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PHOEBE TOOK HER PLACE at the front of the room. She had twenty-five cops in this training session, a mix of uniforms and plainclothes of varying ranks.

A good portion of them, she knew, didn't want to be there.

"Today, I'm going to talk about the tactical role of the negotiator in a crisis or hostage situation. First, are there any questions regarding yesterday's session?"

A hand shot up. Phoebe swallowed her instinctive annoyance. Officer Arnold Meeks, third-generation cop. Bullheaded, belligerent and bigoted, in Phoebe's opinion, with a thick layer of macho over it.

"Officer Meeks?"

"Yes, ma'am." His smile usually started out as a smirk, and often stayed there. "You talked down a jumper the other day, St. Patrick's Day?"

"That's correct."

"Well, ma'am, I was interested in some of the particulars, seeing as we're in this training session with you. Now, I was curious, as it

appears you broke some of the rules of negotiation during this incident. Unless being FBI-trained, as you are, things are different for you. Is that the case?”

Her early federal training would always rub some of the rank and file the wrong way. They'd just have to live with it. “Which rules did I break, Officer Meeks?”

“Well, ma'am—”

“You can use my rank, Officer, as I do yours.”

She watched annoyance flicker over his face. “The subject was armed, but you engaged him face-to-face, without cover.”

“That's correct. It's also correct that a negotiator should avoid, if possible, any face-to-face with an armed subject. However, circumstances may call for it, and we'll be covering that area of crisis situation in the role-playing sessions in the second half of this course.”

“Why—”

“I'm getting to that. In my opinion, the incident on St. Patrick's Day called for a face-to-face. In point of fact, most jumpers respond better to this method. The subject had no history of violent behavior, and had not fired the weapon. In a situation such as the one on St. Patrick's Day, I, as negotiator, had to assess and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of going face-to-face. In my opinion, the advantages far outweighed the risks. As we've already covered the other considerations regarding face-to-face in a previous session—”

“Ma'am—Lieutenant,” Arnie corrected, with just enough hesitation to make sure she knew it was deliberate. “Is it also correct you provided the subject with alcohol?”

I bet you have a really little dick, Phoebe thought, but nodded. “I provided the subject, at his request, with a beer. Providing alcohol to a subject during negotiations is not encouraged, but neither is it forbidden. This tack would be up to the negotiator, his or her sense of the situation and evaluation of the subject.”

“Get him drunk enough, maybe he'd just fall off the roof.” Arnie's comment got a few snickers. Phoebe inclined her head, let them die off.

“Next time you're on a ledge, Officer, I'll remember you get drunk off one beer and bring you a nice Coca-Cola instead.”

That got more than snickers, and noting the angry red wash over Arnie's face, Phoebe cut through them. "As I've said, repeatedly, while there are guidelines for negotiations, the negotiator must be flexible, be able to evaluate, to think on his or her feet."

"But you agree providing alcohol or drugs is risky?"

"Certainly. My gauge in this case was it was low risk. The subject did not demand alcohol; he very politely asked if he might have a beer. Bringing him one gave him something he wanted, and allowed him some control, allowed him to exchange that beer for his word not to use his weapon on me, to allow me to come out and speak with him. Just you wait," she ordered Arnie before he could open his smirking mouth again.

Then she paused to make certain her tone would be calm and cool. "The preservation of life is and always will be the primary goal of negotiation. Everything, absolutely everything else, is secondary to that. Therefore, in this instance—as every single instance is different—I elected a face-to-face, elected to provide the subject with a single beer because I believed those choices would assist me in talking him down. As he's alive, as there were no injuries, as the weapon he held was never discharged but given to me by him, I believe—in this instance—my choices were the correct ones."

"You also used a third-party intermediary."

Now Phoebe smiled, sweet Southern sugar. "Officer Meeks, it appears you have several questions and problems with this particular incident and my handling of it. I wonder if you'd be more satisfied if the subject had just jumped."

"Seeing as he was only sitting up four stories, he'd only have a couple broken bones if he had. Unless he shot you and himself beforehand."

"There's an interesting train of thought. Disbelieving a subject is serious about suicide, or could indeed cause his own death."

Casually, she reached up to secure a stray wisp of hair that had escaped from its pins. And kept her voice just as casual. "I was acquainted with a negotiator who had this train of thought over a jumper who was about twelve feet off the ground, unarmed. Mostly being a nuisance, from my acquaintance's point of view, one that was keeping him from

doing more important things with his valuable time. And he allowed that opinion to show. The subject jumped, headfirst, crushing his skull on the sidewalk. He was very dead, Officer Meeks.

"Anybody know why this nuisance ended up with a toe tag?"

"Negotiator screwed it up," someone called out.

"That's right. The negotiator screwed it up by forgetting the prime directive: Preserve human life.

"If you have any more questions or comments about the incident, please feel free to write them up for me. But for right now? We're moving on."

"I'd like to—"

"Officer." The temper Phoebe rarely set free strained on the leash. "You may be mistaken about who is running this session. I am. You may also be confused about the order of rank here. I am your superior."

"It seems to me, *ma'am*, that you don't want to address your questionable decisions during a crisis negotiation."

"It seems to me, *boy*, that you are unable to take no for an answer, by a woman who happens to outrank you, and that you're both rigid in your thinking and argumentative in attitude. These are very, very poor qualities in a negotiator. I'll so note to your captain, and hope that we'll be relieved of each other before much longer. Now, I want you to close your mouth and open your ears. That's an order, Officer Meeks. If you choose to ignore it, I'll write you up for insubordination here and now. Clear?"

His face had gone an angry red, and his eyes spoke furious volumes. But he nodded curtly.

"That's fine. Now, tactics, teamwork and the negotiator's role."

The minute the session was over, Phoebe headed straight for the women's room. She didn't beat her head against the wall, though she considered it. Instead, she turned to the mirror, gripped the sink below it.

"Arnold Meeks has a dick the size and width of a baby carrot, and his smirky, *insulting*, juvenile behavior is a pathetic attempt to compensate for his pinkie-sized weenie."

She nodded, relaxed her shoulders. Then dropped her head when she

heard a toilet flush. How stupid could she be to mouth off to the mirror without checking the stalls first?

Phoebe knew the woman who stepped out, but that didn't negate the mortification. Detective Liz Alberta was a solid cop, a strong-willed brunette who worked in sex crimes.

"Lieutenant."

"Detective."

Liz ran water in the sink, turned her own face right and left as if checking her reflection. "Arnie Meeks is a fuckhead," she said casually.

"Oh." Phoebe sighed. "Well."

"He tells tits-and-ass jokes in the break room. I like a good joke same as the rest, and boys will be boys and all that. But I took some exception, and made my exception known after he told me the majority of rapes are bogus, pulling out the old chestnut about how a woman can run faster with her skirt up than a man can with his pants down."

"The fuckhead said that?"

"Oh yes, he did. And I filed a complaint on him. He isn't a fan of mine." Liz fluffed at her short, dark hair. "And I dislike him right down to the tip of that teeny weenie of his." She offered a sunny smile as she dried her hands. "Lieutenant."

"Detective," Phoebe returned as Liz tossed the paper towel into the bin and strolled out.

She didn't like it, but she went to Dave. As was her habit, she jogged up the two flights of stairs from the lecture area to her own section. He was striding out of his office, swinging on his jacket as she popped out the stairway door.

"Oh, you're heading out."

"I've got a meeting. Problem?"

"Maybe. I'll come back."

He glanced at his watch. "I can give you two minutes." He jerked a thumb, stepped back into his office. And said nothing when Phoebe closed the door behind her.

He was still so much the same as the day she'd first met him. A little gray dashed his temples, and those lines people called character in a

man and age in a woman fanned out from his eyes. But those eyes were still clear and blue and, for her, drenched in quiet wisdom.

"I don't like having to do this, because for one thing, it means I've failed. But I'm asking you to consider removing Officer Arnold Meeks from my training sessions."

"Because?"

"I can't teach him anything. And, in fact, may be prejudicing him against any of the basic tactics and guidelines in the field."

Dave leaned back against his desk, a gesture that told her she'd get more than the two minutes now if she needed them. "Is he stupid?"

"No, sir, but he is small-minded. In my opinion."

"His father's still on the job. He's a son of a bitch."

Phoebe relaxed fractionally. "I'm shocked and amazed to hear that."

"I want all officers assigned to the sessions to complete them. You can relate your opinions of Officer Meeks, in this area, in your evaluation. I want all of them to get through it, Phoebe. You know as well as I do that at least some of what you teach them will work its way in, even into small minds."

"I dressed him down in the session."

"Did he deserve it?"

"And then some. But he's only going to be pissed off at me now, and even less likely to listen."

"Minimize the damage and move on." He gave her a pat on the shoulder. "I'm going to be late."

"Minimize the damage," Phoebe muttered, but reached up to straighten Dave's tie.

He smiled at her. "You're the best I've ever worked with. You remember that, and handle small-minded Meeks."

"Yes, sir, Captain."

She walked out with him, and when she peeled off, spotted Arnie loitering with a couple other cops outside her squad room. Her belly might have clenched, but her face was serene as she walked up to him. "Officer Meeks, the captain wishes all assigned officers to complete the negotiator training. I'll expect to see you Monday morning, as scheduled. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now I'm sure the three of you have more important things to do than stand around here. Go on and do it."

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated, in a tone that had her hackles rising. Minimize the damage, she reminded herself. "I expect we can both learn something from these sessions."

She couldn't hear what he said when she walked away; the words were low and indistinguishable. But she heard the snickers clearly enough.

She let it go. A woman who'd pushed through Quantico, who'd slogged through police training, through negotiation training, sexually outnumbered ten to one, had heard snickers before.

She also knew when eyes were trained on her ass, and while it might infuriate her, Phoebe reminded herself to pick her battles. And that she had a damn fine ass.

When she entered her office, saw the message from the mechanic, she understood she had bigger problems than a smart-mouthed cop and ass ogling.

Her car was going to cost seven hundred and fifty-nine nonnegotiable dollars.

"Ah, hell."

Giving up, Phoebe laid her head down on her desk for a moment of pure self-pity.

She caught the bus home, and the moment she was inside deeply regretted the prospect of going out again. Even the idea of going out again—the bus ride, sitting in a bar making small talk, only to ride yet another bus only to get back to square one—seemed overwhelmingly stupid.

She should dig up Duncan's number, cancel. Agreeing to the thirty-minute drink had been a moment of weakness anyway—that damn dimple. Hadn't she thought of a dozen other things she could do with thirty minutes on the ride home?

A bubble bath. Yoga. Give herself a facial. Clean out the junk drawer in her desk.

All were a better use of her time. But a deal was a deal.

Carly sprinted into the foyer to take a flying leap into Phoebe's arms. No outside irritations could stand up against a Carly hug.

"You've been in Gran's perfume." To make Carly giggle she sniffed elaborately at her daughter's neck.

"She let me have a spritz. Dinner's all ready, and I finished my homework." Leaning back, Carly beamed into her mother's face. "You get to be excused from doing the dishes tonight."

"Wow. How come I rate?"

"So you can get ready for your date. Come on!" Wiggling down, Carly took Phoebe's hand to drag her toward the dining room. "Gran thinks you should wear your blue sweater, and Ava thinks the white blouse that ties in the back. But *I* think you should wear your green dress."

"The green dress isn't really the thing for a quick evening meeting."

"But you look so pretty in it."

"She should save it," Ava commented as Carly dragged Phoebe in. "For when he takes her out to dinner. Sit right down, it's all ready. We wanted to give you plenty of time to primp."

"It's a drink. It's only a drink in an Irish pub."

Ava set her hands on her hips. "Excuse me? Tonight you represent every dateless woman in this city, every woman who's about to sit down to a lonely meal of Weight Watchers pasta primavera she's just nuked in the microwave. Every woman who'll get into bed tonight with a book or reruns of *Sex and the City* as her only companion. You," she said, pointing her finger at Phoebe, "are our shining hope."

"Oh God."

Essie patted Phoebe's shoulder before she sat down. "But no pressure."

She didn't want to be a shining hope. But she got on the bus. She had to refuse Ava's offer of her car three times, and disappoint Carly by choosing a black sweater and jeans over the green dress. But she put on the earrings her daughter picked out, and redid her makeup.

Life, Phoebe knew, was full of compromises.

She got a wolf whistle from Johnnie Porter—all of fifteen and full of sass—as he circled her on his bike.

"You sure look pretty tonight, Miz MacNamara. Got a hot date?"

Now she worried she looked as if she were expecting a hot date. “Why, thank you, Johnnie, but no. I’m off to catch a CAT.”

“You going somewhere, you can just hop on here with me.” He popped a little show-off wheelie. “I’ll give you a ride.”

“That’s neighborly of you, but I believe I’ll stick with the bus. How’s your mama?”

“Oh, she’s fine. She’s got Aunt Susie over.” Johnnie rolled his eyes elaborately on his next circle. “Talking about my cousin Juliet’s wedding. So I lit out. Sure you don’t want to boost on up on my handlebars?”

How a fifteen-year-old boy could turn that into a sexual innuendo was puzzling. “I’m sure.”

“See you later, then.”

Off to find some trouble, Phoebe thought with a shake of her head as he zipped down the wide sidewalk. God help the neighborhood when he was old enough to drive.

It was just cool enough she was grateful for the sweater as she walked from the bus stop along East River Street. Plenty of others enjoyed the evening and the stroll, wandering in or out of restaurants and clubs, pausing to window-shop or just gaze out over the water.

So many couples, she thought, hand in hand, taking in that balmy air. Mama had a point, she supposed. It was nice—could be nice—to have someone to hold hands with on a pretty spring evening.

And it was better, given her personal situation, not to think about that sort of thing. Especially when she was about to have a drink with a very cute man.

She had plenty of hands to hold. So many, in fact, that a solitary walk along the river was a rare indulgence. Take the moment, she advised herself and, because she had a few minutes, slowed her pace, turned toward the water, and enjoyed the indulgence.

And see, she mused, she wasn’t the only one on her own. She saw a man, solitary as she, standing spread-legged in a pool of shadow and watching the water. The bill of his ball cap angled low over his face while a pair of cameras were strapped bandolier-style over his dark windbreaker.

Not everyone was a couple.

Maybe she would bring Carly down for a long walk on Saturday, she thought as she tipped her head back, let the breeze take her hair. The kid got such a charge out of wandering around down here, looking at everything, at everyone.

They'd have to set the rules first. Lunch, yes. Fabulous prizes, no. Not with her car currently hostage at the mechanic's.

Probably a smarter idea to make that a nice walk through one of the parks away from retail outlets.

They'd work it out.

Gauging the time, she turned away from the water and didn't notice the solitary man lift and aim one of the cameras in her direction.

At Swifty's a shamrock dotted the *i* in the name on the sign. The stained-glass panel in the door was a rather beautiful Celtic knot design. The doorknob was brass, and the outside walls were done in a dull stucco yellow, a shade she remembered seeing in postcards of Irish villages. Hanging pots dripped with airy flowers and green, green vines.

Little details, she thought. The man paid attention to little details.

When she stepped inside, it was as she remembered from her single previous visit. A big, burly bar set the tone. This was not the venue for airy ferns and apple martinis. But if you wanted a pint, or a glass of Irish, conversation and music, belly right up.

Leather booths were deep and cushy, the tables dark, polished wood. Shadow and sparkle played from the colored glass shades of hanging lamps, while a red-eyed turf fire simmered in a quaint little stone hearth.

The mood was warm welcome.

At one of the booths, its table loaded with drinks, sat the musicians. A girl with a shock of red-tipped black hair sawed a bow over the fiddle strings with a speed and energy that made the movement as blurry as the music was clear. A man old enough to be her grandfather pumped out rhythm on a small accordion. A young man with hair so pale it reminded Phoebe of angels' wings piped out the tune, while yet another set down his pint glass, picked up his fiddle, and slid seamlessly into the song.

Happy, Phoebe thought. Happy music, happy chatter under it. Cheery lights and color, with clever little touches sprinkled through.

Old tankards, a bowen drum, bits of pottery she imagined came from Ireland, an Irish harp, old Guinness signs.

"There you are, and right on time."

Even as she turned toward him, Duncan had her hand in his. That smile of his, she realized, it had a way of making her forget she didn't really want to be there.

"I like your place," she told him. "I like the music."

"Sessions nightly. I've got us a table." He led her to the one in front of the quiet fire where she could sink down on the cozy little love seat.

Take the moment, Phoebe thought again. "Best seat in the house."

"What can I get you?"

"Glass of Harp, thanks."

"Give me a minute." He moved over to the bar, spoke to the girl running the near end. A moment later he came back with a glass of golden beer.

"Nothing for you?"

"I've got a Guinness in the works." Those soft blue eyes zeroed straight in on hers. "So how are you?"

"Well enough. How about you?"

"Let me answer that by asking if you've got a stopwatch on me."

"Sorry, left it in my other purse."

"Then I'm good. I just want to get this out of the way, so it doesn't keep distracting me. I really like the way you look."

"Thanks. I'm okay with it myself most of the time."

"See, I've had you stuck." He tapped a finger to his temple, then paused to flash a smile at the waitress who brought over his pint of Guinness. "Thanks, P.J."

"You bet." The waitress set a bowl of pretzels on the table, gave Duncan a wink, Phoebe a quick once-over, then carted her tray off to another table.

"Well, *sláinte*." He tapped his glass to Phoebe's, sipped. "So, I kept asking myself were you stuck in there just because of Suicide Joe or because I thought you were hot. Which was my second thought when I saw you, and was probably inappropriate given the circumstances."

She sipped more slowly, watching him. That tiny dimple that

flickered at the corner of his mouth when he grinned just drew the eye like a magnet. "Your second thought."

"Yeah, the first was sort of: Thank God she's going to fix this."

"Do you always have that kind of confidence in total strangers?"

"No. Maybe. I'll think about it." He angled so their knees bumped companionably with a little whoosh of denim against denim. "It's just I looked at you and it struck me you were someone who knew what to do, knew what you were doing—a really hot woman who knew what to do. So I wanted to see you again, maybe figure out how come you're stuck. I know you're smart—also a plus—not only because of what you do, but hey, Lieutenant, and you seem young for that."

"I'm thirty-three. Not so young."

"Thirty-three? Me, too. When's your birthday?"

"August."

"November. Older woman." He shook his head. "Now I'm sunk. Older women are so sexy."

It made her laugh as she tucked up her legs, shifted a little toward him. "You're a funny guy."

"Sometimes. But with serious and sensitive sides, if you're counting points."

"Points?"

"There's always a point system in this kind of situation. He's clean. She has breasts. Points added. He has a stupid laugh, she hates sports, points subtracted."

"How'm I doing?"

"I'm not sure I'm going to be able to add that high without my calculator."

"Clever, too. Points for you." She sipped at her beer, studied him. He had a little scar, a thin, diagonal slash through his left eyebrow. "Still, it's risky to assume I'm smart and competent—if those are included in the final total—with so little actual data."

"I'm a good judge of people. On-the-job training."

"Owning bars?"

"Before that. I tended bar and drove a cab. Two professions where you're guaranteed to see all types of people, and where you get to peg them pretty quick."

“A cab-driving bartender.”

“Or bartending cabdriver, depending.” He reached over, tucked her hair behind her ear, gave the dangling silver at her lobe a little tap. The gesture was so casual and smooth, she wondered at her own quick jolt of intimacy.

“Easy to juggle hours on both sides,” he continued, “and I figured I’d sock away enough to open myself a sport’s bar.”

“And so you did, fulfilling the American dream.”

“Not even close—well, the American dream part—but I didn’t earn the ready to open Slam Dunc riding the stick or driving a hack.”

“How then? Robbing banks, dealing drugs, selling your body?”

“All viable options, but no. I won the lottery.”

“Get out. Really?” Delighted, fascinated, she lifted her glass in toast before stretching out a hand for a pretzel.

“Yeah, just a fluke. Or, you know, destiny, again depending. I picked up a ticket now and then. Actually, hardly ever. Then one day I went in for a six-pack of Corona, sprang for a ticket.”

“Did you pick the numbers or go with the computer?”

“My pick. Age, cab number—which was depressing since I hadn’t planned to still be hacking—six for the six-pack. Just that random, and . . . jackpot. You know how you hear people say if they ever win, or even when they do, how they’re going to keep right on working, living pretty much like they have been?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

She laughed again, snagged another pretzel. “Obviously, you retired as a cab-driving bartender.”

“Bet your ass. Got my sports bar. Very cool. Only funny thing, and I may lose man points here, but I figured out after a few months I actually didn’t want to be in a bar every night of my life.”

She glanced around Swifty’s, where the music had gone slow and dreamy. “Yet you have two. And here you are.”

“Yet. I sold half interest in Dunc’s to this guy I know. Well, almost half. Figured, hey, Irish pub.”

“Hence Swifty’s.”

“Hence.”

"No travel, no flashy car?"

"Some travel, some flash. Anyway, how did you—"

"Oh no, the question begs to be asked." She wagged a finger at him. "It's rude, but it has to be asked. How much?"

"A hundred and thirty-eight million."

She choked on her pretzel, holding up a hand when he tapped her on the back. "Jesus Christ."

"Yeah, that's what I said. You want another beer?"

She shook her head, gaped at him. "You won a hundred and thirty-eight *million* dollars on a lottery ticket?"

"Yeah, go figure. Best six-pack I ever bought. It got a lot of play at the time. You didn't hear about it?"

"I . . ." She was still struggling to absorb. "I don't know. When?"

"Seven years ago last February."

"Well." She puffed out a breath, pushed a hand through her hair. *Million* replayed through her mind. "Seven years ago last February I was busy giving birth."

"Hard to keep up with current events. You got a kid? What variety?"

"A girl. Carly." She saw his gaze shift down to her left hand. "Divorced."

"Okay. Lot of juggling, single parent, high-octane career. I bet you've got excellent hand-eye coordination."

"It takes practice." Millions, she thought. Millions stacked on top of millions, yet here he was, nursing a Guinness in a nice little pub in Savannah, looking like an average guy. Well, an average guy with a really cute dimple and a sexy little scar, a killer smile. But still.

"Why aren't you living on an island in the South Pacific?"

"I like Savannah. No point in being really rich if you can't live where you like. How long have you been a cop?"

"Um." She felt blindsided. The cute, funny guy was now a cute, funny multimillionaire. "I, ah, started with the FBI right out of college, then—"

"You were with the FBI? Like Clarice Starling? Like *Silence of the Lambs*? Or Dana Scully—another hot redhead, by the way. Special Agent MacNamara?" He let out a long, exaggerated breath. "You really are hot."

“Due to this, that and the other thing, I decided to shift to the Savannah-Chatham PD. Hostage and crisis negotiator.”

“Hostage?” Those dreamy eyes of his sharpened. “Like if a guy barricades himself in some office building with innocent bystanders and wants ten mil, or the release of all prisoners with brown eyes, you’re the one he’s talking to?”

“If it’s in Savannah, chances are good.”

“How do you know what to say? What not to say?”

“Negotiators are trained, and have experience in law enforcement. What?” she said when he shook his head.

“No. You have to *know*. Training, sure, experience, sure, but you have to know.”

Odd, she thought, that he’d understand when there were cops—Arnie Meeks sprang to mind—who didn’t. And never would. “You hope you know. And you have to listen, not just hear. And listening to you, here’s what I know. You live in Savannah because there wouldn’t be enough to do on that island in the South Pacific, or enough people to do it with. You don’t discount the sheer luck of buying a winning ticket along with a six-pack, but neither do you discount that sometimes things are simply meant. Telling me about the money wasn’t bragging, it was just fact—and fun. Now, the way I reacted to it mattered, in as much as if I’d suddenly put moves on you, we’d end this evening having sex, which would also be fun. But I’d no longer be stuck in your mind.”

“Something else I really like,” he commented. “A woman who does what she’s good at, and is good at what she does. If Suicide Joe was still working for me, I’d give the son of a bitch a raise.”

She had to smile, and by God, she was charmed right down to the balls of her feet. But . . . “That’s quite a bit for one drink,” she decided. “Now I’ve got to get on home.”

“You love your kid—that’s first and last. Your eyes lit up when you said her name. The divorce still bothers you on some level. I don’t know which, not yet. Your work isn’t a career, it’s a vocation. Cab-driving bartender,” he said. “I know how to listen, too.”

“Yes, indeed. That’s quite a bit, on both sides, for one drink.”

He rose when she did. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

"It'll be a hike. It's in the shop. I'm catching a CAT."

"Jeez. I'll drive you. Don't be stupid, 'cause you're not." He took her arm with one hand, signaled a goodbye to the bar with the other on the way to the door.

"You're the second man who's offered me a ride tonight."

"Oh yeah?"

"The first involved hopping onto the handlebars of his bike. As I told him, I don't mind the bus."

"Take you just as long to walk to the bus stop as it will for us to walk to the lot down here. And I can promise you a smoother ride home." He glanced down at her. "Nice night for a drive."

"I'm only up on Jones."

"One of my favorite streets in the city." He strolled now, sliding his hand down her arm to link it with hers. "So's this one."

And here she was after all, Phoebe thought, half of a couple wandering on River Street, hand in hand. His was warm, the palm hard and wide. The sort of hand, she imagined, that could wrench the top off a pickle jar, catch a fly ball or cup a woman's breast with equal ease.

His legs were long, his stride loose and lazy. A man, Phoebe judged, who knew how to take his time when he wanted to.

"Nice night for a walk, too, especially along the river," he commented.

"I have to get home."

"So you said. Not cold, are you?"

"No."

He walked into the lot, hailing the attendant. "How you doing there, Lester?"

"Doing what comes, boss. Evening, ma'am."

A bill passed from hand to hand so smoothly Phoebe nearly missed it. Then she was standing, staring at a gleaming white Porsche.

"No handlebars." Duncan shrugged, grinned, then opened the door for her.

"I'm forced to admit this will be better than the bus—or Johnnie Porter's Schwinn."

"You like cars?"

"If you'd asked me that a couple hours ago, I'd have given you

several reasons why cars and I are on nonspeaking terms currently.” She brushed a hand over the side of the buttery leather seat. “But I like this one just fine.”

“Me, too.”

He didn’t drive like a maniac, which she’d half-expected, and had to admit had half-hoped. He did drive, however, like a man who knew the city the way she knew her own bedroom—every nook and cranny.

She gave him the address and let herself enjoy the sort of ride she’d never imagined experiencing. When he pulled up in front of her house, she let out a long sigh. “Very nice. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” He got out, skirting the hood to take her hand again on the sidewalk. “Great house.”

“It is, yes.” There it was, she thought, rosy brick, white trim, tall windows, graceful terraces.

Hers, whether she liked it or not.

“Family home, family duty. Long story.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it over dinner tomorrow night?”

Something in her actively yearned when she turned toward him. “Oh, Duncan, you’re awfully cute, and you’re rich, and you’ve got a very sexy car. I’m just not in a position to start a relationship.”

“Are you in a position to eat dinner?”

She laughed, shook her head as he walked with her up to the parlor level. “Several nights a week, depending.”

“You’re a public servant. I’m the public. Have dinner with me tomorrow night. Or pick another activity, another day. I’ll work around it.”

“I have a date with my daughter tomorrow night. Saturday, dinner, as long as it’s understood this can’t go anywhere.”

“Saturday.”

He leaned in. It was smooth, but she saw the move. Still, it felt fussy and foolish to stop it. So she let his lips brush over hers. Sweet, she thought.

Then his hands ran down from her shoulders to her wrists, his mouth moved on hers. And she couldn’t think at all. Deep, penetrating warmth, quick, hard flutters, a leap and gallop of pulse.

She felt it, all of it, as her body seemed to let out a breath too long held.

Her head actually spun before he eased back, and she was left staring, staring into his eyes. She said, "Oh, well, damn it."

He flashed that grin at her. "I'll pick you up at seven. 'Night, Phoebe."

"Yeah, 'night." She managed to unlock the door, and when she glanced back, he was standing on the sidewalk, still grinning at her. "Good night," she said again.

Inside, she locked up, turned off the porch light. And wondered what the hell she'd gotten herself into.