’ll make a doctor’s appointment just to be on the safe side.”

“I can take him, if you’d like,” said Daniela.

“No, I want to talk to the doctor and get a full physical for him. It’s been a while, and he’s due one.”

“OK, let me know when and I’ll have him ready.”

“Thank you. Why don’t you take a break while David and I play his favorite game?”

“Sure, he’ll love the attention. Enjoy your boy.”

After playing hide-and-seek and giving him a bath, she put on his jammies, then rocked him and sang nursery rhymes remembered from her childhood. He went to sleep with a little smile on his face. Looking at him closely, she saw the uncanny resemblance to Walker, and was glad he didn’t see his son at the festival.

When she took David in for his physical, she wanted the doctor to run genetic testing for diseases inherent in Walker’s ethnicity. She didn’t want any surprises, and many genetic diseases were treatable and curable now. She laid him in his crib, noting it was time for him to have a “big boy” bed. He was growing tall for his age compared to other children.

She felt tired, and wondered how Daniela kept up with him all day. He wore her out in the evenings during their playtime. She took a leisurely bath, enjoying the quiet time, and almost fell asleep before remembering where she was. She dressed for bed and was glad she and Walker never made love in her bedroom—always his—close to the kitchen, where Daniela now lived. When her head hit the pillow, she fell asleep thinking of her son in the adjoining room.

After saying goodbye to David, the next morning, she headed into her office. McNally, her CEO, was already there and waiting to meet, which was out of the ordinary.

She went straight to the point about the meeting. She was concerned about the public relations backlash with their new client, Beijing Jīn Róng Group, the Chinese technologies company charged with cyberterrorism, stealing proprietary secrets from American companies. The case would be time-consuming and expensive, and most likely the Chinese company's assets had been frozen by the government.

"Do you really want to represent a terrorist?" she asked.

"No, but everyone is due the legal process of innocence until proven guilty."

Sydney looked pensive and added, "I'll meet your demands halfway. Ask the accounting department to verify their funds and have seventy-five percent of the expected fee paid upfront."

"Sydney, I wish you'd just say you have a conflicting case on your schedule and don't have the manpower to invest into their case."

"You've given me some options; I'll let you know my decision. In the meantime, have their financials looked into."

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you have a personal stake in the outcome of this case. What's going on with you?"

"Personal stake—no! I just love the law and want to see a fair trial."

McNally shrugged her shoulders and shook her head, not caring that Sydney was watching as she walked out the door.

Sydney thought, *McNally's right. The firm shouldn't take the case. We have plenty of clients who wouldn't put us in a negative light.*

Her gut instinct said Walker was somehow involved, and being a CIA bust, she'd bet on it. They'd tried to entice him to work with them ever since she'd met him. She wanted to know what he was doing in Atlanta with Isabella, and why he'd not contacted her. There was something off-keel, and she wanted to find out what. She'd like to know the full story, for one day, she might have to explain his absence to their son.

They'd just walked into their Atlanta residence when Walker said, "Our vacation is over, darn it." Isabella looked at him with a knowing look that made him wilt. Their weekend cruise in the Bahamas was refreshing. They explored the island and sampled the local delicacies. He wished they could go on with their life miles away from the CIA's prying eyes. He never doubted he could get security work outside the government and live anywhere she could practice medicine. Free at last to live their lives was his ambition.

Then Sydney Jones bombarded his thoughts. He'd never be free if he felt responsible for her. He never doubted his love for her, but they were opposites. He tried to deescalate a situation, get in and get out, and she'd run into a burning building. Exactly, what she was doing with the Chinese technology company.

He still hadn't told Isabella about their past, thinking it didn't matter to their relationship or work assignments.

They'd barely unpacked when command called with a new assignment for him in Beijing. He was to infiltrate the Chinese mafia and verify ties to the Beijing Jīn Róng Group. Isabella was to sit this one out in Atlanta and continue her work at the hospital.

He called Uber to schedule a pickup for his morning flight to China. The rest of the night was spent making love to Isabella, with no thoughts about the sixteen-hour flight ahead of him.

The next morning, he didn't awaken Isabella to see him off. He gave her a light kiss and left the house when Uber arrived to take him to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

After the long flight he was starving, and headed to one of the street vendors on Guijie, Ghost Street, for some hot and spicy crawfish. He hoped his old acquaintance would be working so they could catch up and maybe learn something useful relating to his new assignment.

He and the food vendor had gotten past the acquaintance stage when he'd helped him with a little problem on one of his stays in the district. The booth was crowded, being one of the first and most popular in the area. He nodded to his friend, knowing there'd be a better time to talk. He breathed in the ambiance of Beijing, remembering the bittersweet memories as he tasted the morsels seasoned to perfection.

He had cataloged the people he could trust and those to avoid in a soothing, nonchalant way. His personal life was his and off limits, a fact those who knew him understood.

His no-nonsense attitude helped him infiltrate his Chinese target quickly and plant the surveillance device as instructed by the CIA. He wasted no time in accomplishing his mission, for he wanted to return to Atlanta and Isabella.

When the jet hit the runway landing, he was ready to go home. Isabella hadn't responded to his phone calls or texts since his leaving for Beijing.

He took Uber to their home in the exclusive metro Atlanta community. Using his key to unlock the door, he called out to her and there was no answer, unlike when she was home after work from the hospital.

He called and texted her cell with no answers until he had little choice but to call the hospital administrator, where he was told she had not reported for duty in a week, exactly how long he'd been gone.

Walker was getting the picture fast; the CIA sent him to Beijing without Isabella so they could do a hit on her. Supposedly, to make him want to help them more. Little did they know about the affairs of the heart and their believed hold over him. "Fuck them."

Walker called command and said, "Isabella is missing, and no one has seen her at the hospital. Is the agency aware of her disappearance?"

"This is news to us, but I'll see what I can find out. Do you think your cover was blown in Beijing and they've hit you personally?"

“No, it was a clean in-and-out job, leaving no trail. That’s not what happened. I need some time to find her before my next mission.”

“OK, but don’t take too long. We have new intel regarding the Chinese in Atlanta, and we need your help. We’ll put an alert out for Isabella and other agencies will follow suit. She’ll be found.”

Walker hung up the phone in disbelief, yet distinctly knowing it was real and he was lied to. He was ready to take the next step, knowing there’d be no turning back once he crossed this threshold. But he would find Isabella and if harmed, make her killer beg for death.

He packed his belongings, along with the identification he’d stored for when he and Isabella could safely flee from the CIA and have a life of their own.

He waited for sunrise to board the plane to take him to Australia under his new disguise. The in-flight news story was about a woman identified as Dr. Isabella Walker found bloated and floating near a marina at Lake Lanier on the outskirts of Atlanta. *Assholes*, were his thoughts. Why didn’t they just ask him? He’d have done anything for her survival and freedom.

He ducked his head and left the plane, hoping his friend was waiting for him. He would deal with Isabella’s remains once he completed the tasks in mind. She deserved better.

Sydney was watching the local news when a report of a Lake Lanier drowning was announced. The body of Dr.

Isabella Walker was found floating near a marina. The police were investigating, and details would be released later.

She thought most likely Walker had crossed the CIA and they'd retaliated by murdering Isabella. If they thought murdering her would keep him in line, they'd be mistaken. They'd just unleashed a beast, for he'd not stop till everyone involved was dead.

She debated whether she should resign and let another law firm take the case for the Beijing Jīn Róng Group. She was conscious of her reason for taking the case. She wanted Walker to talk and tell her why he didn't contact her in the States, let alone, Atlanta, where they'd lived together. It was her personal agenda, just like McNally suggested.

Either she could back out of the case or expand her influence. Not being one to back down from anything, her goal was to make influential friends, and her sometimes date, the executive from a premier studio, would be ripe with contacts, as were her political contacts. They may be able to make Walker run and hide, but it wouldn't work with her. *You just wait and see.* Thinking of Walker, she realized their son was the most important person in her life, and she intended to find out Walker's story.

After her triumphant thinking, she wondered if working on the case brought unwanted attention and they'd started killing those closest to Walker. If the CIA or their outsourced killers were responsible for Isabella's death, was she next in line?

If they wanted Walker's nose planted in the agency's business, killing Isabella wasn't the answer. Walker was a protector, and for whatever reason, Isabella was important to him. Knowing him, he'd rebuke their authority and get answers himself.

She wondered if taking the case for Su Geming of the Beijing Jīn Róng Group contributed to the CIA's plan to keep Walker away from her. Yet, she'd not heard from him in over a year, before taking the case. With their clandestine ops, she'd not be surprised if they put out a hit on Isabella, making them no better than her client—terrorists on the homeland.

The case was moving slowly, and her investigator was having difficulty getting the information needed from her client and the US government. McNally was right; it would be a costly trial and one she should consider dropping. She wondered what the backlash would be from her client. It was worth discussing the options with her director of operations.

Jenkins, her PI, delivered some unsettling news regarding the case. He was visibly shaken and pacing the floor as he reported his findings. She was in a catch-22, and had no idea how to untangle the mess. The CIA wanted her off, and the Chinese mafia wanted her on the case. She felt like she was caught between the crosshairs on a target and didn't know which one would pull the trigger first.

Discussions with her director of operations weighed heavily on her future actions. There were options; she could retreat from the case. The firm would make a partial refund of the upfront fees collected from Beijing Jīn Róng Group

with her apologies. Her communications manager would release a statement about her small law firm quitting the trial and wishing the client the best.

Sydney didn't think it would be over if she withdrew from the case, and she knew she wouldn't breathe a sigh of relief until then. A black cloud was hovering over her head either way, and she suspected Walker was feeling the same way.

Walker had a plan for payback for those responsible for Isabella's death and infiltrating his life and killing at will. Now, Sydney and perhaps her son were at risk if he didn't play by their rules.

He'd managed to have the remains of a male body incinerated in a car crash identified as him. A comrade using an alias managed the crisis. The CIA was off his tracks for now. How long? He wouldn't know until his plan played out.

His comrade owed him after entering Sydney's town-home, showering, and changing into his clothes. Although he thought Walker would be there, since it was his last known address, he should have called first. He knew the code, and no answer meant stay away; a reminder of rapid changes when in the trenches of the CIA. And, unlike Sydney in the past, she allowed him to walk out; a bullet between his eyes would have been his call.

He'd carefully devised his plan for when he and Isabella could escape. Now, he had no choice. She was dead, and he was probably targeted next for a bullet between the eyes.

To make the outcome in his favor against the CIA, he intended to have a makeover and Australia, his hideaway, had surpassed the US in plastic surgery procedures the past year. When he awoke from the procedure, he wanted no one to recognize him and no fingerprints to mark him. He had a laryngoplasty, a procedure designed to transform the voice box (larynx) to change the sound of his voice, and skin lightening. He had to admit, his new, deeper bass voice was a match for his bulky, towering body.

He'd already said goodbye to his friend so he couldn't describe him, in case someone inquired. He was going by a new name, James Godwin—Jim to friends—he decided. He had new identification documents and passport printed from a source his friend had mentioned in passing. He was ready to begin his trace on the person/s responsible for Isabella's murder and possibly Sydney's, if she won her case, and Su Geming and his technology company went free.

He'd stashed some cash over the years by living onsite with his clients. His new plan would put him back in Atlanta, where he'd lease a car and become an Uber driver. He could find a low-rent apartment and fit in while he stayed abreast of Sydney's defense of Su Geming and track leads to Isabella's murderer.

He had an untraceable cell phone with him, but he used it only for emergencies. He wanted to plan Isabella's burial, but couldn't. He didn't trust the device couldn't be traced, and he wasn't taking chances. The CIA was probably hoping he'd call the morgue to trace his whereabouts. Until he dealt

with the killer responsible for Isabella's death, he'd sit tight and collect her remains for burial later, when it was safe.

He watched the six o'clock news on the small TV in his extended stay hotel. There on the screen was Sydney, coming from the courthouse where the proceedings had begun in Su Geming's case. He hoped they'd keep the camera lens aimed at her and not break to a commercial. The rogue contractor he'd identified working with the CIA wouldn't miss a chance to pop her if he could.

He'd found the CIA's assassin hired to kill Isabella. Going by the name Raff, he moved around abroad, with short stints in the States serving the top bidder as he plied his trade, mostly for clandestine agencies.

Sydney heard the news on TV about Walker's death. What was he doing on Hwy 575 in North Georgia? Tracing a lead concerning Isabella's death, she'd bet. Now, she'd never have closure about what happened between them.

Frustrated and hurt, she focused her attention on the legal case staring her in the face—Su Geming and the Beijing Jīn Róng Group. She pulled out all the stops to get her client found not guilty, but at every twist and turn was shot down. Her goal was to provide a defense and let the court decide the verdict.

She was convinced the government had information she wasn't privy to. The Atlanta Federal Bureau of Investigation oversaw the discovery presented in court. She suspected the CIA had influence in the case, as they were now mandated

to cover acts of terrorism on the homeland as well as abroad. She wondered how much Walker had known about the case, but it was too late now.

Sydney lost the case, and was relieved to have it behind her. She'd provided Su Geming his best defense, given the players involved. Now, the Chinese government had stepped in and demanded Su Geming's return to China. The United States government was fighting their extradition. She planned a vacation to wash the slime from her mind. The president of Beijing Jīn Róng Group, Geming, could find a new attorney if circumstances led to another trial. She was done.

Walker had supplied information leading to the arrest of the president of Beijing Jīn Róng Group and knew the ties to the Black Societies. There was no way Sydney could win this case and her clients were unmerciful, much like the CIA.

He decided to keep an eye on any further proceedings while taking care of the hit man responsible for Isabella's death. It wasn't difficult finding him, for doing a hit for the CIA was something to brag about at the slimy haunts he frequented with others in his trade.

Saddling up to the bar, he listened to enough of the conversation to know the loud ex-military-looking loafer sitting at the end of the bar killed Isabella. As he bragged about her pleading for mercy before he strangled and pushed her into a watery grave, it took all he could do to not squeeze his thick neck until his eyeballs popped out of their sockets.

Distancing himself from her killer was the smart thing to do before he murdered him in front of eyewitnesses. He went to the bathroom and noticed the work wanted bulletins on the wall with slips of paper with phone numbers attached. Walker remembered the nickname and handle Raff was called, and looked through the notices until he found his. Then he went to his bar stool and chugged his beer and left, hoping no one was the wiser.

On pins and needles, Walker waited almost 24 hours before making the call so there'd be no connection to him from the bar. When he answered, Raff's upbeat voice fueled Walker's desire to see him dead. He told him the job and the discreet location to carry out the hit and asked where to drop off the cash. He told him.

Walker dropped off the manila envelope with the cash to a locker at the bus terminal and waited to see him collect it before driving to the location. He followed him several car lengths behind until he could take a back road to their meeting place.

Military-trained to know the terrain, Raff would check out the location in advance to be certain he could carry out the hit and get out. Walker positioned himself to see his arrival from his hiding place. He waited for him to get out of his older model flatbed truck and look around. His finger rested on the trigger until he was within sight for the perfect kill. He applied pressure, fired, and watched the bullet hit its mark. The velocity of the impact sent Isabella's killer headfirst over the bluff he was looking over down into

the lake. He doubted there'd be much investigation into his death after they pulled his record. Probable payback would be the initial response; that is, when his body floated to the surface, hopefully unrecognizable.

One down and one to go until he found who was behind Isabella's murder; and most likely his, if he hung around as the CIA intended. He was taking a much-needed break to Barbados to investigate a new place to hang out. Pirates had made their home along the Caribbean coast. The location might be a haven for him as well.

He still had business in Beijing to get a handle on the terrorist case he was familiar with and Sydney had involved herself in. He'd have to be careful about engagements; he didn't want to compromise his new identity. He'd stay clear of former informants and eavesdrop on conversations directed to the ringleader. He had less chance being caught there than in the States, where the CIA had taps.

He made the trip quick—his favorite mode of operation. When he got what he came after, he boarded the next flight to his new home in Barbados. Win or lose, the Chinese government was backing extradition home for the company official involved in terrorism. Sydney's case would become political and if she knew what was good for her—she'd quit.

Sydney, her son, and Nanny Daniela from Barbados had arrived at the Sandy Resort. She was ready for a Caribbean holiday, and Daniela deserved a break and time to visit her

family. Being away from her busy law firm was overdue to gather her thoughts about future cases she'd represent.

She'd gotten involved with the Chinese technology company for the wrong reasons. And now with Walker dead, she'd never know the truth about what happened between them. She was hoping the vacation would give her a chance to come to terms with his death and put the past behind her.

She laid on the pristine white, sandy beach and watched the waves ebb and flow against the shore while her son played with his sand bucket and beach toys. She'd given Daniela some time off to explore the island and see old friends and family. She'd grown up in Bridgetown, "the city," the neighboring parish of St. Michael, and hadn't returned until now.

Later she and her son, David, would return to their condo after enjoying the sun and cool trade breeze for a while. She decided to help him build a sandcastle and got up to stoop down beside him. When she did, she saw a man with a familiar gait walking along the shore. She did a double take when realizing who he reminded her of—Walker. This man's skin tone and overall look made her realize it wasn't him. She had to get him off her mind.

Walker saw Sydney and her son playing in the sand. He wondered why she came to the island, now his home. He was reminded of what his granny said about kindred spirits, entering and leaving your life until the perfect reunion. He wondered if that was the case now.

He knew he'd never return to Atlanta and her, for it would be too easy for the CIA to figure out his disguise and he'd be back in their clutches—or dead. But for now, he could get a closer look at the toddler to see if he had familiar traits. He was pretty sure the child was his, right down to his once jet-black, curly head full of hair and dimpled chin.

On his way home, he took a detour through Bridgetown to meet a new acquaintance. He saw Daniela walking through the city and stopped to greet her. He asked, "You work for Sydney Jones, don't you?"

She lifted her eyes to his and said, "Yes, I do. I take care of her son."

"Good," he said. "I saw her on the morning news about the Chinese technologies case. You might want to tell her to be cautious dealing with those people."

Startled that he knew about Sydney's cases and had connected her she replied, "Who should I say is concerned for her safety?"

"Just an innocent bystander that would hate to see her get hurt."

She recognized he wouldn't be forthcoming with his name as he nodded and walked away.

She sped up her pace on Broad Street to hail a minivan back to the condo to tell Sydney what happened.

Daniela was out of breath when she entered the condo. Sydney took one look at her wide-open eyes and realized there was a problem.

"What's wrong, Daniela?"

“A man stopped me on the street and said to warn you about dealing with the Chinese technologies company.”

“Who was he?”

“I don’t know. But he knew your law firm was representing the Chinese company.”

“What did he say?”

“Just to be careful dealing with them.”

“That’s all?”

“No, when I asked who the message was from, he said someone that didn’t want to see you hurt. Then he walked away.”

“Don’t worry, Daniela. I’m through representing the Chinese company. The case was over before we left Atlanta.”

“Good, I was worried we were in danger.”

“No, don’t be. We’re safe.”

Sydney’s thoughts went quickly to the weapons she’d packed for the trip and decided to arm herself with a small pistol and blade when they went out. Maybe she should have brought someone from her security staff with her, but she’d wanted a carefree vacation with her son.

Her office manager called to update her about the firm’s cases and messages and to wish her an enjoyable vacation. She’d email her messages so she could read them at her leisure, for nothing was pressing.

Sydney was pleased her staff was on schedule with their work and she’d reward the top producers when she returned. She’d hired a corporate attorney to draw up the paperwork for a new corporate structure for taking on partners.

Her CFO was preparing a financial statement with the income and expenses associated with each attorney's cases, noting the ones the firm represented from their personal referral. Attorneys who were bringing in business and successfully handling it would be rewarded. She'd already lost an excellent lawyer from not having a career ladder at the firm. This wouldn't happen again with the incentives she planned to announce.

She quickly looked over the messages emailed to her from the office. The Chinese technology company wanted a meeting with her to discuss representing them in the future. She'd not waste her or their time. She was done. She'd write the message personally to make sure there'd be no more inquiries about her services.

The man Daniela encountered most likely knew she'd be contacted. She wondered who he was to know her business. Yet, anyone watching the news could have an opinion they'd like to share about her defending a terrorist organization. But recognizing her nanny to deliver a message was creepy. She'd already made up her mind before their vacation to distance herself from her former client. With Walker dead, her reasons for representing them were no longer important. She'd never get a chance to talk with Walker now or know his involvement in the case.

She encouraged Daniela to enjoy the rest of her vacation with her family and not worry about their safety. She'd been good with David and deserved a break.

Daniela was reluctant at first until Sydney told her she was always armed and ready to defend herself and family, including her. After thinking about it for a minute, Daniela agreed.

She'd heard rumors about Sydney, but they were too bizarre to believe. A woman that dangerous wouldn't have the thriving law practice she did—or would she? No one would cross her and live to tell about it. Daniela did as she suggested and went to her family's home for the remainder of her vacation. They didn't meet again until boarding the plane for Atlanta.

Sydney was glowing from the rest and enjoying David at the beach. She hoped Daniela enjoyed her vacation too, for things were crazy-busy at the office, meaning she'd be working longer hours for her son to be in her care. She'd made plans for daytrips for them around town, hoping for fun and educational opportunities for both her son and Daniela.

At a distance, with their skin coloring, you'd think they were related, perhaps even mother and son. Instead of feeling jealous, she was glad, for it added to their safety. Unless someone had their photos and was specifically looking for them, they'd fit in with the crowd.

She'd no sooner sat down behind her desk when her office manager came in to brief her on the caseload since she'd left. The new lawyers she'd hired were doing a great job of winning their cases. She told her office manager to schedule a meeting with them at their most convenient hour,

for she was making a big announcement about bonuses and partnership possibilities.

She'd been reluctant at first to change the corporate structure to add partners to her firm. She'd been burned before by the unethical behavior of those sworn to uphold the law. But, to stop the bleeding of exceptional attorneys leaving for partnership possibilities at competing firms, she had to do something. The decision was a weighty one. She'd made peace with knowing Ray, her private detective, would do a thorough job of vetting them.

The meeting was well received by the attorneys and they were excited about the new career incentives. She could only imagine the conversations around the water coolers. She left for the day, pleased with her first day back.

Walking to her car in the garage, she thought about Walker and how he'd changed her parking space to a less visible one for her safety. She was getting ready to cross over to her car when someone approached her. He was of Chinese descent, and the technologies company quickly came to mind.

When he was within conversation range, she asked, "How can I help you?"

"I'm from the Beijing Jīn Róng Group. The chairman of the board wanted me to ask you to consider representing the company as needed."

The warning Daniela had received from the unidentified man in Barbados came to mind. She said, "I emailed your

boss with my sincere regrets. I'd hoped he would understand and hire another firm to represent him in the future."

"He received your apology. I'm here to make a personal plea on his behalf for your assistance. He needs your help."

"I'm sorry. We're not taking on global accounts currently. Please let him know his thoughts are appreciated, and I wish him the best."

As he turned to leave, Sydney noticed the smirk on his face. This wasn't good tidings. She needed to find out what was going on with the technologies company and prepare to defend herself if needed. She'd make a call to Lt. Thomason first thing in the morning to see what he knew.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Fallback and Regroup

Walker was reluctant to return to Atlanta, for he knew if Sydney was in danger, he'd protect her, and everything he'd done over the past year would be in vain. The CIA would be on to him. Why couldn't she quit taking high-profile mafia-related cases that had jeopardized her life, not to mention her son's?

He hoped his intel was wrong. He'd hunker down in Barbados until he got confirmation of her involvement while hoping his source was mistaken. He'd sent her a warning by her nanny, believing she had the good sense to listen, even if the message was from a stranger.

He'd been chasing leads to confirm who gave the order for Isabella's murder. Being assumed dead had its disadvantages, for he didn't have access to the CIA's intel and couldn't confront those he thought responsible.

He believed the order came from the director of operations, the man who'd orchestrated his and Isabella's escape from Cuba. But could he have been following an order from someone higher up in the agency? In hindsight, he should have interrogated the hit man, but he was blood thirsty to avenge Isabella's murder and knew the CIA put layers of ambiguity when ordering a hit, so it could've been useless. However, his continuing education as ordered by the CIA was paying off. He was taking the cyberterrorism examples the CIA had presented about the North Koreans and infiltrated the director of operation's life. Every move he made, he was watching.

He'd learned from computer whizzes starting with the leader, Kim Jong-un, a computer scientist who'd built an army of cyberagents milking countries and businesses of millions before being detected, including top government agencies and well-known US businesses. Who said education doesn't pay off, no matter where or why you get it?

Now if Sydney would lay low, he might get the answers he sought. Yet, knowing that was improbable, he planned for the worst-case scenario. Frustrated as he was, he still had her back.

Sydney called Lt. Thomason at GBI to ask questions about his knowledge of the US government's stake in Su Geming's extradition to China. She knew he'd be upfront with her, even to tell her to back off, which she'd already done. He needed to know in case something happened to her who to arrest for murder.

“Good morning,” she said.

“How can I help you?”

“What can you tell me about the government’s involvement in Su Geming’s request for extradition to China? The Chinese government is coming fast and furious to protect their assets. And, I’ve been asked to stand by as their attorney.”

“Sydney, Geming is never leaving the US. He will be interrogated until the government knows who’s behind their US business facade and he’ll die in prison for terrorist acts against the US. We want China’s commerce, just not those associated with Black Societies whom their government backs to infiltrate our technology secrets, hurting the US economy.”

“For the record, I said no to their request for my firm representing them. However, I am concerned. I was met by one of their men in my office building’s garage making a plea for me to retain their case. I didn’t like how it ended. Just know I am armed and dangerous.”

“Point taken. By the way, I made captain when my boss retired.”

“Congratulations. I always thought you should have the job.”

“Thank you.”

Sydney arrived home and was surprised to find the door unlocked and the security alarm off. She hurried into her townhome with her hand resting on the revolver she carried in her purse. She slipped through the rooms, inspecting every square inch for Daniela and her son. She cleared downstairs

and started up the staircase to the bedrooms and living area above. She opened her son's bedroom door and peeked inside. There were no signs of entry or disturbance. She went to his new "big boy" bed shaped like a sports car with toys scattered over his blanket. She smiled and looked at her son sleeping with a trail of tears dried onto his sweet face. Wanting to inspect the rest of her home and set the security alarm, she left him sleeping. She hurriedly moved from room to room, hoping to find Daniela. She was nowhere to be found. She went to the kitchen and poured a drink and noticed a note on the island bar. It said, "Do we have your attention now? Wait for our call, and don't alert the police if you want to see your nanny again."

She immediately called Captain Thomason with news of the kidnapping while hoping Daniela was safe. He was surprised to hear from her. They'd just talked earlier in the day.

"My house was broken into and someone has kidnapped Daniela. My son is here and from the looks of his face, he cried himself to sleep. I don't know how long she's been missing. Someone tampered with my security system and set it to replay a previous recording. I looked at the live video remotely from my office before coming home and didn't think it unusual, Daniela giving my son a piece of fruit for a snack, not to spoil his dinner."

"Sydney, I'm sorry this happened. I'm sending investigators over to take prints now. Don't touch anything until we have a chance to see what they've left behind."

“I’ve rearmed my security system, but maybe there’s evidence on the system’s master controls. Whoever it was knew the technology and played me for a fool.”

“Don’t worry, every crime fighting agency in Atlanta will be looking for Daniela. I’ll keep you in the loop.”

Remembering the note, she said, “Do it quietly, or they may harm her if they know I’ve talked to law enforcement.”

“Don’t worry about that. This isn’t our first rodeo.”

“Thank you, and please hurry. I don’t want Daniela’s blood on my hands.”

Captain Thomason went through the proper channels and alerted law enforcement agencies about Daniela’s kidnapping. He thought about the video surveillance he’d planted outside her townhome. The 360-degree cam was planted high up on the modern streetlight. At the time he debated her rights to privacy versus a resource for a crime scene investigation. He was glad the latter won.

She needed someone looking over her shoulder. No matter what he said, she’d continue taking cases that subjected her to bodily harm if things went south. He’d thought with the birth of her son, she’d make some changes. They were slow in coming. Maybe this was her wakeup call.

Walker was at his laptop eavesdropping on the CIA’s director of operations when he saw the alert about Daniela’s kidnapping. *Damn*, he thought. Sydney didn’t listen to his warning. He’d hoped motherhood would make her more cautious. Now, her personal life was invaded by criminals

who played to win. They'd never stop coming after her until she did their bidding or were snuffed out.

His body flexed with an adrenaline rush to catch the next flight to Atlanta. He had to shake it off and backtrack his feelings as her protector. He'd wait to see the local authorities' next move. Thomason was probably the first person she called and from previous problems, he was confident he had her back.

Needing something to occupy his time until another news bulletin flashed on his computer screen, he got up and grabbed his dumbbells and started squeezing repetitions out. By the time he'd completed a couple of sets, his computer was showing signs of life. The intruders into Sydney's home were identified—Chinese nationals. The GBI provided mugshots from their passports, photo of the getaway van and license plate, including the name of the rental agency. He had to admit, identifying the kidnappers quickly was outstanding police work. He just hoped law enforcement found them and Daniela safe.

He hoped this would be the end of the Chinese technology company's hold on Sydney and respect her wishes to withdraw from their legal proceedings. Yet, he doubted it, as they'd send more manpower until the job was done unless someone stopped them.

He closed his laptop and locked his door, then left for an afternoon jog along the beach to clear his head. Every time he heard her name it set him off, and not knowing whether her son was his weighed heavy on his shoulders. Knowing

her family history, with no immediate next of kin, she'd throw caution to the wind with no one to care for her son should she be injured or murdered. This was one of the few times he wished he could make his presence known to her. He wanted a legal document stating him as the child's next of kin should it become necessary.

Barbados had been a good fit for him to plan revenge on Isabella's murderers. He'd kept his hand in the technologies business to keep abreast of the latest in the field and provide consulting from the island. He struggled with fear his identity would be compromised. However, when he looked in the mirror, another man stared back.

His days were filled with study and research about Isabella's murder. Now, he'd added tracking Sydney's legal moves to his plan. At night when he couldn't sleep, he journaled about his life with Isabella. He'd considered writing a military engaged novel but decided even with his alias and pen name, it could be risky. The CIA had his record, and even presumed dead, too many coincidences and they'd be looking for him again.

Writing about the sweet life he and Isabella tasted was good for him. Never expecting to write a romance novel, his journaling gave him a way to grieve her death and have peace as he waited for the last piece of intel to fall into place. He'd avenge her senseless death imposed by her tormenters. They'd reap what they sowed.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Unthinkable

Sydney's townhome swarmed with special agents as they took prints from the door, security console, kitchen counter, and places subject to evidence. The kidnapers' note was sent to forensics for analysis.

Captain Thomason called with the news Daniela had been found and was being returned home. A medical unit was on the way to take specimens of the kidnapers from her body. She wasn't to wash her hands, brush her hair, or change clothes until they arrived and cataloged the specimens.

They'd conclude their interview with her away from the scumbags who kidnapped her. The three men responsible for the kidnapping had been apprehended and taken to headquarters for interrogating. He'd be in touch afterwards.

David woke up. She heard him crying and rushed upstairs to his bedroom. When he saw her, his puffy face lit up with a smile. She went quickly to his bed and he jumped into her open arms. With everything going on in her home, she didn't want to scare him. She hugged him tightly.

The agents downstairs were close to finishing their investigation and would be leaving soon, after they talked with Daniela. The medical unit was another matter. Perhaps they could conclude their business in Daniela's suite, especially with it being personal.

In the meantime, she asked David how he'd like to lie in Mama's bed and watch cartoons. She knew he loved being in her room, and sometimes fell asleep there before she took him to his.

He said yes, and she laid on the bed with him while scanning channels for his favorite shows. She asked him what he did that day. He said he played at the park with friends, came home and ate, and napped. When he woke up and called Daniela, she didn't answer, and he was afraid. He wasn't tall enough to reach the doorknob to go look for her. He cried himself to sleep, hoping his mama would come get him.

She kissed his face and said, "Mama is here now and you're safe. What do you think about getting a new door-knob you can reach, and your own special cell phone with Mama's number? You're a big boy now and can call me when you're scared."

“Yeah. I want a red one like the boys at the park carry in their backpacks.”

“Red it is; and you can go with me tomorrow to pick it out.”

“Thanks, Mommy.”

She knew he was probably hungry, for it had been a while since lunch. She kept mac and cheese, green beans, and his favorite protein—chicken fingers—in the fridge for quick meals.

He settled in watching *Sponge Bob* and she said, “David, I’m going to the kitchen to fix your dinner. I won’t be long, and you’ll get to eat off a TV tray in my bed tonight.”

“OK,” he said, with his eyes never leaving the TV screen.

She left the door open and hurried downstairs to heat up his dinner. She didn’t want him to wander downstairs impatient for her to return. Although the crime scene unit had reduced in size since she heard him cry, agents about could scare him.

She microwaved his dinner and placed some fresh peaches beside his tippy cup and headed upstairs. She told the special agent what she was doing and said she needed to settle her son. He nodded.

Kicking off her shoes, she joined him in the middle of the bed with his special TV tray and dinner. He sat up and started eating as he watched cartoons. She was feeling thankful he wasn’t up when Daniela was abducted and was safe. She waited for him to finish and took the tray and said, “I’ll be downstairs, just call out if you need me.”

He rolled over on the pillow after she took the tray and continued watching TV. "OK, Mommy."

With his little stomach full, he might fall back asleep. She hoped. At least until their home was emptied of law enforcement.

Daniela was brought home by one of the agents who raided the warehouse where she was being held. Distraught, with a busted lip and blackened eyes, she looked at Sydney with tears in her eyes. "Is David OK?"

"Yes, he's upstairs in my bed watching cartoons."

She sighed with relief. Sydney wanted to hug her, but didn't want to contaminate possible evidence from her clothes or body. The special agent in charge asked to go somewhere private as the medical team was parking. Daniela said, "My suite, as long as the door stays open."

The medical team gave her a first-rate physical examination, bagging evidence as they treated her for injuries. She'd fought her attackers and lost the battle. A rape kit was unnecessary, for she'd not been violated in that way.

Thomason arrived behind the medical unit to observe Daniela's interview. The agent in charge had set up the video equipment to record her statement. An agent at the door let him in and he found Sydney in the kitchen making chicken soup for Isabella.

"How's your son?" he asked.

"He's upstairs watching cartoons, probably asleep by now."

"Did he witness any of the brutality of Daniela's kidnapping?"

“No, I checked. He was scared because Daniela wasn’t here when he awakened from his afternoon nap. He couldn’t reach the doorknob to get out. Something I’m fixing tomorrow, as it’s a fire hazard. But it could have been why he wasn’t taken today. They didn’t know he was here.”

“Good.”

“Let’s see what Daniela can add about her kidnappers.”

The agent in charge clicked on the video recorder and began asking questions. When they were satisfied she’d told everything she remembered, they called it a night after handing her his card and said, “Call me if anything else comes to mind.”

They packed up their equipment and left. Captain Thomason lingered and said, “I’m leaving an agent with you. She’ll stand the watch tonight and we’ll look at things tomorrow to see our next step.”

“Thank you.”

“Sleep well.”

The agent charged with guarding them during the night was briefed by the captain before leaving. He said, “Call me directly if there’s a problem, and activate the security system on my leaving. Our techs have updated her unit with new features, overriding what the Chinese did to force entry.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sydney waited until Daniela had showered and changed clothes before bringing her soup. She sat up on her bed and tried to take a few bites to regain her strength.

“I know you’re exhausted from your kidnapping. Why don’t you try to rest a while and get some sleep? We’ll be safe here tonight.”

Daniela nodded as tears sprang to her eyes. “Thank you for rescuing me from those bad men. I hoped you’d not believe the note they left and get help. They planned to kill me to send you a message.”

Sydney didn’t know what to say. Her life had spun out of her control. Now, she was putting people she cared about in danger with her work, including her innocent son.

“I’m so sorry, Daniela. I don’t know how, but I plan to make it up to you.”

“Leaving for Barbados tomorrow would be a good idea.”

“Even if I could, we can’t right now, for we’d be followed. Plus, we have more security here.”

Daniela frowned. “At least David is ok. I was worried sick about him, and wondered if someone grabbed him, too.”

“He’s safe. You’re safe. We’ll be fine.”

“I hope so, ’cause being afraid isn’t my style.”

“Nor mine.”

Sydney said goodnight and left her bedroom, and said a few words to the special agent before going upstairs.

“Help yourself to food and drink in the fridge and pantry. Please wake me if there’s a problem.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said. “And thank you for the refreshments.”

When Sydney changed into her pajamas and got into bed, David was asleep holding his teddy bear under his

CHANCE

arm. She kissed his chubby cheek and decided to let him sleep there for the night. She hoped tomorrow would be a better day. She planned to work from home, for she didn't think Daniela would be up to taking care of David, and law enforcement would most likely be around all day.

Keeping her son distanced from this nightmare was at the top of her to-do list, along with having a carpenter she knew and trusted replace David's bedroom doorknob. When the townhome was built for her parents, adult-sized accommodations were standard throughout the house. She wished she'd noticed it earlier, for it was dangerous for a child. Although his door was normally propped open, she'd not take that chance again. She turned out her bedside lamp and hoped sleep would come. Tomorrow would be another day from hell.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Primed for Revenge

Walker was vigilant in his tracking of the CIA director of operations. On arising, he went to his laptop to listen to the recording from the previous night. He was talking with the agency head about Sydney. He said, “Apparently she turned down their offer, resulting in the kidnapping of her nanny. Good thing Walker took our advice about never contacting her, for he’d be overseeing her security again and she’d represent the Chinese.”

“You’re forgetting he’s dead, killed in a North Georgia car accident.”

“Was that our man’s hit?”

“No, our lucky break, as the assassin we hired was trying to locate him when it happened.”

“Well, I’m surprised he didn’t take credit for it, since we’d paid him.”

Walker was breathing hard through his nostrils listening to the scumbag leaders he once worked for. His gut instinct was right; they planned to kill him. His tour of duty was done with the CIA on his return from Beijing. He listened as they talked about keeping an eye on Sydney's involvement with the Chinese. She had too much political clout to be representing their bid for extradition to China, a red-hot political topic now.

They talked about their weekend deep-sea fishing charter, debating if they should go, finally deciding there'd never be a good time to get away, so why not now. They planned to catch wahoo and bluefin off Barbados. Walker jotted down the name of their hotel and fishing charter boat. The seagoing vessel was docked at Bridgetown Wharf, where he bought fresh fish. He smiled. The bastards were coming to him. He'd plan their welcoming party.

He would take them out one at a time. He checked his ammunition and found a 5-round detachable box magazine with an effective firing range of 1,300 yards (1,200 m). Taking his special ops M2010 Enhanced Sniper Rifle (ESR) from its carrying case, he lubricated his weapon, then ran a dry patch through the barrel to remove the oil before returning it to its case. His rifle would be ready to fire after he scoped out his hiding place.

With the advanced Leupold Mark 5 variable power telescopic sight with scalable ranging and targeting reticle and clip-on Sniper Night Sight, he could take them out day or

night. He was never more ready. He had a couple of days before their arrival to choose possible firing positions to hit his mark. He was a seasoned strategist with camouflage, stalking, detection, and long-range targeting capabilities. He breathed a sigh of relief knowing this part of his life would soon be over after two precision kill shots.

He identified possible spots for firing under cover and waited for the moment to activate his plan. Knowing he had their cell phones bugged, he could follow their movement once they landed on the island. He had a surveillance spot picked out and with their penchant for cigars, it could be the one.

He'd bet they'd visit the island's famous La Casa del Habano, tucked away in Barnados' Limegrove Lifestyle Centre. Inside a storefront on the second floor of the luxury shopping complex was one of the official outposts of Habanos SA, the official promotion and distribution company for Cuban cigars. Being this close to cigars illegal in the US, they'd make a purchase. Then, if they acted according to his plan, they'd go back to their hotel and light up on the balcony. When they did, it was over. The deed would be done. No more looking over his shoulder, and less concern for Sydney's wellbeing. Now, if they'd follow his script.

Walker slept so he could be ready for 24-hour duty if necessary when they arrived. He intended for them never to leave the island. An ending with just cause for payback for Isabella's murder and a price on his head.

With his military-grade binoculars, the world's most high-powered, Sunagor 30-160x70s, he stalked them from the time they landed. From a distance he saw them go into the cigar store and hoped they'd not wait for their fishing trip to light up. Although he had secondary plans, he'd prefer a hit on land with a lesser chance of being spotted.

They headed to their hotel and he went to his earlier identified spot, the roof of the sister hotel next door with a clear shot of their balcony, and waited. He'd hacked into the hotel's booking system and found their rooms, side by side. Pulling up the blueprint of their hotel, he easily identified their rooms from the outside. His high-powered binoculars would provide the finishing touch.

As he waited, he checked the wind to make sure his shot wouldn't drift in the wind. He had two shots to make without being detected. The first would be unidentifiable; a second would tell the direction, and a third reveal his general area. He needed two sure-fire kill shots and unlike in the force, he'd leave his shooting location immediately. A different type of strategy for the terrain and goal of his personal mission.

He was still, listening to his heartbeats, getting in the rhythm for making his shots between beats when they opened their balcony door and stepped out. He opened his mouth, breathed, and fired, then quickly again. Taking a quick look through his binoculars, he verified they were killing shots. He placed his snipe back into her bag and left the rooftop the backway he'd found when scoping the hotel for exits. The deed was done.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Watch Your Back

Sydney was working from home when Capt. Thomason phoned one morning and asked to come over to update her about the intruders and their pending cases. She was staying close, giving Daniela time to heal and process her kidnapping. If Daniela didn't love David so much, she would have quit and returned to Barbados. She said as much between her crying jags, professions of love for David, and entreaties to allow him to accompany her back to the Caribbean until the Chinese were out of the picture.

When Sydney had ushered him into her home office, Capt. Thomason informed her about the changes going on in CIA top-level management. He figured she'd recognize that the departed were the ones involved in Walker's abrupt resignation in favor of a government position. How much

he was able to tell her, he didn't know. He knew the CIA had framed him as the murderer of Roxanne in order to get him to run a special op for them, but it wasn't his place to tell her this.

To his knowledge, the new agency head and director of operations were good guys, though it was still to be seen how much the spy game would change them.

He brought her up to date about the Chinese nationals involved in Daniela's kidnapping. They were being detained and charged with acts of terrorism. The Chinese government officials were lying low and not requesting extradition, unlike Su Geming of the Beijing Jīn Róng Group.

Leaning forward in his chair, Capt. Thomason asked, "Sydney, do you think Daniela will stand up for questioning in court about her kidnapping?"

"I think so. She's slowly regaining her calm, and I know she's determined to take care of David so I can return to the office."

"If all goes according to plan, her kidnapers will be charged and tried for acts of terrorism and will never see the light of day once they're found guilty."

"The sooner the better. We'd all like to put this behind us and send a message to the corporate monsters to quit their meddling, or else it'll not end well for them."

Capt. Thomason wanted to laugh at her upbeat attitude, yet he appreciated the truth behind her statement. She'd not miss her mark if they came after her or this household again.

He knew the protocol that was followed in similar cases. The CIA had options. They could follow the standard rules of operation or go off-book to get the answers they needed. He suspected that once interrogated, and as long as their information collaborated the terrorist attacks, the kidnappers would be released and shipped back to China. The CIA's goal was to tie Su Geming and the Chinese government together in a conspiracy to steal corporate American secrets.

The Chinese officials would know Daniela's kidnappers had ratted the technology company out, so their homecoming would not free them from consequences. From experience, Capt. Thomason guessed the penalty would be death, as they'd know the US wouldn't return the convicts without first extracting relevant information.

Daniela recovered quickly, determined to show a smiling face to David and continue to fill their relationship with fun and educational pursuits. This freed Sydney to return to practicing law. She went about her daily schedule with a renewed consciousness of her surroundings. As a precaution, she stationed one of her office security team members at her townhouse with the directive to shadow Daniela and David on outings.

She sent out a memorandum about accepting cases from foreign entities, specifically Chinese. The partnership was no longer representing those cases regardless of their referral source. She'd had enough.

Soon, the attorney handling the estate received a call from Ming Chang, the widow of Liu Chang, about her husband's will. According to Cheng Li, her staff attorney, she was irate about his departure from the Chinese customs regarding division of assets according to the PRC Inheritance Law. Regardless, his will had been properly drafted and notarized according to his wishes. Naming his then mistress, Nancy Lynn, in the will, however, added fuel to the fire.

To learn more, Sydney called Nancy Lynn about meeting for lunch and suggested a downtown café convenient for both. As soon as their order was placed, Sydney told her about Liu Chang's will and his widow's call to her office.

Surprise splashed over her face. Nancy Lynn claimed she had no idea he was naming her in his will, though he'd been generous in providing clothes, jewelry, personal services, and a car. She was pleased that Capt. Thomason had returned her personal property after she was cleared from his suspect list.

Sydney explained that an attorney from her office would phone her to make an appointment to read the will. Liu Chang had named this attorney, Cheng Li, as an administrator to finalize his affairs. She warned Nancy Lynn that his widow was soon arriving in Atlanta, although Cheng Li had expressed his preference to travel to Beijing to meet. The property going to the widow, son, and parents had already been separated from the Chang estate. The attorney would learn later that day what the widow's plans were in their face-to-face. They both hoped it could be handled discreetly.

“You might want to watch your back if Ming Chang decides to meet in Atlanta,” Sydney recommended.

“This is not something I’m looking forward to. I hope she stays home and lets the attorney handle Liu’s affairs. Most everything can be done remotely. She should know that, being married to a technology expert.”

“Her coming will be more about you than finalizing his will. You know that, don’t you?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, since she’s already planned an attack on me. If not for your fast action and safe house, I’d be dead now.”

“I’ll call Capt. Thomason and let him know she’s coming when Cheng Li verifies the date. He’ll likely send an undercover agent to guard your home while she’s here. If not, I’ll send someone from my security team to watch your back.”

Nancy Lynn sighed. “Thank you.”

Sydney returned to the office and checked her messages. Cheng Li had called while she was at lunch. Immediately, she returned his call and asked for an update on Liu Chang’s will. He said the widow was flying in, although he’d requested to meet her in Beijing. Sydney quickly added the date to her calendar and thanked him for his promptness in settling the estate. Capt. Thomason was her next call, and his admin put her straight through. She quickly updated him about Ming Chang and asked whether he had personnel to devote to Nancy Lynn.

Capt. Thomason had no problem providing security for Nancy Lynn during the widow’s stay in Atlanta. He’d

flagged Ming for US travel notifications since her husband's murder. She was still a suspect, in his mind.

Sydney felt better about Nancy Lynn's safety with Capt. Thomason's added security precautions. Yet, she still had an unsettling feeling something would happen.

Walker was in his Barbados haven. The location had served him well for snooping from a distance and maintaining his anonymous cybersecurity firm. Sydney was never far from his mind, seeing who he believed was his son on the beach and learning of his nanny, Daniela's kidnapping. As much as he wanted to announce himself as a relative to David and request visitation rights and next of kin status in case of her untimely death, he knew the CIA would investigate, and he didn't want their scrutiny to blow his new identity.

He'd highlighted travel from Beijing for associates of the Chinese technology company and relatives of Liu Chang on his surveillance program. He knew Sydney had tangled with the Chinese in the past, and hoped she'd withdrawn from representing Chinese Nationals. Surely, the kidnapping of her nanny, the guardian of her child, would send shock waves about the danger she was bringing on herself and child, his child?

He didn't think about hacking for a minute. Some of the most successful businessmen began their careers as cyberhackers for hire to the highest bidder. When a travel alert for the widow of Liu Chang hit his computer screen, his stomach tied in knots. Women could be as deadly as men,

usually relating to an emotional trigger. He'd learned that from Sydney. Ming Chang was headed to Atlanta, and he hoped Sydney wasn't her target. Yet, in the back of his mind, it rang true. Sydney was involved in her payback scheme. He felt it in every fiber of his being. What had she done now?

His instinct was to pack his bag, although never really unpacked, and head to Atlanta. An even head won out. He had to believe Sydney was at her best and had the bases covered. He thanked God every day for Thomason. He'd be watching out of concern whom she'd kill next in self-defense, making his job complicated; or genuine concern someone might best her attempts, he wasn't sure. He'd be watching as close as her computer monitor, cell phone, and home security system. Hacking made it easier for him to sleep at night, plus it allowed him to see David was safe, an added feature to his monitoring after Daniela's kidnapping.

Ming Chang arrived for the meeting and Sydney was alerted. She allowed Cheng Li to preside over the reading of the will and was thankful he'd scheduled the widow and Nancy Lynn separately, a good business practice in such cases.

He called after the meeting to deliver the news the widow was contesting Liu Chang's will. Whom she'd hire, he didn't know. The probate was going to get messy, and it was a good thing her husband had paid a substantial fee, for it could get costly. He meant for his last wishes to be carried out. Nancy Lynn would inherit his Buckhead condo, furnishings, and a substantial amount of money.

He was surprised Ming Chang was concerned about his US holdings. His personal and business interests in Beijing were separated and she, her son, and his parents, were now richer than before his death.

Sydney wasn't pleased with her arrival and her plans to fight the will for the US holdings. In the affairs of the heart, Nancy Lynn won, and the widow was out for blood. She called Capt. Thomason to alert him of Ming Chang's latest move.

Walker waited for the next update on his computer monitor and prayed Sydney was armed and ready for the next villain. He'd hacked Ming Chang's cell phone and was following her communications. She'd hired a Georgia estate attorney with a good track record. He hoped Sydney was prepared.

He listened to the calls Ming made to another attorney tracking a US adoption of an infant girl, named Ai, meaning love, from Beijing in November 2012. He recognized this was one year before China announced the relaxation of the one-child policy if one parent, rather than both parents, was an only child.

Ming had a daughter in the United States. With her husband's travel and long absences from home, she'd side-stepped female infanticide, the deliberate killing of newborn female children. This changed her game plan. She wanted to reside in the US and own the property of her deceased husband. With her parents dead, and one son, she was free

to establish a home in the US. She could at least see how her daughter was faring in the States. Walker understood. For although different circumstances, he was able to see his son grow up. Family mattered, and Ming Chang knew it better than most.

Cheng Li touched base with Sydney and confided the new attorney for Ming Chang was Robert Lewis. A meeting was scheduled at Sydney's office for the following Tuesday morning. She asked to be kept informed about Liu Chang's probate.

The meeting was an easy one. Robert Lewis had looked over Liu Chang's will and decided it was legally sound. Undoubtedly, he'd put his mistress on the same receiving level as his spouse, and that was a problem for the grieving widow. What could they do to make this go away?

Since Nancy Lynn was renting from Sydney at a much-reduced rate for the metro area and receiving high income as an actress, maybe the condo could be a token of goodwill. He doubted Nancy Lynn wanted to return to the home where her lover was murdered.

After talking with Nancy Lynn, if she agreed, he'd suggest the condo as a peace offering. In the meantime, he informed Lewis the grieving widow was suspected of instigating a hit on her earlier. It would be best if she accepted the administration of his will and return to Beijing.

Lewis informed him she planned to spend time in the US, much like her husband. Cheng Li said fine, but the

mastermind behind her husband's assassin hadn't been identified. And, she wasn't ruled out as a suspect in his killing. She might want to return to China and never look back.

Lewis said, "I'll take it under advisement."

Cheng Li knew it was a done deal. Ming Chang would understand her desire to live in the US was over. She did this to herself. He'd wait for Lewis's confirmation before moving forward. Nancy Lynn would have the condo—to sell, live in, or whatever she desired. Liu Chang's will would be administrated according to his desires.

He received confirmation from her attorney, Lewis, that she was on a flight home. He called Sydney to let her know it was over—the grieving widow was gone. She quickly called Capt. Thomason to relay the message.

Ming Chang had one last stop before boarding the plane for Beijing. She'd figured her timing down to the minute to accomplish the deed before departure. Her last wish in life was to see Ai and one day meet her. With her husband and his philandering out of the way, she wanted a fresh start, and Nancy Lynn and Sydney Jones had robbed her of the chance. Jones she'd deal with later. Her husband's whore would realize her mistake today.

She'd mailed her weapon of choice to the herbalist living in Atlanta's Chinatown. He'd been resourceful in providing a deadly concoction for her cheating husband.

She took an Uber to the International Market District and purchased a wig like Sydney's bob hairstyle before picking up her weapon and holster. She knew the weapon well. The telescoping sliding knife, a Kershaw Ripcord, a sheath and knife that partially retracts into the handle with a cap on the piercing tip of the blade. The belt hanger grasps the retracted blade and pulls fully open when unholstering. A unique, compact, fixed blade alternative, easy to carry and shield from view.

Nancy Lynn's address was easy to pinpoint. Her name and address were in eye view on Cheng Li's desk. She quickly memorized the location.

Completing the finishing touches on her wig and makeup, she was ready to see the *juni*, the whore. She packed her bag for the trip to the airport and called Uber. The driver accepted the extra \$100 to wait for her to say goodbye to a friend before continuing to the airport.

He parked the car and she took the elevator to Nancy Lynn's floor. As the elevator ascended, she slid her fingertips to the leather holster and released the knife's protective cap. She rang the doorbell and turned her back to the entrance, hoping she'd think it was Sydney. When she opened the door, Ming Chang withdrew her razor-sharp blade and plunged it into her heart. Nancy Lynn fell backwards, and Ming closed the door and took the staircase out of the building. The bloody blade was in her holster and she needed to dispose of it before going through airport security. She asked

the driver to pull off at the next exit so she could use the bathroom, it was an emergency. He complied.

She went into the bathroom stall and took wipes from her bag and cleaned the weapon. She cut the holster in shreds with the sharp blade and wrapped it, retracted, in a paper towel and pushed it down into the overflowing trash bin. The holster fragments, she flushed. Now she was ready to board the plane for Beijing.

She promised the driver no more stops. He smiled. Arriving at the front airport entrance, he quickly popped the trunk and unloaded her suitcase before saying goodbye.

Ming Chang went smoothly through airport security, noting her plane's departure would be on time. In minutes she was boarding her first-class seat for the long trip home. Luckily, she'd remembered to buy a novel, *Primed for Revenge*, to make the time pass faster. When she felt the plane pulsating for takeoff, she smiled. Soon she'd be out of American airspace with half of her mission accomplished. Sydney Jones was next, and with her security detail, she might need to hire a professional assassin.

Sydney called Nancy Lynn to see if she was ready to celebrate. The wicked witch was gone. Capt. Thomason called to give her the good news. Chang boarded the plane and it had taken off for Beijing. Hopefully, they'd never see her again.

Nancy Lynn didn't answer her cell phone and Sydney decided to give her a few minutes before calling back. She

was probably in the shower. She waited and still no call back, so she tried her again.

She decided to go over and see if she was at home and her phone wasn't charged. She drove over like a madwoman, not knowing what to expect on her arrival. She hoped she hadn't started using drugs, like one of the movie stars she associated with.

She parked her car next to Nancy Lynn's in the garage and took the elevator up to her floor. She still had a key to the condo in case of emergencies, since she owned it. She knocked and there was no answer. The door was locked, and she took her key and unlocked it and froze. There in the entry lay Nancy Lynn with her crimson-red blood circling her body. With shaking fingers, Sydney called Capt. Thomason and stepped outside the door so as to not contaminate the crime scene, and waited.

Within minutes, the place was crawling with agents. She gave her statement to the agent in charge and left the building. Thomason saw her sadness and knew she'd lost a friend. He'd just pulled his security off her after verifying Chang was en route to the airport. He'd bet she was the killer, or the mastermind behind it. She'd left the States leaving a blood bath in her wake, with no evidence directly tying her to the murder of Nancy Lynn.

He'd moved too quickly. His agent responded that the Uber driver picked her up and put her suitcase in the trunk. He pulled him off the detail, thinking she was headed straight to the airport. This one was on him. He should've ordered the

agent to follow until she'd boarded the plane. This woman was slippery, and he'd bet not her first kill. He could save agents time. They'd never find the weapon used in the murder. She'd dumped it where she knew it would be picked up and dumped in a landfill, leaving no trace.

He knew sooner or later she'd come after Sydney, the woman whose firm cost Ming the benefit of US property ownership and a way to live in the United States without incident or question.

He had a large slate. Being captain, Thomason couldn't pull all his resources to protect Sydney Jones. Although with her political ties, if they knew she was in jeopardy, it would change everything. As a friend, he knew she'd never go for it. She'd never use her friends or allies for her own gain, even if it meant life or death.

Sydney was trying to process the murder of her friend, Nancy Lynn. She felt responsible for not protecting her. She was the one who told her the wicked witch was gone. And Nancy Lynn opened the door to her killer, the witch.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Soldier of Fortune

Sydney sat on the sidelines and watched the US and Chinese government play political volleyball in the extradition of the Chinese technology leader, Su Geming. The US government wouldn't easily give up, for his company was involved in terrorism against American companies.

Although no longer involved in their lawsuits, she wasn't taking any chances after Daniela's kidnapping. She was slowly recovering from the incident, now only visibility upset when seeing a related news bulletin. She continued voicing a trip to Barbados would be calming for both her and David, adding with her extended family, there would always be plenty of people around in case they were followed.

Sydney gave it some thought and decided a trip home for Daniela might speed up her healing. Taking time away from the office with her caseload proved to be difficult. She'd

have to schedule time away in a couple of months. If this was what it took to get her back to normal, it'd be worth it.

She began making plans at the office to lessen her workload for the extended trip. When completed, she'd tell Daniela when they were leaving. She'd booked their flight and accommodations in Barbados. This time, she rented a villa in a residential community with secure access to and from their lodging.

The days dragged by as she sorted through the pile of paperwork on her desk to complete before leaving. In her absence, the CEO, McNally, would assign new cases to the staff attorneys as they were awarded. She probably should've taken a leave of absence sooner, right after her best friend, Nancy Lynn, was murdered. But time was always of the essence in the cases she was representing. Exactly one week to the day of their flight, she told Daniela to pack her and David's suitcases for the trip. The nanny lit up at the news and hurriedly began sorting clothes for their getaway.

In the Caribbean, Walker was tracking incoming flights to Barbados and picked up on Sydney's date of arrival. She'd rented an oceanside villa for a month. He was surprised she'd taken the time away from the office. There was probably more to her vacation than enjoying the beach and the laid-back, leisurely lifestyle of the island. He began investigating the parameters of the residential community for security measures.

On his computer monitoring program, he noticed a last-minute booking of a flight the same day by a mercenary he knew by name. Coincidence? He thought not. Even if Sydney should best him at his game, Capt. Thomason wouldn't be able to make it go away. Barbados had its own laws and she'd be tried for murder, a hanging offense.

His adrenaline was pumping, wondering if he should warn her or hang back and be ready to protect her and the household. He decided whoever was gunning for her would attack regardless of her location. Although it was easier to get through security in Barbados than the US, they'd come for her, and keep coming until the contract was executed.

He'd not had a minute's peace since meeting her. Adding her son, a spitting image of himself at that age, heightened his concern for their safety.

At his laptop, he quickly clicked on the website where former military picked up jobs as soldiers of fortune. He tapped on one for a hit in Barbados using an anonymous handle to inquire about the details. Sydney Jones's image quickly appeared with information about where she was staying and her traveling companions. To claim the substantial reward, a picture of her dead body was required, along with instructions for receiving payment. The money was to be wired from Beijing. Whoever put out the hit had a backup plan in case the first attempt was unsuccessful.

He logged out of the site and planned to go back later and track the owner who posted the hit. For all he knew, it could be coming from the Chinese government. He'd step

lightly before diving into the dark net to identify the source. She'd arrive within 24 hours, and it didn't leave much time for him to prepare for her safety.

After nearly five hours of flight time from Atlanta, Sydney arrived at Sir Grantley Adams International Airport in Barbados with her son, Daniela, and Len, their bodyguard. Since the increase in murders had tripled in the first quarter, security at the airport had heightened. Her and Len's guns were checked and transported in hard-sided TSA-approved lockable cases. She didn't envision any problems with their collecting their cargo and being on their way to their oceanside villa.

Len hailed the resort's minibus to transport them and their excess luggage. He'd then pick up their car rental for their personal use while on the island. Daniela's mood had become lighter the closer they'd gotten to her home. Sydney had given her the first night off to reconnect with family and enjoy being home. She'd spend time with David and cook something he loved.

The kitchen pantry was stocked in advance with his favorites, and daily deliveries of fresh produce were ordered. She'd made outings with David to the market to select fresh seafood and protein. She tried to get into the vacation spirit and into the relaxed Caribbean mode. She sipped on her slightly stirred Barbados cocktail made with light rum, triple sec, and pineapple juice, and began creating something special for their dinner.

CHANCE

Having grown accustomed to having a bodyguard present didn't deter her enjoyment with her son. She was glad he didn't seem to notice their traveling companion was always with them. He'd never known anything different.

With the clock ticking off the seconds to Sydney's arrival, Walker dove deep into the dark web. Developing his skills as a hacker had its merits. He wanted to get in and get out with the name of the source of the hit on Sydney without detection. He got what he was looking for and knew it was related to a case with Sydney's firm. Now, he wished he was on a first-name basis with Capt. Thomason, but it'd blow his new identity.

He had to do something, for this killer wasn't stopping until she was dead. He might be able to keep her safe in Barbados, but when she returned to Atlanta, an assassin would be waiting. The killer had superior tech skills and was tracking Sydney's moves, but how? He knew from his own hacking no one was looking at her cell phone, laptop, and home security system. But where was the information of her whereabouts coming from? The mole was somewhere within her organization. The only plausible answer was someone had something to gain from her demise. But who, and why?

He knew Sydney. She bent over backwards to help others and promote her staff. He'd seen it with his own eyes. Why would someone close betray her trust? The memory of Judith Garner danced across his mind and he shook his head thinking of her thievery and illegal shenanigans.

Sydney was settling into the peaceful swing of the Caribbean. Taking Daniela's advice, she'd ordered a delivery of homegrown coffee, called Dawn Patrol, from Wyndhams Bajan Crafted Roasters on the island. She sipped the delightful breakfast blend while enjoying the view of the crystal-clear, turquoise waters of the Caribbean. She smiled. This could be something she could grow accustomed to. A satellite office in the Caribbean came to mind, and just as fleetingly, left. She'd not want to work here, for sooner or later, it would spoil the lighthearted feeling she had now. Dealing in others' dirty laundry left a stench. The idea of living at a scenic getaway was spoiled. She'd enjoy her time away from the office and the laid-back lifestyle while away and leave it at that.

She awakened David for a day of playing on the beach in front of their villa and later an outing to the wharf. He'd love seeing the fishing boats and their catches of the day.

Later they could park, then walk to the shops and restaurants in Bridgetown. When looking online before the trip, she'd been surprised the cafes and even street vendors were Zagat-rated by diners, making it easy to mark popular ones to visit. David would like ordering from the street vendors where he could see the meal prepared. His curiosity about his surroundings was a positive trait she hoped to expand on during their vacation.

Daniela had introduced him to the Bajan cuisine, and he reminded Sydney of Walker with his hearty appetite. She

made him his favorite macaroni pie she'd watched Daniela make for him, a favorite kid-friendly Caribbean dish.

David was ready to play on the crystal-white sandy beach and swim in the ocean. She was glad of his swimming lessons in Atlanta. Although never out of her sight and within reach, he could enjoy the tropical azure waters. They played in the sand and built a sandcastle with a moat to keep away the bad men from their fort. They frolicked in the tropical, clear-blue water, releasing the sand from their swimsuits, and laid on the lounge chairs provided by the villa and soaked up the sun. David examined the seashells he'd collected and tried talking and poking the creatures out of their shells. At lunch, they went to the cottage, a stone's throw from the ocean, and ate.

Later, they took a trip to the marina. The saltwater fishing fleets were arriving at the docks loaded with their catches of the day. Being on the wharf energized David. He wanted to see the big fish and meet the boat captains, whom he called pirates. He got his wishes and saw the saltwater haul caught by the local fishermen. She bought his favorite—flying fish.

She looked up the recipe online for fried flying fish with spicy gravy, taking it down a notch by removing the hot-scotch bonnet peppers for David's palate. It was a good choice, for it was the national dish of Barbados, usually served with coucou, a creamy mixture of cornmeal and okra, or even yams and bananas. A cooling accompanying dish for spicy recipes. Tonight, she'd make the traditional coucou using Daniela's simple recipe she'd made at home.

Daniela would return the following morning from her family's home and have ideas for David's daily activities. She was not opposed to him meeting her family, as they were close. With Len accompanying them, Daniela could show David the sights around Bridgetown and share the history of the island. She was aware she'd taught him words from her language, Patois, a local dialect spoken in Caribbean cultures, a mix of British English and West African language. Sydney wanted her son to have a broad worldview, and this was part of his education.

She was certain Daniela would love to show off her cooking during their stay using the now handy traditional ingredients and Bajan recipes. She was relieved, as they were a world away from her go-to takeout market for dinner.

At night after she tucked in David, she sipped the local rum cocktail that was surprisingly light, unlike rum punch Americans consume on vacation. After relaxing while reading a few chapters of the romance novel she'd brought, she fell into a peaceful sleep.

She was awakened by Len, her bodyguard, when he lightly knocked then cracked her bedroom door open. With his index finger pressed against his lips, he motioned her to quietly go to David's room. She knew it was so he could protect them both from the same location. Her pistol was lying on the nightstand, and she clutched it in one hand before doing as he asked. Someone was attempting to break into the villa, and she'd protect her son.

The sound of shattering glass left a clue to the entry point of the break-in. She waited with her pistol cocked for the intruder's presence. Through the cracked bedroom door, she could see the bodyguard taking aim and then an eerie stillness penetrated the cottage. They waited. Minutes seemed like hours before the bodyguard waved her out of the room, indicating it was safe. She knew sleep was over for her and put on a pot of coffee for them to drink while they waited for daylight. Then they could explore around the cottage to determine additional damage that needed repair before night.

Her thoughts went to Daniela, and was glad she was with family. Knowing about this incident would trigger recent memories of her kidnapping and she'd fear for their safety. She and the bodyguard would assess the damage, and have it repaired before she returned. David was sleeping soundly when she peeked in on him.

After sunrise, she and her bodyguard went outside to determine damage to the villa. How an intruder penetrated the security gate leading to the villa was unclear. A security code was required for entry. They found one windowpane on the back door shattered. The intruder had hoped to gain entry by breaking the pane and reaching through to unlock the door when someone or something stopped him. Perhaps security was patrolling the area and scared or caught him. She'd chosen the westside of the island for security, new construction, and calmer seas. Was it possible she was getting all three?

They decided to not report the incident to the Royal Barbados Police Force. The attempted break-in might result in being flagged for violence, and even asked to vacate the island. Plus, she didn't want the police around to disturb David and Daniela. They'd get through this, and everything would be back to normal. She called the villa's management office and made a maintenance request. They assured her the work would be completed by noon.

Soaking wet from his late-night deep-sea excursion and tired, Walker returned home and changed out of his clothes and placed them in a trash bag for disposal at a nearby restaurant dumpster. He'd gotten bloody dragging the body to his car and lifting his stiff bulk into the trunk for the drive to his watery grave.

He was glad he was paying attention to details and wrote down the security code to enter Sydney's residential community. Otherwise, the assassin would've carried out his hit. The employer was thorough in providing access to the victim. He circled back again to the belief that this someone was a hacker with high-level technical skills.

Much like the employer who placed a contract for kill, he'd prepared for silencing and stopping him. He waited outside Sydney's cottage until he showed. When the mercenary took a tire iron and broke the glass pane on the door, Walker pounced. The would-be assassin never knew what hit him. With dead aim and a silencer, Walker dropped him, then dragged him to his car and dumped him into the trunk, where he'd placed

a tarp to keep blood from soaking through the flooring. A short drive to his skiff he used for scuba-diving off the island and he disposed of the body wrapped in the tarp from his trunk, weighted with a heavy chain, into the Atlantic Ocean.

One down and more coming. He was reminded of when he was head of her security force. Always someone gunning for her; and she didn't help matters by taking controversial criminal cases. Looking back, the difference was he wasn't disposing of bodies that could lead to a public hanging. On his part, there was a love-hate relationship. Of course, she'd never know, for Walker was dead. Yet, his son was alive; that was worth the risk he'd taken.

Daniela returned to the villa with her bubbly personality in full swing. A night with her family did wonders. She was ready to take David on an educational scenic tour of the island and with Sydney's blessings, to meet her family.

Sydney's plan was to lounge beside the cottage's private pool and relax with no one around to interfere with her thoughts. Her bodyguard was to go with Daniela and her son to assure their safety. They didn't have to discuss last night's events; he knew Daniela would freak out if she knew what happened.

When Daniela returned, she'd picked up some vegetables and stewing beef to make a hearty stew—Bajan Pepper Pot. She said it would get tastier when reheated over the next couple of days. First, she thought David should tell Sydney about his day and she'd start cooking dinner.

David was still smiling from his sightseeing around Bridgetown and meeting Daniela's family. He blabbered his favorites so fast she could barely understand him.

He reached into his little pocket and showed her a treasure Daniela's mother gave him; a Barbados beach sand locket necklace.

"Nice," she said. "Did you say thank you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. You can show your friends when we get home."

He nodded and went to his room to watch cartoons with his locket shoved back into his pocket.

Sydney caught up on her emails while dinner was cooking. She was relieved nothing death-defying was going on at the office. When she returned, she'd probate Nancy Lynn's will. When she'd suggested making one, she had no idea Nancy Lynn would be murdered. She was helping her account for her new holdings, to get a grip on her finances for future investments. She'd reluctantly agreed to act as administrator, and Nancy Lynn had left a significant amount of her estate for Sydney to dispose of as she wished, along with a sizable bequest for her parents.

Sydney missed Nancy Lynn; the first real friend she'd had in years. Unlike her fake friend, Judith Garner, who lied and stole from her, Nancy was genuine.

While lounging by the pool, she'd decided to contact a realtor and sell the Buckhead condo Liu Chang left Nancy

Lynn in his will. The price would be negotiable, for it was where he was murdered. Although a prestigious area, many prospective homeowners didn't want to buy and live where a murder occurred. She couldn't blame them. She'd never be able to return to the safe house where Nancy Lynn was murdered, so it would be sold too. She'd buy another one for keeping clients safe, as needed.

She'd donate the proceeds from Liu Chang's condo to charity. Nancy Lynn's jewelry and collectables, she'd keep for selling later. A new movie she was starring in would be released soon. Depending on its success, her valuables might be in demand and she could sell them and donate to a charity that helps struggling artists.

The relaxing scenery in Barbados overlooking the Caribbean had helped her make peace with Nancy Lynn's death. Yet, she knew her murderer was still at large and was unsure of how it might affect her, especially since she was administering her will. Times like this was when she missed Walker's investigative skills.

Walker was keeping track on the dark web to see if another hit had been posted on Sydney. Apparently, the killer decided Barbados posed too many problems for a successful mission. Now, she was being targeted in Atlanta upon her return. He couldn't go, even with his new cover, as the CIA might be tracking her. They'd investigate his interest, and even with his new identity, might get lucky, at the least they'd

know they had ties. The best he could do was to investigate her staff and see if one of the litigators posed a problem. They'd been down that road before, but thought her new head of security would've vetted new employees carefully, given her history.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Chinese Connection

Sydney gave Daniela the day off to be with her family, as they were leaving on a morning flight to Atlanta. She and David would enjoy the cottage's pool and later beachcombing for seashells and sea glass abundant on the west coast near their villa. They'd be selective and choose one or two unique pieces to take home.

They'd finish her Pepper Pot stew, even tastier when reheated as the evening meal. Daniela had packed her and David's bags and left out traveling clothes for the trip home.

She was organized and great with David, who considered her family. Sydney wanted her to continue employment and her education in the States. She'd been taking online courses in education and wanted to teach elementary children. Yet, in times of distress she wanted to return to Barbados, and if nothing else, work at one of the resorts.

Sydney couldn't guarantee a stress-free or safe work environment. She'd tried.

The flight home was smooth, and the Uber van she'd ordered picked them up for the commute to her townhome. The first night's dinner was ordered in from a nearby restaurant and everyone went about their normal activities.

When she tucked David into bed, he was sleepy but happy. He'd even grown taller, it seemed, on their vacation, and with his suntan, he was looking undeniably like his father, Walker. Another addition to the rumor mill about her, if anyone noticed who knew him. She was past caring, and had never divulged her son's patrimony, for it was no one's business but his—when he was older.

She'd gone over Daniela's plans for David for the week and approved, with the bodyguard tagging along at a safe distance. She had plenty to do at work and breathed a sigh of relief that she didn't need to worry about her son.

The office was swarming with new clients when she arrived. The CEO met with her to bring her up to date on clients the partnership was handling. She turned over selecting a realtor to represent the estate in disposing of Nancy Lynn's property and her own to her assistant, with directives to notify her about pricing before placing on the market.

Her next order of business was the probate of Liu Chang's will. She met with her top Chinese attorney, Cheng Li, a computer technology expert and litigator. He assured her the account was in the final stage of administration. To speed up the process, he was flying to Beijing to personally handle the completion of his Chinese properties and gain the necessary signatures to finalize his probate. She agreed it was the best move to complete the administration of his will.

Cheng Li checked his email before closing his laptop to catch his flight to Beijing. He'd received a message from Ming Chang. She'd be waiting at the airport for his arrival. He'd called an Uber, although the partnership would provide transportation. He wasn't comfortable around the security team.

He looked forward to seeing Ming again. They'd grown close during his administration of her husband's will. He understood her feelings of being shamed by her husband's flaunting his mistress above her and the desire to own his US property.

She'd taken care of their home and his aging parents while he enjoyed freedom from his responsibilities. She was smart and technically inclined. She'd studied online computer courses while her husband was away; so much so that after his death, his associates, the Black Society, approached her about taking his seat in the organization. She was considering the possibilities.

Cheng Li wanted to stay on her good side. He'd noted the top tech companies in the US were eyeing China for expansion. He could exceed his salary with perks to land a job with one of these companies. Knowing Mandarin and the dialects of the Asian language, he would be a prime candidate and could return home and watch as China landed the top destination for American tourist dollars.

He needed to get Ming to back off. She was harboring a desire to take over her husband's US holdings. They'd gone to his mistress, and she'd not want to mess with Sydney to get them. If she'd wait, she could pick up the Buckhead property for dimes on the dollar. He knew Sydney. She'd let it go for nothing compared to its value because it was a scene of a murder. He could put Ming in touch with the realtor representing the sale and she could make a bid anonymously. He'd help.

Ming met him at the airport and invited him to stay in her home during his stay. There was plenty of room, and she seldom had guests for intellectual conversation. He agreed.

Her home was one of the finest in Beijing and she was a cordial host, putting him immediately at ease. Her house staff uncorked an expensive bottle of imported red wine, symbolizing good luck in China, and she toasted their meeting. He raised his glass slightly below hers, showing respect, and consumed the drink.

After a light meal, knowing he was tired after the long flight, she showed him to his bedroom suite. He spoke his appreciation for understanding. They'd talk business tomorrow.

Early the following morning, Ming offered a breakfast of *douzhi*, fermented bean juice, and *jiaoquan*, crispy circles of fried dough, on the side for dipping. Afterwards, she showed him the garden and said, "It's lovely outside today; let's talk business here."

"Let me get my briefcase with the paperwork, and I'll meet you here."

"I'll be waiting." She was clipping the buds of the peony with her long-manicured fingernails, snipping the flowerhead off as he left. The symbolism wasn't lost on him. Ming would butcher anyone getting in her way of owning her husband's US property.

Shortly, he returned. He dove into Liu Chang's Chinese business first. She only needed to sign the legal documents where marked. Something that could've been handled from Atlanta if not for his desire to talk about her husband's US holdings.

She needed to know Sydney was a dangerous and influential foe and there were options for succeeding with her plan of ownership. He had no doubt she was guilty of a crime of passion against her husband. But if she wanted to travel freely to the US, she needed to leave Sydney alone, at least for the present, until she distanced herself from government scrutiny.

Ming listened to his proposal. He noticed her using the Taoist breathing method to stay calm and control her reactions. She was breathing slowly with a half-smile on her face. When he finished, she congratulated him for a reasonable plan for overtaking her husband's property.

She'd play by his rules for now to achieve her long-term goals. He promised to email her with the realtor's name involved in the sale of the Atlanta property and guidance for achieving the first right of refusal in case others were interested. When she was ready to make the offer, he'd complete the paperwork using a shell corporation as the offeror. Later, when no one was watching, he'd transfer the property into her name. She agreed.

Their business was concluded, and he'd return to the States in the morning. She wanted to celebrate with dinner at the best upscale food street in Beijing—Fucheng Street. This 3-kilometer-long street served regional Chinese cuisines; Hunan, Sichuan, and Jiangsu. Notwithstanding, several Cantonese restaurants featuring seafood ranked amongst the best in Beijing. He missed the sights, sounds, and food of his homeland, and readily accepted her invitation.

They had a lighthearted evening sampling the delicious dishes and drinks until late into the night. He noted she needed more adult interaction with her own age to not be pulled down into the depths of dealing with the chronic illnesses of her husband's parents. He'd made sure the properties inherited from her husband would go to her son upon her fathers-in-law's death, following

traditional Chinese inheritance laws. The looks of things said, it wouldn't be long. And, that would be when Ming would strike back at Sydney for her dealings supporting her husband's mistress.

Their banter continued back to her lavish home. From too much to drink or just having someone to talk to, she said she'd decided to take the Black Society's offer. She'd be the first woman they'd added to their board to replace an existing member, and it would provide aliases for traveling to the States and setting up a home.

There was no doubt in his mind she could fill her husband's shoes; probably exceed expectations. She'd be someone to be careful of in the future if going against her wishes.

He said goodbye and boarded his flight to Atlanta. He was surprised she went to the airport to see him off. When he returned, he'd record the documents she signed at the courthouse and send her copies and the contact information for buying her husband's property after he talked with Sydney.

Next was getting his name in the pool for employment with large tech companies setting up offices in Beijing. He was ready to go home with a large paycheck and options for a brighter corporate future. With Sydney's run-ins with the Chinese nationals and government, he was confident his tenure at the partnership was on the skids.

He scheduled a meeting with Sydney to discuss the finalization of the administration of Liu Chang's will and quietly

gain information about the realtor in charge of selling his Buckhead condo.

She was so pleased with an end to Chang's business, she eagerly told him about the realtor and asking price for the property. He asked her the bottom dollar she was willing to accept. She quoted what he expected—dimes on the dollar. He'd let Ming know and setup her dummy business entity to make the offer. He wished he was making a commission, for it was still a hefty selling price. A perk he should consider when agreeing to a new position in Beijing.

The ink was barely dry on documents transferring ownership of Liu Chang's condo to Ming's dummy corporation when he received confirmation of the job offer, he'd anticipated. He hurriedly drew up the documents transferring the property to her from the dummy corporation, to deliver personally in Beijing. He texted her the good news and she invited him to stay at her home until he could find a suitable place. He agreed.

He typed his resignation letter, giving a two-week notice if desired. The CEO was aware most of his clients were Chinese, and they weren't accepting cases at this time; perhaps a week's notice would suffice. He hoped for an early departure, for Ming's work wouldn't show up in his billable hours, for obvious reasons. Sydney blamed her for Nancy Lynn's murder.

The CEO agreed to a one-week notice due to the current business mandate regarding his top sources. She scheduled an

exit interview with Sydney prior to his departure. He wasn't looking forward to the meeting. She could spot a lie, and he hoped to be long gone before she suspected he'd helped Ming purchase US property.

The meeting with Sydney was cordial on her behalf, thanking him for his commitment for growing the partnership during the past two years. He couldn't wait to exit the front door, for he didn't want to discuss any of the projects he'd worked on that could lead to Ming. He smiled and thanked her for the opportunity to work in her prestigious firm. In the end, mutual respect won out.

He left the law office and went directly to the airport for his flight home. He'd already packed and cleaned out his apartment in advance of his leaving. He was headed home.

Ming met him at the airport for the drive to her home. Humbled by her gracious offer, he said thank you. He had a few days before starting his new job and would look for an apartment with easy access to his new office while being her guest.

Ming picked up on his mood and said she had friends with apartments near his new employer and would be glad to make a call. And, perhaps after construction of her new units, he'd want to move to a newer building with more amenities. He couldn't believe his good luck. He smiled and said, "Thank you."

Before his first day of work, he was moved into his new apartment. Ming insisted on decorating based on the principles of Fung Shui, creating a balanced harmony throughout his tiny dwelling. He let her have free rein, for good luck and prosperity were his goals in returning home.

He thanked her and promised to stay in touch for dinner and conversation. Ming said she'd miss him.

He replied, "I'll message you after getting familiar with my new employer and his expectations." And, he reminded her to put him on the new tenant list for her new apartments.

"Consider it done," she said.

He saw it first in the newspaper—the passing of her respected father-in-law, and knew after the appropriate time, he needed to call Ming. He knew with family ties he'd receive the traditional invitation to his funeral in a pink invitation to celebrate his longevity. And he'd respectfully RSVP and send white chrysanthemums and a white envelope with money to pay his respects.

The old ways die hard in China, and one that has lasted is the reverence to one's parents and the paying of respect in the traditional way. Ming had fulfilled her husband's obligations and would continue until his mother's death, whose illness could take her any time if she didn't succumb to grief from her husband's passing.

Cheng Li called Ming to let her know she was in his thoughts during this difficult time. Being friends with her

husband, he'd met his father as a teen. She thought it best he stand back until the appropriate time of greeting friends of the family. He understood her reasoning, and concurred.

No one was surprised when within a month, her mother-in-law passed away peacefully. Ming's obligations to her husband's family was concluded after her young adulthood was spent in the care of his family. Cheng Li sent the appropriate sympathy card, hoping if she needed someone to talk to, she'd call.

Her son, Chang Bohai, was home from his studies at a prestigious university in the United States that welcomed the out-of-state tuition from rich Asian families. Before he returned to finish his education, he'd be wealthy in his own right, with the inheritance from his father's and grandfather's estates. Chinese inheritance law guaranteed the rightful transfer of property rights to her and Liu Chang's son. The income from family assets were at his disposal.

Ming called and asked Cheng Li to meet her at the end of Ghost Street, at a popular restaurant for dinner and conversation. He knew she'd had a rough go of things recently and quickly accepted her invitation. He was right; she needed to talk.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Salt Life - Barbados

Walker was diligent in keeping up with the latest news around the world that could impact his technology business or Sydney Jones. His offshore company had exceeded his expectations without the taxation of living in the United States. He loved his new home in Barbados and had expanded his holdings to saltwater fishing boats hiring locals to captain his charters at above-average salaries. He'd hired a local marketing firm to partner with Barbados tourism to bring customers for his business, creating a win for everyone.

He was living a life of luxury, moving from his once get-by shanty to a luxury community not far removed from where Sydney had stayed on her last visit. He'd worked a sweet deal by providing tech security for the corporate owners. When he wakened in the mornings, the ocean view met his gaze a few steps from his villa.

He had women over for the night; one or two, maybe longer. He learned not to let women get too close, for although his new life looked inviting, he knew it could blow up in his face. His job was to stay on top of things and make sure that didn't happen. Sweet Isabella was dead because of him, and although he'd made her tormenter and CIA corporate leaders pay for ordering her death, he'd always have to watch his back. His only wish was his death certificate never be challenged; for he was the next hit ordered by the US government.

When he awakened during the night panicked and drenched in sweat, a look in the mirror of the man today calmed him. The Australian surgeons did a seamless job of creating his new identity. No one could trace him from them, for he'd used a fake ID and photo prior to surgery. The thought calmed him. But he knew if Sydney got a whiff of his being alive, she'd come after him for answers about his leaving, as he'd never had the chance to explain.

He monitored Sydney's home and watched his son, David, grow up and start school. Daniela was still with them, teaching at his elementary school and caring for him at home. Sooner or later, she'd meet someone and fall in love, and her stay in David's life would change. He hoped Sydney planned for this occurrence, as their son would be lost without her presence.

CHANCE

He picked up chatter from Beijing about the death of Liu Chang's parents—one after the other. He wondered if Ming Chang waited for their timely death or increased the odds in her favor. He quickly searched her US holdings and found a connection. Sydney was the administrator of Nancy Lynn's will, her dead husband's mistress.

Walker noticed the contract for kill targeting Sydney in Atlanta was deleted from the Soldiers of Fortune website. Instead of feeling calm, he felt uneasy, as the employer could be changing tactics, not calling off the hit. He didn't have a clue what it meant.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mommy Dearest

Ming received news from the private eye she'd hired that her now adult daughter was living in Atlanta near her adopted family. She'd wanted to see her, if only from a distance, before returning home after meeting about her husband's will.

She would've if not for her attorney Robert Lewis's strong suggestion she leave immediately, or face being detained for questioning about her husband's murder. She took the advice, knowing she'd return when the coast was clear.

The right opportunities became available and Cheng Li helped her buy her husband's condo anonymously. Inheriting her late husband's seat with the Chinese Black Society provided the leverage for taking over her husband's business in the US and aliases to travel. With a change in hairstyle and desired facelift—with double eyelid surgery, removing the

slant from her eyes—she had a European look. She now had passports with multiple identities.

She thought she had the bases covered until she read the detailed report from her private investigator. Apparently, her daughter was curious about her Chinese family and located her father in the US. No doubt, he'd been surprised she existed, for Ming had never disclosed her pregnancy. There was six years difference between Alicia and her brother. She got lucky and didn't have to abort or orphan another child, in keeping with the Chinese one-child rule.

Banking on her continued familial curiosity, Ming threw caution to the wind and called Alicia to let her know she was returning to the States and would be in contact after arriving. She wanted to get to know her daughter and explain her abandonment was the only way to keep her alive and get her out of her communist country.

From the looks of things from the private eye's report, Alicia was making a life of her own quite successfully. Ming wanted to get to know her and explain the reasons for leaving her at a place where female infants were abandoned to be adopted by foreigners. She was not the first woman who'd faced the extinction of her child. They shared their secrets when another was facing the same dilemma.

She planned to talk with her daughter until she understood the heartbreak of leaving her in the care of strangers. Afterwards, she'd deal with Sydney Jones, the woman who made her husband's mistress a star, so everyone gazed at her beauty and not see the whore she was.

First, she wanted to clear out the furniture and personal belongings of her late husband and leftovers from his mistress. His furnishings remained for staging during the quick sale of the property. She agreed, they did show off the property. However, she didn't want his spirit clinging to his belongings and hanging around, causing ghostly problems.

She planned to rip out the interior walls and completely renovate after a supernatural cleansing of his dwelling, burning sage throughout the condo near windows and doors. This was a start; then, she'd clean every chandelier with a cloth soaked in warm water and a white vinegar solution. After a thorough cleansing, she'd place clear and rose quartz with other clean energy stones, like amethyst and citrine, into display containers around the home to remove negative energy.

Her ancestors believed in talking with spirits, and telling them to leave was crucial in ridding the residence of the dead. She planned to walk through every room and tell him to leave and take his mistress with him.

Once she was convinced the condo was spic-n-span, with no remnants remaining of her husband and his whore, she'd call Alicia.

The renovation of her high-rise was completed on schedule and by skilled craftsman. Although she'd incurred a hefty contractor's fee, she was pleased with the results. Now she could entertain in her home. She wanted to meet Alicia at her condo, where they could talk without interruptions. A trip to the local grocer and she had fresh flowers and tasty

appetizers for snacks. She selected traditional Chinese music featuring the bamboo flute zither on her wireless surround sound stereo system and waited.

The doorbell chimed and she breathed slowly to calm her heartrate and get control of her emotions. This was the day she'd anticipated for a long time, and she wanted to make a good first impression.

She opened the door and her beautiful Asian daughter was standing there. She smiled and waved her into her home. Remembering Chinese customs, she'd read about, Alicia removed her shoes at the entry and barefoot, followed Ming into the spacious living room.

Ming offered a refreshing drink of Long Jin, Dragon Well Chinese Tea. Alicia accepted her offer and gifted her the special bouquet she'd selected for the occasion. Ming said, "Thank you. Allow me to select a vase to display the lovely arrangement at its best."

Minutes passed, seeming like hours, before Ming returned with the bouquet in a crystal vase. Sipping her tea in wordless silence, Alicia then began the conversation speaking in Mandarin. Ming was surprised, and told her English would be fine. Alicia explained that her adopted parents wanted her to learn about her heritage and embrace her ethnicity. Her early childhood and the support of her adopted family impacted her decision to become a psychologist and human rights lawyer.

Their discussion flowed smoothly at first, about the weather and her flight from Beijing and Alicia's education

and work. As the conversation took on a more personal note, the yin and yang as they talked took on the darkness of Ming and the lightness of Alicia, leaving an overshadowing, conflicting heaviness in the air.

Alicia was curious about her living in the US and asked the reasons behind her decision to leave Beijing and have dual residences. Ming tried to convince her of the burden she carried of giving away her firstborn. She'd had a lifelong struggle to get to where she was now, meeting her daughter. Living in the US was the only way she could learn more about her and share a future.

Alicia noted the subtle way her birth mother asked about her career plans. Apparently, the PI she'd hired had already provided the information about her work history. Yet, there was something more she was hoping to learn.

At the mention of Sydney Jones's law offices, Alicia saw a barely veiled look of contempt in her mother's eyes. There was more to the story than she was telling, and she'd like to know why she'd use the facade of finding a long-lost daughter to accomplish her goals.

Ming asked pointed questions about her job at the law office, circling back around to questions about Sydney knowing her father, asking specifically, "Did you know your father's will was prepared by Cheng Li at your office?"

Not rising to her interrogation, she said, "I'm not familiar with other attorneys' work at the office."

"Oh, I see."

Alicia thought she probably knew more than she wanted to share until she learned Ming's motive behind the questions. She was getting cagey with her attempt to learn something; what, wasn't clear. She decided to end their meeting so she could clear her head to discern motives behind Ming's agenda for meeting her.

Alicia stood and said, "Thank you for wanting to meet me. I appreciate your sharing the details surrounding my birth."

Ming didn't expect her to leave so soon; they'd not even tasted the delicious vegan appetizers she'd bought for the occasion, knowing they were her favorites, according to the PI's report.

"I hope we can meet again soon," she said. "Maybe next time we can meet for dinner at one of the upscale restaurants recommended online, or perhaps one you know?"

Alicia quickly said, "Sounds good, I'll let you know." Then hurriedly reached for her mini backpack and slung the leather strap over her shoulder. She turned and said goodbye, pausing at the entry to slip on her heels before exiting.

As the elevator ticked off each floor descending from the penthouse to ground level, she was thanking her lucky stars for her adopted mother. She'd just met Mommy Dearest and it sent chills through her body.

She could read her birth mother's aura and saw the anger leaping out in flames like a starving tiger. Her boss, Sydney, was involved in her rage. She decided it was time to talk with

her to identify the source of Ming's festering anger. Her gut instinct said, things could get bad. She couldn't shake the eerie feeling of their meeting and hoped Sydney wouldn't think she was crazy.

Alicia called Sydney's assistant to make an early morning appointment. She hoped she had an idea about what was going on with Ming and her plans in the US.

Sydney's assistant reserved Alicia a spot early in the day. Being punctual and having privately rehearsed what she'd say, she was pleasantly surprised at Sydney's response about a nonlegal and personal matter. Sydney was easy to talk with and open to knowing more about her concerns. Sydney told Alicia about Ming's husband's mistress, Nancy Lynn, and the connections to her and the law offices. She assured her she'd investigate Ming's plans and if she should learn anything new, let her know. Alicia felt relieved someone else was watching Mommy Dearest. In the meantime, she'd see what she could learn.

She decided to accept the offer of dinner with Ming. Perhaps she'd let down her guard and talk with her long-lost daughter. Alicia called. Ming was glad to hear from her and they made plans for dinner the following evening. Alicia pulled the news stories from the Internet about her natural father, Liu Chang, and Nancy Lynn's murders. Both remained unsolved. Something pricked her mind, wondering if Ming was responsible. If so, she was gutsy to return to the States—unless she'd not finished her mission.

Their dinner reservations at the swanky new sushi restaurant in metro Atlanta was everything it was said to be—excellent. Alicia had the vegan toppings, while her birth mother enjoyed the traditional offerings. Ming complimented the chef, saying it reminded her of home. While sipping their chardonnay, Ming visually relaxed and smiled. She was a pretty lady, and Alicia suspected lovelier in an Asian way before her cosmetic surgery.

Her birth mother began talking about the years she'd spent taking care of aging parents and the desire to live in the US with her husband at least some of the time. Her hopes were dashed when his trips home became sporadic at best, typically for special family events where his absence would be frowned upon or mandatory meetings with his colleagues. She'd heard rumors about his living in the States and knew Nancy Lynn was photographed with him on numerous occasions. She recognized she was his live-in mistress; unlike the numerous women he'd dallied with in the past. She blamed Sydney for everything, and for his leaving property and assets to Nancy Lynn, which she now managed through her estate. She'd purchased his property anonymously when it went on the market. She wanted to live and work in the States to be near her children.

Alicia used her background in psychological studies to create a profile of Ming. Was she dangerous, and if so, to whom? There was no doubt Ming blamed Sydney. But, did she have a plan for revenge? She listened.

If what she was hearing was Ming's plan to complete the mission she'd been on since her husband's desertion, Sydney needed someone to watch her back. She sensed relentless and unmerciful revenge, the kind signified and usually carried out from the mindset of kill or be killed.

They said goodbye and made plans to meet again later in the month. Ming was smiling and waved as her Uber drove away from the restaurant. Alicia knew she needed to talk with Sydney and share her concerns. Her birth mother was consumed with hatred toward her and things could get bloody. She wondered if it was, she who'd been on a killing rampage. She decided it was a possibility, for dealing with her husband's rejection could be a strong motivating force behind her recent actions.

Alicia was no stranger to weapons and how to use them. Her adopted father made sure of that. He'd said, "Best you be prepared, for someday you'll be living on your own and you'll need to protect yourself."

Alicia talked to Sydney about her fears and she waved them off like it was a pesky mosquito bite. She'd hoped to be taken seriously, and Sydney would beef up her security. Alicia had no doubt that Ming had payback on her mind. She touched her handbag and felt the small pistol she toted for protection and hoped Sydney was as prepared.

Ming called to let Alicia know she was returning to Beijing for an important business event. She wanted to know if she'd meet for drinks before her departure at a

known Chinese hangout. Alicia agreed and said, "I'll meet you there."

She found Ming waiting for her when she arrived and quickly ordered a drink. Ming was excited, and confided her return to Beijing was for the grand opening of her new apartment building. Alicia congratulated her on the smart business move, with Beijing fast becoming the new business capital, with the influx of competing global industries.

She left the bar knowing the smug look on Ming's face wasn't about her real estate success but something else she had in mind—the completion of her mission. She had well-thought-out plans. What, Alicia didn't know—except Sydney Jones was involved.

Alicia made plans for the next day. She would shadow Sydney until she left in her car to go home, where security was impenetrable. She hung back after others, pretending work still needed to be done. Finally, when seeing Sydney leaving the office, she caught up with her for the walk to the parking garage.

She was impressed with her zigzag movement as she bypassed the VIP parking and headed to her car. She was getting ready to split off toward her car when she heard gunfire. She ducked behind the closest vehicle, as did Sydney.

A car nearby cranked up and sped out of the garage. It was moving so fast she couldn't identify the make or model or get a tag number. Maybe it was a coincidence and the killer

and/or guardian was lurking somewhere in the garage. She watched as Sydney called someone on her cell. Hopefully, security. They waited.

When security arrived, they went directly to Sydney to ascertain her safety, then to look around the parking garage for shooters. Their video surveillance of the area was hacked, as they neither saw nor heard anything that could've happened.

She and Sydney maintained their position crunched behind a nondescript SUV until security returned from their search of the vicinity. The look on his face said everything. They'd found the shooter, and likely, they'd no longer be a threat. The head of security said, "I think it best you return to your office and lock the door. We'll call you after the police secure the crime scene and tell us more."

"Who was it?" asked Sydney.

"A woman. Her pistol was lying in her puddled blood."

"Let me know when you know her identity. We'll be upstairs."

Alicia didn't need to wait—she knew it was Ming. She'd figured her moving to the States had more to do with revenge than the love for a lost child. *The only love she showed was the day she placed me in a basket for a stranger to raise*, she thought.

Alicia said, "You have an angel watching over you."

Sydney agreed and said, "Let's walk back to the office and get something strong to drink and talk about this before talking to the authorities. If it's who I think it is, I want to

keep you out of the police report and leave your relationship to Ming unquestioned.

“My security team will call Captain Thomason to let him know about the crime scene. As far as anyone knows, we’re still working on a case. Neither of us saw anything, so we have nothing to report.” Thinking out loud, Sydney said, “Yet, as lawyers we have sworn to uphold the law, and secrets have a way of becoming stumbling blocks. We need to tell Captain Thomason about the nothing we saw. He can be trusted.”

Alicia took the shot of whiskey offered and drank it before lightly setting the empty bourbon glass on the table. When deciding to intervene for Sydney against her mother, she was feeling brave. Now, she doubted she could’ve pulled the trigger. Her studies in psychology helped to gain a keen insight of her birth mother’s motivation. She was consumed by hate and desire for revenge against anyone who contributed to her imagined sub-rate life. Yet, when she was in reach of building a new life in the US and Beijing, she blew it. The desire for revenge killed her.

Capt. Thomason arrived at the crime scene and told his agents to wrap it up while he talked to the eyewitnesses. Walking to the elevator, he wanted to turn around and walk away, for if Ming was gunning for Sydney, she’d met her match. He didn’t need to hear the rest of the story and see the sadness in her eyes.

He walked into her empty law office suite. Everyone was gone for the day, and Sydney and Alicia were waiting for him in the lobby. He looked at Sydney and expected her tale-tell sign of guilt. There was none. He took their statements and said he'd let them know when he learned more.

The best he could discern, Ming received her just deserts, thinking she could come on US soil and murder at will. He could close Liu Chang's case now, for she was the one behind his and his mistress's murders.

Sydney told Alicia to take the rest of the week off and return Monday to get ready for the human trafficking case they were working on. She now better understood Alicia's interest in human rights. Her adoptive parents saved her from death and gave her a new life. She wanted to help others who needed protection from government/s or greed.

She'd landed in the right city to make a difference. There was plenty of legal work surrounding human rights. Atlanta is a major transportation hub for trafficking young girls from Mexico, and one of the fourteen US cities with the highest levels of child sex trafficking. On average, 100 juvenile girls are exploited each night in Georgia.

Alicia's division at Sydney Jones & Associates took the cases to counter this form of abduction and slavery. She was good at her job, and could do more with a seat at the table where relevant discussions were being held. She'd keep an eye on her and the posts she'd excel in and enable her to contribute more, even if it meant leaving the firm.

Cheng Li received the news about Ming Chang's death. His gut instinct was right; she'd not let go of the past. He'd told her not to mess with Sydney Jones and apparently, she did, since her body was found in her Atlanta parking garage. The news media was quiet about the murder, with headline news talking about the latest drug busts in the city and the epic heroin overdoses.

Ming had wished for him to carry out her final wishes. Her son was now in the upper echelon of Chinese landholders and wealth with the recent death of his father and grandfather. After the bequest of her Beijing real estate, she left him a cursory token of affection and finances along with wishes for him to complete his studies in the US before returning to Beijing to take over the family's business. Her newly acquired US property she left to her daughter, Alicia Brewer, who Cheng suspected would immediately sell it, as had Sydney after Nancy Lynn's death. He'd take this one off her hands for dimes on the dollar like Ming did on the previous sale.

He was certain Sydney would connect Alicia with her realtor and then he could act. Owning property in Atlanta might be good for getting away from Beijing; at least it would be cheap for the luxury location, and an excellent long-term investment.

The premiere of Nancy Lynn's final movie made before her death was being released and the executive of the movie studio, Dominic Houser, asked Sydney to accompany him to the opening. She gladly accepted.

Sydney was moved to tears during the showing. Nancy Lynn was a natural actress whose beauty transcended time. The movie would be a blockbuster. She only wished her friend had lived to see it. She knew her legacy would live on, for it was one of those movies you'd never forget—a classic.

She thanked Dominic for the night and for taking a chance on Nancy Lynn's talent. He said, "She's one of the best I've ever worked with. Bright, eager to learn, and ready on cue."

Returning home, she slipped into her nightgown after looking in on David sleeping peacefully in his bed. She was tired of her nonstop busy life and people dying or murdering those she loved.

She knew her finances were secure and provided for her son's future through her inheritances and income. She could reduce her workload and hand the managing partner role to one of the ace partners. She'd talk to her CEO, Nancy McNally, to get some feedback about the best way to go about making changes.

With the nonstop demand for her attention and unsavory characters vying to kill her, she needed a break. Her thoughts wandered to Barbados. Her son could grow and learn before he was exposed to his next level of school and later adult learning. Whether just a whim in a low moment or her heart's desire, she'd consider the options. She fell asleep calmer, knowing there was a chance life could get better.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A Trap

Everything was different, yet nothing had changed, Walker thought. Sydney was still dodging bullets, and he was still running to her aid.

Walker stood at the refrigerator door staring out at the pale-blue sea through the nearby oversized window. His mind was exactly 3,392 KM away, thinking about his quick trip to Atlanta.

He'd spent the last month studying Ming and the attacks he believed she carried out in Atlanta. Judging from the files he'd hacked, the GBI suspected the same thing.

Ming liked to have the advantage of surprise, and having visited Sydney's law offices, he figured she'd marked her territory from the parking garage. Sydney was the last of the people she begrudged for taking away prized possessions and being entangled in her love loss.

His flight was running late, and he barely had time to hop into his rental car and get there before Sydney left work. He figured with Ming booking a flight to Beijing for that evening, she'd act.

He backed his rental into a parking space and strapped on his holster and waited. She'd be hiding somewhere on the VIP level, thinking she could get a clean shot at Sydney on the way to her car.

He spotted Ming behind one of the massive concrete columns supporting the garage. She had her pistol pulled, sneaking around the edges of the columns one by one, getting closer to the entrance to the building.

Then he saw Sydney with a young woman talking, laughing, and walking to her car. Scoping his target again, he saw Ming's finger slide to the trigger, and he dropped her. She fell backwards from the blow of a bullet between her eyes. He'd double-checked for any movement through his scope and got the hell out of Dodge. He didn't breathe a sigh of relief until his flight home was in the air. He had no desire to get caught up in Sydney's affairs, for he didn't want the government looking for him and putting another bounty on his head.

Sydney's lost her edge; she'd never go unsuspecting into her garage acting like a newly crowned prom queen with no worries. She had a pattern she followed. Something or someone threw her off; for she wasn't thinking about survival. She could've been killed, making his son an orphan. What the hell was going on with Sydney?

CHANCE

His better self-won out and he took a chance on following up on Ming's communications and followed her to Atlanta, knowing it could blow his cover if anyone suspected him of protecting Sydney.

He'd pinpointed Ming as the murderess of most everyone who got in her way, and Sydney had managed to do that. He was glad he was there; otherwise, she'd be dead now. The young woman with her who drew her weapon when hearing his weapon discharge would never fire, even for self-preservation. Why she was even there was a mystery he'd solve, for it contributed to Sydney's lack of focus.

Sydney walked into a trap and wasn't smart enough and equipped to protect herself. *By God—she's gone soft or stupid.* Which, he didn't know. He had no intentions of following her around the world to make sure she stayed alive. She'd built an attractive empire where everyone wanted a piece of Sydney Jones, he thought angrily, and they could get it.

He wiped the sweat from his brow, knowing his frustration was getting the best of him. He pulled another beer out of the fridge and took a long swig, thinking how Sydney was always under his skin. She'd be the real death of him yet, he thought.

Captain Thomason had no doubt the kill shot on Ming was a professional hit. Reading the eyewitness report once again, he realized Sydney was clueless, unlike her previous encounters with mercenaries. She was always bluntly honest when pulling the trigger. Someone was watching over her;

who, he didn't know, but had his suspicions. The question was, should he open that can of worms?

Anyone who'd met Walker could see Sydney's son, David, was his mirror image. He questioned whether Walker had found out before he was killed in the North Georgia car accident. If so, he may have decided she needed protection should something happen to him and made backup plans.

He routinely viewed the video from the webcam he'd posted on the streetlight facing Sydney's townhome. He knew that sooner or later; she'd take a case with some bad voodoo and this might be his only way of catching the culprit. Since it resulted in finding Daniela after her kidnapping, he was feeling better about breaking her Fourth Amendment rights to privacy.

He scanned through the latest recordings from the cam to see if she'd had any visitors. There was nothing out of the ordinary. He knew Walker hadn't returned since the CIA's call to action and no other men, except the movie producer, had been at her home in the last month. And he was in and out.

Did he think the case looked like something Walker would do? Yes. But the CIA was satisfied he was dead, and his body was cremated. They had to be certain of their assessment, for ruining a man's life could come back to haunt the instigator. Captain Thomason's job sucked at times like this. His thoughts gravitated to what his daddy said. "Let sleeping dogs lie."

CHANCE

He wanted to think it was just Sydney's lucky day and leave it at that, but he knew there was no such thing as coincidence. For now, he'd place the case on the back burner and wait. This time someone was protecting Sydney, not trying to kill her.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Marriage Proposal

Sydney was well-pleased with the role Alicia played in their latest sex-trafficking case. Her partnership represented victims' rights against individuals and businesses involved in forced slavery for labor, or commercial sex acts. These personal injury lawsuits were becoming common in Atlanta, with victims or their families seeking restitution for harm or death of their loved ones.

The new task force charged with infiltrating human trafficking organizations was accomplishing its goals. They provided the funding and top-level political support for crippling to a halt one of the fastest-growing transnational criminal organizations in Atlanta.

The culprits were convicted and would spend their days and nights paying for their crimes. She was past being surprised at people you'd least expect to be involved. The saying

“follow the money” was an accurate description for the bank-rollers behind the slimy scheme of abducting humans for financial gain.

Sydney’s home life was improving since the attempted murder by Ming. A moment to pause and enjoy her son was what the doctor ordered for her health. And, staying alive was her top priority. Staying on top of her game was her mandate. She knew Walker would’ve said she was sloppy in self-preservation.

Ming’s attempt on her life was a wake-up call. Like umpteen lawyers in Atlanta living the good life, at least not in crosshairs of an assassin, she could never relax and enjoy the life she created to help others. Apparently, not even a moment.

Daniela was flourishing again and dating an acquaintance from Barbados now living in Atlanta. Jonathan contributed to the growing local business community with his graphic design business and came over often for Daniela’s homemade Caribbean dinners.

She knew their relationship was past the budding stage. Daniela made it no secret she wanted to return home to the island. She now had credentials to teach and could contribute to educating the young children there. It was only a matter of time before they’d announce their engagement, and she shuddered to think about their loss. Jonathan could work remotely from anywhere with his bustling graphic designs business, so they would surely relocate to Barbados.

Thinking on a positive note, David could attend after-school care when Daniela left. Although it wouldn't be the same, her son would be safe and supervised.

Valentine's Day had just passed, and Daniela was glowing with happiness. Sydney knew a proposal was likely. After David went to sleep, Daniela asked to talk with her in the kitchen and share a glass of wine. An unusual request for a weekday, with their busy lives. Usually, the weekend was their shared time together as Daniela cooked and created native dishes for Jonathan and their family meals together.

They met at the kitchen bar, where Sydney poured their glasses with wine. Daniela was beaming with joy and announced her upcoming wedding plans, showing off her diamond engagement ring.

The wedding would be on Saturday, May 18, in Barbados, where their immediate family and friends could attend. After their honeymoon at the Canadian Niagara Falls in Ontario, they'd return to Barbados to live and work. Her fiancé, Jonathan, had already arranged for their new home in an upscale oceanside community. She'd secured a teaching position at Westbury Primary School, in Bridgetown, near her parents' home.

Sydney congratulated and hugged Daniela. "I wish you much happiness."

Daniela was relieved she shared her joy; she'd been concerned how she'd take her exciting news.

Trying to hold back tears, she said, "Thank you."

They relaxed and talked about helping David to understand her leaving, knowing she loved him. Sydney said, "I've been thinking about buying a vacation home there. Perhaps you, David, and I can continue our friendship on the island."

"Are you seriously considering Barbados for a vacation home?"

"Yes, I am."

Daniela's eyes lit up and she smiled. "I'd love that. I could see David on your trips!"

"I'll look into it when we come to your wedding." Laughing, she asked, "We are invited?"

"Of course! And I'd love for David to be in my wedding. He's big, and tall enough to be a part of the wedding party. My niece and nephews will be glad to have some help seating the guests."

"He'll be excited to be included. Thank you, Daniela."

"You and David are my extended family. Nothing else would suit."

Daniela would be leaving in April, a month before the wedding. She and Jonathan had much to do to set up their new home and finish the wedding arrangements. Saying goodbye would be difficult and they'd agreed telling David the night before was best, with a reminder she'd see him soon.

They called it a night after Sydney made a toast to Daniela's future happiness. She checked on David before going to her own bedroom and was pleased he was smiling in his sleep. "Sweet dreams, my son," she whispered.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A Caribbean Wedding

Walker's businesses were flourishing. He gave half-interest in his most lucrative charter boat to the captain who'd made it possible. They'd grown tight over the last few years and he considered him a brother. They often grabbed a beer together, and Alex never tired of trying to fix him up with a woman; usually a relative.

Alex said, "My cousin Jonathan is getting married, and it will be the event of the year. A real party, with plenty of booze and food!"

Walker didn't need to be a mind-reader to know his next words. He said, "Sounds like you'll have fun."

"And you, too, my brother. I just happen to know someone who needs a plus one for the wedding and reception. Think you'd be interested?"

“You’re setting me up on a blind date to—a wedding, of all places? You know how dreamy-eyed women get at these things.”

“It’s nothing you can’t handle. And besides, Jenna is a knock-out, and will show you a good time and introduce you around.”

“Well, I don’t know. Don’t we have a charter that day? Maybe I’ll take the fishing party out and you can enjoy the wedding.”

“The wedding is right after our high season, you know, December 15 through April 15, so there’s no worries. The ceremony is May 18 and I booked around it, so everyone’s happy. So, see, we can enjoy the day off with women and dancing!”

“You make it sound more like a night out clubbing than a wedding. You must need a distraction—or a buffer. Who are you trying to escape?”

“My ex.”

“Enough said, I’ll be there. Tell Jenna to call me with the details. That is—if it was her idea in the first place.”

“Oh, it was—I promise you.”

Alex shook his head. Apparently, his good friend Jim Godwin hadn’t looked in the mirror recently. Half the women on the island wanted him.

Sydney made their Barbados plans to stay in one of the oceanside communities with new homes for sale. She wanted to check out a new development, since someone had tried to break in at the last place they’d lodged.

CHANCE

Staying for the wedding and a mini vacation afterwards would provide a chance to look over the community and its residents. If she liked one of the villas for sale, she'd put down a binder and hope for a faster closing than she'd been advised was normal in Barbados.

She planned to relax and rejuvenate in Barbados while spending time with her son. She needed a break from her fast-paced world, and her new partners and staff could keep the law office running smoothly in her absence.

She'd posted notice with her security team that she'd need someone for the trip to Barbados. She wondered if Len, the bodyguard from their previous trip, would volunteer again. At least he knew what he might be up against; not the usual Caribbean vacation.

Everything was in place for their departure and Len, from her security team, stepped up for the occasion. They arrived in Barbados, and Daniela was waiting at the airport for their arrival. They hugged, and she invited them over that evening for dinner with her and Jonathan. Sydney gladly accepted and said, "See you tonight." They hugged again.

Len had secured their rental car and had loaded their luggage while Sydney talked with Daniela. She waved goodbye and they were on the way to their oceanside retreat.

The villa was ready for their occupancy with fresh food and beverages stocked for their stay. Sydney gave Len the evening off while she and David had dinner at Daniela's. Her new home was a short drive from their luxury community.

Daniela's new home was beautiful. Although not quite as large as the ones in the community where Sydney was staying, she had ocean view. David was smiling. He was excited to see her.

Jonathan was cordial, and both he and Daniela appeared happy. Sydney couldn't want anything more for her. She asked, "Are you ready for your big day?"

Daniela smiled and said, "Yes, the wedding has turned into the event of the season. We're happy to share our special moment with friends and family. And, we both have large extended families. So, there'll be lots of people in attendance. We are especially pleased you and David could attend."

"We are glad to be here on your special day. Thank you for inviting us."

"Now if you can find a vacation home, we can continue our friendship here."

"I'll be looking. In the meantime, is there anything I can do to help with your wedding and reception?"

"No, I think we've got everything ready. But, thank you for asking."

"You're welcome."

They enjoyed the Caribbean dinner Daniela prepared, and knowing it had been a long day and seeing David's sleepy eyes, she said, "We'd best call it a night."

Sydney said goodbye and congratulated them on their new home.

"Thanks for coming over. I couldn't wait to see you both again."

Len was waiting at the door when they returned. She'd called to say they were on their way. She poured a glass of wine and relaxed after saying goodnight to David.

Tomorrow would be a big day. She'd made prior arrangements to look at villas for sale on the West Coast of Barbados. Then she and David would enjoy the beach in front of the villa and have an easy lunch with cold soup and a sandwich at home. Afterwards, she, David, and Len would go to Champers Restaurant for dinner.

David stayed with Len while Sydney explored vacation properties. She was sure he would not be interested until she found the one, she wanted to buy. Then she'd show it to him. He was excited about the idea of living near Daniela, even if it was just on vacation.

The luxury real estate agent had a good selection lined up for her to view. The one that she could see them enjoying was a modern villa on beautifully landscaped tropical grounds just steps from the water's edge.

The villa was larger than she and David needed, with five bedrooms and five baths. Yet, for the size of the property it was sitting on and the contemporary architectural design and high-end furnishings, she couldn't go wrong as an investment.

Thinking about her and David's safety, she was relieved that upstairs there was a magnificent master suite and additional guest suite, David's room, and a living area opening

onto a wrap-around balcony, with an uninterrupted view of the Caribbean Sea.

Three other bedrooms were located on the main level along with formal and informal dining areas, a state-of-the-art kitchen, well-equipped media room, and ample living space, with bar and covered terraces and sundeck surrounding the stylish, 45' infinity pool.

She knew how important location was, and the villa was located within easy reach of fine dining restaurants, trendy boutiques, and world-class duty-free shopping and championship golf courses.

She told the salesperson she'd call later for an appointment to show her son the property. She said, "No problem. If you want to go get him now, I'll wait, since you're staying nearby."

"Thank you."

Len and David were playing video games with David killing him in their warfare. He was teaching him some moves for winning the game when they were interrupted by a phone call from Sydney.

She said, "I'm on the way back to pick up David to look at a property. Tell him to be ready to go."

"Yes, ma'am."

David was waiting by the garage and hopped in for a quick ride back to the property. After introductions, she showed him around and watched his expressions. He liked this one better than where they were staying.

“What do you think, David? Would you like for us to live here on vacation?”

“Yes. I love the pool and the media room.”

“Then, we’ll buy it.”

“Good,” said the salesperson. “You know only attorneys-at-law can handle real estate transactions in Barbados, yes? Do you have a local attorney to handle the contract and closing?”

“Yes.”

“Good, then, they’ll take it from here.”

Sydney had hired an attorney before coming to complete any real estate transaction she should make and to make a formal request to the Central Bank of Barbados to wire money directly to them for closing. She wanted to be ready to act if she found a vacation home she wanted. She was glad for her foresight. Real estate transactions could take anywhere from three to six months to close—Island Time—and she wanted to move faster.

She smiled at David and said, “I think we just bought our dream home.”

“Me, too, Mama. I’d love to live here near Daniela.”

“Well, at least on vacation and when we can get away.”

Sydney called Daniela and said, “Well, the deed’s done. I’ve made an offer on a home in Barbados.”

Daniela let out a loud shriek and Sydney moved the phone away from her ear as she congratulated her. “Now, we can be neighbors, and I’ll see David a lot more often,” she said.

“I can’t wait to show it to you. I think you’ll love it, and can help me plan parties to get to know some people on my next visit. I’m so excited.”

“Me, too.”

“I’ll see you on Saturday at your wedding. Until then, if you need anything, just call me.”

“Thank you.”

Sydney had no idea she’d be this excited about her new vacation home. She’d inherited other homes from her parents, and they were extraordinary getaways, but this one was her and David’s choice. She couldn’t wait until the papers were signed. She wasn’t surprised by David’s obvious joy; he loved Daniela, who’d been with him since birth. Tonight, at Changers Restaurant, they’d celebrate finding their dream home on the island.

The next day was Daniela’s wedding, and David was included in the wedding party. He would be an usher, helping to greet and seat the wedding guests. He stood head and shoulders taller than most of her young nephews and was eager to be a part of Daniela’s special day.

Daniela’s friend Kaylia was a wedding planner who coordinated destination weddings in Barbados. She helped Daniela plan her wedding. Although there are many locations to choose from to host weddings from beaches, galleries, plantation homes, and important historical sites, or even yacht weddings, Daniela had always dreamed her wedding

would be at St. Patrick's. She'd been going to the cathedral on Bay Street in Bridgetown since she could remember. The church had played an important role in Bridgetown for over 100 years. Daniela's ancestors were members of St. Patrick's, and her family remained active through the present. No other wedding venue could come close to her feelings about St. Patrick's. Her dream was about to come true with a wedding to the man she loved.

Although Sydney had purchased a stunning Calvin Klein cocktail dress with flattering fit and flare in Atlanta, she wanted to check out the island's offerings. She hurried to shop the downtown Bridgetown boutiques. She wanted a dress suitable for an island wedding, and knew one of the shops on the main road would have the right selection, likely from a local seamstress.

She chose a lightweight chiffon tea-length dress from a local boutique and was pleased with the feel of the fabric and the unique pattern design. She felt pretty in a semi-formal Caribbean way.

She'd brought David's wedding suit from Atlanta. His size compared to his age made it difficult to find clothes at most shops. He'd had another growth spurt, leaving no doubt he'd be tall and bulky like his father, Walker.

They dressed for the event early, to get David there on time as a member of the wedding party. He was excited to see Daniela get married. He liked Jonathan and their nieces and nephews.

Sydney drove them to St. Patrick's, leaving Len, her bodyguard, at the villa. She didn't sense there'd be danger lurking at Daniela's wedding. Len had protested, but only mildly. After all, she was the boss.

David hurried just ahead of her to the greeters' meeting place. Once he was settled and talking with his new friends, she walked outside to wait until closer to the time of the ceremony.

A crowd was gathering at the entrance and she decided to get in line to be seated. Making polite conversation with others about the bride and groom's big day was interesting and festive. Finally, her son, David, took her by the hand to escort her down the aisle to the mahogany pews on the left side, where the bride's family and friends were seated. She couldn't be prouder of her son.

As they were walking, she looked to her right on the groom's side and noticed a man a head taller than most, with broad shoulders, and had a feeling she knew him. She quickly shook it off and allowed her son to seat her.

Once the mother of the bride was seated, signaling the wedding procession was to begin, David returned to her pew and waited for the ceremony to begin.

The organist began playing, and everyone stood looking toward the entrance where the bride's procession would begin. First the bridesmaids, and then the ring bearer and an adorable flower girl with a posy of flowers streamed down the aisle.

Daniela was looking more beautiful than words. Escorted by her father, she was wearing a trumpet/mermaid off-the-shoulder gown with a train made of tulle, carrying a bouquet of the island's national flower, the Pride of Barbados. The sound of the wedding march rose to a crescendo, bringing tears to her eyes.

The priest officiated the vows and announced Daniela and Jonathan as husband and wife. As is tradition in Barbados, the bride and groom signed the legal documents before their wedding guests. The guests stood and applauded as the bride and groom walked down the aisle, leaving the sanctuary for the reception hall.

The reception area was elegantly decorated with candles, lilies, and an array of sunset-colored tropical flowers. The traditional Black Cake, a rich mixture of blended fruits soaked in wine/rum and baked, then topped with royal icing and a wedding ornament, sat undisturbed on the linen-covered table, ready to be cut by the bride and groom.

A buffet table was filled with freshly harvested seafood, fruits, and vegetables. The native dish of Barbados, Flying Fish, was fried to perfection. A large crystal bowl filled with fruity rum punch, along with nonalcoholic drinks, were ready for the guests. A band of local musicians began playing popular island music as the bride and groom danced their first dance.

Sydney stayed longer than she'd planned, for David was enjoying his new friends. She observed the tall, muscular,

light-chocolate-colored man with a beautiful Barbadian woman as they danced to the music. Between sets he was talking with someone, probably a friend, laughing about something. She couldn't shake the thought she knew him, even though they'd never met.

She spoke briefly to Daniela, wishing her happiness in her marriage. The guests began leaving and she corralled David for the ride home. Daniela's friend and wedding planner, Kaylia, did a marvelous job, with guests leaving with gift bags tied in a ribbon of her tropical wedding colors with favors of sugared almonds.

David never stopped chattering on the way home. He couldn't wait to spend summers with his new friends. This was the happiest she'd seen him since Daniela left Atlanta.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Dream Home

Walker—or Jim, as he was known on the island—did Alex a favor by attending the wedding of his cousin, Jonathan. Now, he could kick himself. Would he do it again? Yes; most likely to run interference for his friend. And he was having a good time with the gorgeous Jenna.

She was tall for a woman, making her a viable dance partner for his height. Their conversation flowed smoothly, and he could tell she was interested in knowing him better—a lot better. He was warming to the idea when he saw his son, David, then Sydney. His thoughts about the evening with Jenna were interrupted and he slid into a personal hell, knowing Sydney was a few feet away.

He sensed her presence from behind him as she walked into the cathedral. He didn't dare look to his left, for seeing his eyes might spark recognition. Of all days to not

be wearing his colored contact lenses. He'd thought nothing about it, for his friends on the island knew him as Jim Godwin. He didn't need to disguise himself, as they never knew him as Walker.

He first saw David seating the bride's family and remembered Alex saying it was Jonathan *and Daniela's* wedding. He didn't put Sydney in the picture then, as they were thousands of miles away in Atlanta. But now he remembered, Daniela was David's nanny.

He'd profiled her early in her employment with Sydney for his own peace of mind. She'd left Barbados with her sister, who'd received a high-paying job offer from one of the bottling companies in Atlanta. When her sister married, she had a choice whether to return to Barbados and continue her education or stay in Atlanta. She wasn't ready to return home and took a live-in position as a nanny so she could see her sister and explore Atlanta. Apparently, she'd met Jonathan there and they'd decided to return home.

His evening would have gone much differently with Jenna if not for seeing Sydney and his son. He froze. He was sure his date was surprised, and probably thought he was an idiot. A wedding—everyone has sex afterwards. And from the look in her eyes, it would've been an enjoyable night.

Well, he hoped Alex didn't give him any shit if Jenna mentioned what a dud he was that evening. He dropped her off at home after the reception and thanked her for the evening. She looked surprised. Hell, so was he, for that matter. But that's what Sydney does to him. A mixture of fear and

love erupts and drives him crazy. She's the one link to his past that could ruin him and expose him to the CIA or other US government agencies. Not to mention the unexpressed, buried feelings he had for her that wanted to explode when she was around. He needed to stay away, as far as possible, or a bounty would be plastered on his head.

When things settled down, he'd ask Jenna out for dinner. He wasn't going to let Sydney ruin his social life. He knew he needed to move away from any thoughts of them as a couple. He'd done it before and could do it again. There was no reason to put them both—and possibly David—in danger.

He looked out over the azure ocean, wishing things could be different, and popped the cap of another beer. *Drowning*, he thought. Drowning in sorrow for what might have been. He shook himself. He'd not follow that path to self-destruction.

Under different circumstances, he'd like the opportunity to know his son. To teach him scuba diving, fishing, and how to use a weapon. The basics every boy needs to know to become a man. The pleasure of teaching him, he'd never know. He left it at that—what might have been—and went to sleep. No more dwelling on the past or imagining an impossible future.

Sydney was pleased when her attorney called and said everything was in order to close on her island dream property. She made note of the time and place to sign the final real estate documents and get the keys to her new vacation home.

David would be beside himself when learning they'd get to live in their new home before leaving. She was glad they could leave their luggage behind and stock their new home with necessities for their next trip.

Daniela mentioned their maintenance man was interested in more work and would give a price. She wanted to finalize an agreement before she left, to keep their home's pool and lawn maintained in their absence. Plus, it'd be nice to have someone keep an eye out on the property, although it was in a luxury gated community.

According to Daniela, the vandalism and crime on the island wasn't caused by the natives, but from the misfits and criminal elements taking advantage of the island's tourism.

Most Barbadians were middle class, with an almost 100 percent literacy rate across the island. Free education through the university level with top-level degrees in medical, legal, hospitality management, and other professional studies was available for natives.

She, David, and Len cleared their rental villa and took their personal belongings and supplies to their new home. Len was helpful, and exceeded his normal duties by helping box supplies from the pantry and refrigerator to move to their new vacation home.

The first thing she did after putting away their belongings was to ask everyone to gather around for a toast to their new home. She poured a glass of wine for her and Len and a sparkling, non-alcoholic drink for David.

She held up her glass and said, “May this home always be a welcome haven to us, our family, and friends.”

“Cheers,” said Len and David.

Sydney told Len to look around and make any suggestions to security he thought was needed. Afterwards, change into his bathing suit and meet her and David at their 45’ infinity pool overlooking the ocean. They’d have dinner on the terrace and enjoy their evening.

Sydney watched as David swam like a fish while she enjoyed the cool trade breeze blowing in from the Caribbean. She’d dipped her toes into the pool and relaxed. She was already thinking about taking the summer off for her and David to return in a month. With David out of school and becoming a middle-schooler, she believed he’d enjoy his summer more in Barbados. He’d met Daniela’s extended family and there were many children his age.

Their options in Atlanta were limited. She worked nonstop, and the southern summers were sweltering, with temperatures reaching 100 degrees in the shade during the hottest months.

Her practice required working long hours to stay on top of her personal caseload. This left David unattended unless she hired another nanny or made other age-specific childcare arrangements. She could enroll him in a day camp, sports, or music camp, and hire a nanny to shuttle him between activities and classes she enrolled him in.

The pluses were stacking up for taking the summer off. This visit was relaxing, and Len wasn’t needed, unlike the

previous one. She hoped he enjoyed this trip; he deserved it. But from now on, in Barbados, she'd be just fine. She'd met more locals, friends of Daniela and Jonathan's, who indicated interest in knowing her better. It was time to stretch her wings and make new friends.

With her mind made up she asked, "David, what do you think about our spending the summer here?"

"Do you really mean it?"

"Yes. We need a break from the city."

"I'd love it. Me and my new friends will have fun!" He smiled and hugged her.

"Yes, you will have a great summer."

Sydney leaned back and gazed at the starry skies with shooting stars trailing overhead. She relaxed, thinking finally she could distance herself from the unsettled past with Walker. This was going to be a good move for her family. A new beginning—a second chance.

The End

From the Author, Carolyn M. Bowen

Thank you for reading the Sydney Jones Series, *Primed for Revenge, Book 1* and *Chance—A Novel, Book 2* in the trilogy. The final novel in the series will be available in early 2021. Stay connected for details about special offers and giveaways.

Word of mouth is crucial for any author to succeed. If you've enjoyed the novel, please consider leaving a review, even if it is only a line or two; it would make all the difference and I would appreciate it very much.

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