

THE ART DEALER

by

SUZANNE FLEMING

SYNOPSIS

Mix six priceless works of art, a missing dealer, some serious insurance fraud, then throw in a few smart investigators, and what do you get? A fast-paced page turner that forces you to take notice.

Billionaire, Sam Richards, had no trouble outbidding the other hopefuls when six masterpieces went under the hammer at Marcus Murray's, Z Block art gallery. A few weeks later the paintings were stolen from the Richards' mansion. Insurance fraud was the hot gossip throughout the art world.

Detective Alexandra Miller defies the rulebook when she goes solo to talk to an informer in a part of town where the local currency is gang violence, not precious art works. She discovers the paintings are on Sam Richards' yacht and bound for his South Pacific getaway island.

Senior Sergeant, Tony Vascelli and Senior Detective, Tim Newman, want to know who set the firebomb in the cargo wharf precinct, and the name of the unidentified male seen running from the

area.

The action driven plot is a race against time to unravel a complex net of events, including a sea chase to the island of Nauru, kidnapping and murder. The Art Dealer demonstrates that some people will do anything to get their hands on five-hundred million dollars.

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CHAPTER ONE

Walking down a dark alley, in a neighbourhood specialising in pecking-order turf wars and drug deals negotiated by under-age kids, had never been Alexandra's idea of fun. Doing it alone at midnight, made her hyper-sensitive to sound and movement.

She buried the thought of abandoning the exercise by reminding herself she had made a promise. She didn't break promises. She gave her word she would respect his meet-up terms. They were clear enough. Come alone. Ditch the hardware. Don't tell anyone where she was going.. And don't record the meeting in the

Investigation Register.

Her boss, Senior Sergeant Tony Vascelli, would not gold-star her back-alley rendezvous. Vascelli's safety policy was non-negotiable. Risk-taking heroics did not impress him, and flying solo was off limits. Vascelli insisted the team exercise extreme caution; regardless of the environment they worked in. Disregarding orders put Vascelli in an extremely bad mood.

She shivered again as her bone marrow temperature plummeted to zero. Blatantly disregarding orders made her feel bad, but instead of aborting the mission, she tightened the belt of her long woollen coat and strode to the parked vehicle.

Alexandra gripped the handle, wrenched the door open and slid into the seat beside the driver. "Hello Marcus. It's been a long

time.” She said, “What’s so important that it comes with conditions?” She glared at him. “Conditions that could cost me my job.”

“I’m not holding a gun to your head cupcake. You’re a big girl. I’m sure you’re capable of making your own decisions about who you meet up with.” Marcus smiled at her, and turned the ignition key. “Relax Ally. When you tell Vascelli your story, he’ll probably promote you.”

“Yeah, right. Vascelli doesn’t reward officers who play hero. He busts their balls.”

Marcus laughed, “Good thing you’re female then, hey?” Alexandra didn’t respond, but a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“So where are we going?”

“To the boat ramp, cupcake.” He stressed the last word because he knew it drove her crazy.

“You know you’re a shit, don’t you?” Alexandra spat the words through clenched teeth.

“What’s wrong with cupcake? It’s a helluva lot better than Senior Detective Miller.” Marcus glanced sideways. He faked the injured look. “Sorry Ally, the title makes me nervous.” He sounded serious. “Your stripes just don’t fit into our history book.”

Alexandra didn’t respond. Mixed emotions flooded her heart, and a memory king-tide pounded her brain. For the past five years, she had been emotionally steady. Her life was predictable. Just the way she liked it.

Sitting beside Marcus messed with her

head. And her heart. She was a good cop and the fact she was deliberately throwing out the rulebook confused her. A familiar tingle in her blood scared her.

Twenty minutes later Marcus swung the Grand Cherokee, into the Sea Spray Marina car park. The full moon danced on the calm water and the maxi-priced vessels swaying gently in their moorings.

“We should walk down.” Marcus said quietly, “Not a good idea to spook the natives. Their boss pays them to play tough and scare off sightseers.”

Alex leaned forward to study the scene below. The marina appeared deserted, but looks can be deceiving. “Before we go down there, tell me exactly what you expect to find?” she said. “Don’t crap me Marcus. If you know something that might impact on my case, tell me now.” Her eyes

locked on to his, “This is not a game Marcus. It’s serious shit. People could end up dead.”

“Come on Ally. I’ve already told you I’ve seen the paintings. Spotting the difference between a genuine Van Gogh and a fake is what I do.”

Marcus exhaled heavily. His frustration was showing. “Sam Richards docked here two weeks ago. I saw the paintings in his private stateroom. There are six masterpieces down there on his yacht.” Marcus said, pointing towards the marina. “They’re the paintings he bought at the auction.” He continued, “The ones he claims were stolen from his Boston mansion.”

“I understand your story Marcus. What I

don't get, is how the hell you managed to score an invite to tour the yacht. Surely if Richards is trying to scam his insurance company, he wouldn't want people snooping around his staterooms."

Marcus sucked his lower lip and nodded. "OK, so I took a few liberties when I attended one of Sam's famous champagne bashes." His eyes pleaded with her, "Trust me Ally. I saw them and they are the real deal."

"Come on Marc, I'm not going down there until you tell me everything." Marcus pushed his frame back in the seat and rested his hands on the steering wheel. Alex studied him hard and waited.

"Two years ago, I bought a Day-Sailer. She's berthed here and I take her out most weekends."

Marcus glanced at Alex then continued, “I’ve made some yachtie friends Ally. We spend time together.”

“So, you know Sam Richards. He’s one of your yachting pals.” Alex said with attitude. Marcus ignored her tone. He was still unpacking the emotional surge he felt when she called him Marc. It took him back to the good days and he realized how much he missed her. Suppressing the desire to run his fingers along the side of her face was hard work. Old habits die hard.

Alexandra lowered her voice, “So what’s the game plan?”

“We’re going down to Sam’s yacht and we’re going to take a long hard look at the paintings.”

“Great idea. We just knock on good old

Sam's door and ask him for a viewing hey?" She shook her head and added, "He'll be thrilled to be dragged out of bed at one a.m. by a couple of strangers." Alex rolled her eyes, "Oh sorry. I forgot you two are pals. Maybe he'll pop his best champagne for us."

"Richards isn't on the boat. A couple of his security stooges take care of the shop while he's on shore."

"Come on Marc, this is a dumb idea. If you're certain the paintings are on board, let me do it by the book. I'll get a search warrant and we'll check the vessel out properly. Sneaking around like a couple of boy scouts won't get us anywhere."

She held his gaze, "Please Marc, let's do this right. We do it properly and we

nab the bastard. If he is pulling an insurance scam it will be easy to stitch him up.”

“Don’t let the media version of Sam Richards distort your perception Ally. Beneath the glamour is one mean character who has gathered a lot of powerful friends. I’m guessing he’s taking the paintings overseas, where they’ll end up on the black- market. Moving them by yacht is a smart way to stay under the custom’s radar.”

“Don’t do it like this Marcus. It will only jeopardise the case.” Alex pleaded. “We don’t have to do it alone.”

“Richards has already logged a departure plan with the local harbour master. He’s moving out at sun-up.”

“All the more reason for us to do it

right Marc.” She looked worried. “Once he’s in international waters he’ll be home free.”

“Not if we can get the goods on him before he leaves.” Marc gave her a reassuring smile, “We get on board, take a few date stamped photos of the paintings, then we make it official.” He opened the door quietly, “Come on Ally, we’re wasting valuable time sitting here arguing. Let’s just do it.”

Against her better judgment, Alexandra climbed out and walked to the front of the vehicle. She looked down at the marina and studied the vessel Marcus had pointed out earlier. Because of its ostentatious size it stood out like a skyscraper in a suburban neighbourhood.

Lights were shining through two lower deck portholes, but the rest of the vessel

was in darkness. The moon made it easy to see the boat, but Alex knew it would also make an unannounced visit difficult. She inhaled deeply, pushed her shoulders back and said, “Okay. Lead the way superman.”

CHAPTER TWO

Senior Sergeant Tony Vascelli and Senior Detective Tim Newman scanned the stack of files on the desk. They were looking for anything to help them compile a shortlist of burglary suspects.

Art was a special commodity. It was an exclusive market street thugs didn't muscle in on. Whoever did the heist had to know the product, and their way around the art world. The thieves knew exactly what they were lifting. They probably had a solid reputation for handling quality merchandise with respect and care.

“Our man had to know enough about the stuff to identify the exact paintings to lift.” Newman said with conviction. “And he needed the right equipment to

transport them safely to wherever he's hiding them. Paintings have to be handled with care or their value takes a dive. Big time."

"Which makes me think he, or she, didn't do this thing alone." Vascelli replied.

"Definitely a he, boss. A she would have had a problem scaling the bloody great walls around the Richards estate." Vascelli nodded, "Plus it would take a pretty strong woman to carry six paintings in one go." Vascelli looked at his watch. "What time did you tell Alex we were going to have the update meeting?"

"I sent her a text last night to say same time, same place." Newman frowned.

"Come to think of it, she didn't respond. That's not like her. Should I punch her number again?"

“No. Let’s wait for a while. She might be caught in traffic.” Vascelli said. He felt uneasy because Miller was a punctuality freak. In the four years she’d worked for him, she had never been late for a meeting.

Newman made a fresh pot of coffee and handed Vascelli a mug. The room was heavy with the anxiety they were both trying hard to hide.

Alexandra was an hour late. She didn’t do late. And she didn’t forget to call in. This morning she’d blown the schedule with zero contact. After a short silence Newman thumped his mug on the desk. He ignored the coffee streaming towards the files. “I’m going to find her boss. It just doesn’t add up.” He said in a thick New Jersey accent.

Vascelli peered over his glasses, “Settle down son, she’s entitled to miss a

meeting.” His deeply creased forehead conflicted with the calming tone of his voice. “Still, it might be a good idea to check on her. Perhaps she’s ill. Or maybe she’s had an accident.” He said like a concerned father.

“I’ll go” Newman blustered. “You’re busy and I’ve got nothing urgent going on right now.”

Vascelli shook his head slowly. “Thanks for the offer, but I’ll do it.” He said, pushing the soggy files towards Newman. “While I’m gone you can sort this mess out.”

“Come on Sarge. You can’t do that.”

“Sure, I can.” Vascelli grinned. “I’m still in charge here, remember.” He grabbed his coat from the hook and headed towards the door.

“When you’ve mopped up the coffee, you can finish that report I’ve been waiting for. You mightn’t consider it urgent, but I do.” Vascelli said over his shoulder.

Newman gave Vascelli’s back the finger. “Yeah. Right” he mumbled.

“Bad attitude son.” Vascelli said without turning. He didn’t see the gesture, but he sensed it.

He smiled as he gently closed the door. He liked the lad. The attitude made Vascelli’s life more interesting. Not many officers had the pluck to smart mouth him face-to-face.

Sure, some of the younger guys made the occasional crack, when they thought he couldn’t hear them, but not Newman. If he had something to say, he just spat it out. He thought it. He said it. No sugar coating.

Take it or leave it.

Vascelli liked Newman's values. Under all the bluster, Newman was fiercely loyal and Vascelli knew the young detectives had the greatest respect for him.

Vascelli also knew if any of the young officers ever put the boss down, Newman was on it in a shot. He had a unique way with words. He made sure there was no misunderstanding about the rules. It was his way, or the highway.

The young men hero-worshipped Newman. If he said the boss was a damn smart cop, who had earned his stripes in ways they could only dream about, they didn't argue with him.

Vascelli believed a small amount of slagging-off was ok. It was a national sport and an essential part of the male-bonding

process. It raised the young blokes' perception of status; if only in their own testosterone blasted brains.

Vascelli drove to Alex's apartment building and walked up to level three. He pressed apartment 305's buzzer and waited for a response. When none came, he rang again. No sounds were coming from inside. No TV. No radio. No noise to indicate Alex was home. Vascelli checked the door. It was shut tight. His brow creased into a heavy frown. Something wasn't right. Alex loved her music. If she was home, Jimmy Hendrix would be bouncing off the walls.

He plucked his cell phone from his pocket and called Newman. "I think you'd better come over." Vascelli said. "And it would be useful if you could bring a bunch of picks with you."

“I’m there.” Newman said, his voice suddenly hoarse from tension. “I’ll push the blue lights and honkers to the max.” He was down in the car park before he hit the end-call button.

The trip took fifteen minutes; twelve less than normal. His strobe- lightshow cleared the roads as fast as a fox in a chicken shed.

Newman left the car on the grass verge and raced up the internal fire-stairs to Alexandra’s apartment. He gave Vascelli a quick nod and got to work on the lock.

He had the job finished in fifty seconds. “Not bad son. Not bad at all.” Vascelli said with genuine admiration for Newman’s lock picking skill.

Vascelli pushed the living room door inwards and looked around. Newman checked the bedrooms, while his boss

scanned the other rooms. Everything looked normal.

Neatly made double bed. Gleaming stainless-steel sink. Not an unwashed dish in sight. The apartment was as tidy as its owner. “So, what do we do now?” Newman asked.

CHAPTER THREE

“Just follow my lead. Don’t question anything Ally. Let me set the scene and the pace.” Marc said. His eyes pleaded with her to trust him.

Alex nodded. Marc put his arm around her waist and began to stumble forward like someone who had had too much to drink. She went along with the charade and supported his weight. They made their way along the decking until they reached Sam Richards’ vessel then Marc lurched to the right and pretended to lose his balance. He grabbed a railing to steady himself. “Come on cupcake, just one nightcap.” He yelled, “Don’t be a party pooper.”

Marcus rolled his body over the railing of the yacht’s front deck. “The night’s still young cupcake. Let’s enjoy ourselves while we still can.”

Alex almost laughed. “You told me we were going sailing.” She yelled at him. “Now you’re too bloody drunk to even walk by yourself.” She climbed over the rail and stood in front of him. “I’ve had enough of your stupidity Charlie. Grow up. Act like a man, instead of an idiot.” She delivered a convincing performance.

While Alex was deciding on how to a follow up, the sound of heavy boots echoed through the night air.

“Hey, you two. What the hell are you doin’ here?” one of the boot-men yelled. “This is a private vessel. Get your arses outta here, before I throw you to the friggin’ sharks.

“Come on pal. There’s no need to be unfriendly,” Marcus called back in a hurt voice. He tried to stand up, but slumped in a heap, the boots were only inches away

from his face. “My girl’s having a PMS moment and I’m over it. I’m going to bed.” He dragged himself to his feet again. “You two can buddy up together. I’m movin’ out.” Marcus headed for the lower deck door and half- walked and half-fell down the stairs.

The boots were after him in a flash. Alex pushed passed them both. “You idiot Charlie. Are you okay?” her voice trembled with concern. It was wasn't a performance. It was real.

She clambered down and knelt beside him. His head was bleeding. It wasn't life threatening, but it was making a mess. “Oh my God. You're hurt.” She looked around for something to wipe him with, then yelled at the boot-men, “Well don't just stand here. Do something. Get a wet cloth.” She was tempted to add “you goons” but

decided it might trigger a nasty response.

The boots looked at each other. Confusion was new to them. They usually called the shots. No one had ever pulled a stunt like this before. This was uncharted territory for them both.

Alex used their uncertainty to her advantage. “Come on guys. He’s in trouble.” She said in a gentler tone. “He’ll die from blood loss if we don’t do something.” There was no chance of him dying, but she could tell the boots didn’t want to take a chance. A dead man on their watch was not a good way to impress their boss.

The shorter boot-man jumped over Marcus and raced into the galley. He came back with a towel and threw it at Alex. The tall one just stood glued to the spot. “Thanks.” Alex said as she began

dabbing at Marcus's face. After most of the blood was cleared away, Marcus yelled at her to stop. After screaming she was a cold-blooded Nazi, Alex threw the towel at him and told him to call Florence Nightingale next time he needed help.

Marcus let his head loll backwards and his eyes roll up in their sockets. Letting out a deep moan, he knew the fake alcohol-induced coma was worthy of an Oscar.

Alex tried to wake him, but Marc kept up the performance. "Oh my God, he's out to it." She said, looking up at Tweedledum and Tweedledee. "Is there anywhere we can put him until he comes around again?" Alex said. "Please."

The boot-guys glanced at each other and shrugged. "What the hell. Let's drag him into the lounge and try to sober the idiot up." the tall one finally said. "Then we can

send the two of you on your way.”

Shorty nodded and locked his arms under Marcus’s shoulders. Tall boy hooked onto his feet. They dragged Marc along a narrow passage and into a formal living area where they threw him onto a sofa. Alex followed.

“Thank you so much. I don’t know what I would have done without you.” She said. “I’ve never seen him like this before. He’s usually a nice guy, but tonight he’s been downing beers like there’s no tomorrow.”

“We’ll sort him out for you little lady. Then you can take him home and put him to bed.” Shorty said. “He’ll be fine. Well, apart from the big-time sore head he’ll be nursing in the morning.”

Shorty grinned at Alex, “I ain’t never seen

anyone die from a few scratches and a gut full of grog.” He grinned some more, then added. “You clean him up little lady, and I’ll fix him one of my power tonics. Guaranteed to clear his head at rocket speed.” Shorty chuckled.

Tall and Short left the room, but Alex could hear them arguing about how to handle their uninvited guests. Marc opened his eyes and whispered, “Find the stateroom and take the photos.”

“Are you crazy? I can’t just wander around like I own the place.” Alex snapped, “Those guys are paid to keep people like us off this bloody boat. They aren’t going to put up with us for much longer.”

“They don’t have to. Just take the photos then we can scam.” Marcus insisted. “If they see you, just say you’re looking for the bathroom.” He tilted his head towards the

door, “Go.”

Only half committed to the plan, Alex moved towards the door. She looked back at Marcus but before she could argue he said, “For Christ’s sake just do it.”

Alex poked her head around the door and checked the passageway. It was clear. She stepped out and headed towards the stateroom. She could hear the boot-men in the galley. They were arguing loudly, so their voices covered her footsteps and gave her the courage to continue. Following Marc’s instructions, she found the stateroom on the right and slipped inside.

She flicked the light switch and found herself in a large entertaining area. The Ritz quality room screamed money. A scaled down version, of a two-grand-a-night suite. 'The designer must have bagged a pretty sum for this fit out',

she said to herself. The original portholes had been replaced with spectacular crystal lead-light windows. The end result was breathtaking.

Gilt-embossed ceilings matched the ornate fireplace that housed a state-of-the-art, ceramic-log, gas heater. The room's atmosphere was warm and welcoming. Alex stared up at the crystal chandelier; amazed that the roof structure could hold its weight.

A slamming door reminded her that she wasn't there to carry out a décor evaluation. She plucked a Galaxy smartphone from her jacket and slipped into the adjoining bedroom. Marcus said that's where she'd find the paintings. Coming face to face with great works of art made her gasp.

Alex snapped two photos of each painting,

shoved the phone back in her pocket and left. The boot-men had stopped yelling. Their noise replaced with an eerie silence.

She returned to the small lounge where Marcus was and held her breath as she lowered the door handle. When she opened it she saw Marc sitting opposite her. A fresh bruise had exploded through his tanned skin, making the cut from the stair-slide pale into insignificance. Alex froze for a second, then her line of vision changed to the two men on the sofa, at the far end of the room. She waited for one of them to speak. Neither did. They wanted her to make the first move.

Tall-boy finally broke the silence. “Enjoy your little tour sweetheart?” His eyes were rock hard. Alex said nothing. “I don’t know what you’re playing at lady,” he yelled, “but I sure as hell do know, your

drunken mate has sobered up pretty quick.” His glared at Marc, “So what’s the game hey?” he paused for a second, “Make it the truth drunk-boy, or you’ll be swimming without a lifejacket.”

Alex pulled herself together “There is no game bigfoot.” She shouted. “Charlie here might have sobered up, but I don’t give a damn. I’m over all this crap.” She grabbed her handbag from the couch. “You blokes have fun. I’m outta here.” She glared at Marc from the doorway. “Delete my number Charlie. You won’t need it anymore.”

“Wait up ladybird. Get back here. We ain’t finished yet.”

“Oh, yes we are.” Alex said and ran like the true Olympian sprinter that she was. She made it to the deck before heavy steps on the metal stairs rang out. She would have

made it to the dock if the moon hadn't decided to duck behind a cloud.

Alex groaned when a pair of heavy hands grabbed her shoulders. "Fuck off, you idiot." She yelled, bashing her attacker's groin with her boot. His scream told Alex she had inflicted serious pain.

The adrenalin rush propelled her upwards. She sprang onto the boardwalk and ran. When she reached the beach, she hurled herself into a wide hedge and willed her breathing to slow down. She strained to hear anything that might tell her how the boot- men felt about her sudden departure, and the counter measures they had planned.

CHAPTER FOUR

Newman and Vascelli didn't return to the station immediately. They found a quiet coffee shop where they sat in silence. Vascelli's mind was focused on Alex's empty apartment. His frown deepened as he tried to make sense of her disappearance.

“Come on Sarge stop with the thinking. We need to come up with a plan.” Newman said. His tone was urgent.

Vascelli looked over the rim of his glasses and said, “Plans come after the thinking son. We can't draw a diagram until we know what we're dealing with.” He stirred his coffee slowly and watched the creamy foam turn into a whirlpool. Following the swirling vortex helped his

head clear.

“What do we know at this point?” Vascelli asked but didn’t wait for Newman to answer. “We have a colleague, who is behaving outside her normal patterns.

Of course, there could be a number of reasons for this. She might have taken ill was and now tucked up in a hospital bed. On the other hand, she might have a new boyfriend she hasn’t told us about, and she spends her free time with him. Maybe he doesn’t have an alarm clock.”

“Yeah right. And she might have won the lottery and taken off to the Caribbean,” Newman snarled. “Get a grip boss. There is no new boyfriend. She’s in trouble and we’re sitting here like a couple of wackos yacking about stuff even a five-year-old kid would target as rubbish.”

Vascelli smiled. “You’re right. It’s not like Alexandra to miss work. Even if she’s ill, she’d message in. Something has happened to her, and like you, I think all the news is going to be bad.”

“Finally.” Newman sighed, “Now we’re getting somewhere.” he said. “Okay, let’s timeframe the situation. She finished work around nine p.m. Turner, Brady and I dropped her off; after we called it a night on the art dealer case.”

“How did she seem?”

“Tired. But then we all were.” Newman squinted and did a mental replay of them driving Alex home and saying goodbye outside her apartment block. “I walked her to the front door and waited until she let herself in. She waved to us from behind the glass and we drove off. She seemed fine.”

“Okay let’s check her phone records to see if she made any calls or if anyone phoned her.” Vascelli said. He felt better now they could plot their action. “I’ll get Turner to check the hospitals and Brady can check the cab companies to see if she left the apartment again.”

It was Newman’s time to frown. “Can we do that boss? She’s a private citizen and she’s not under suspicion for anything. It’s not ethical. Is it?”

Vascelli chuckled. “When did you start worrying about ethical behaviour son?” He smiled gently, “Of course we can do it. She’s a colleague and we think something bad has happened to her. You know as well as me that the first twenty-four hours are vital. We need to follow the clues now, before leaves bury the track.” Vascelli nodded, more to himself than to

Newman. He was committed to the plan and anxious to get it happening. “Come on son. Let’s go back to the station. The fog could close in at any time.”

Twenty-minutes later Newman, Brady and Turner gathered in Vascelli’s office for a briefing. The big man did not downplay his concerns and five minutes later, they were giving the phones a serious workout. Forty minutes later they re-grouped to share their findings. Newman reported Alex had received a call from an unlisted Bay area number. Unlisted was a problem, but Newman expected to have the number within an hour.

A Special Investigations mate was happy to help; he knew the favour would be reciprocated. That’s how it worked in the force. Forget to do pay-back and your name ends up on a blacklist. Repeated pay-back-

failures had a negative impact on the offender's investigations. Stonewalling was a highly effective way to manage an overdue pay-back debt.

Turner checked out all the local hospitals and ambulance stations. Alex's name was not on any of their lists. She hadn't visited her local church to ask the priest to hear her confession. None of the local pharmacists had dispensed a hangover draft or sold Alex any self-medicating products.

Brady struck gold when he discovered a yellow cab picked up a young woman from Alexandra's building at eleven-thirty. The driver dropped her off in Baxter Street. The dark end. There was no record of a return trip. Brady double checked the cab companies and drew a blank.

“Excellent work lads. Excellent work

indeed.” Vascelli meant it. “Now we have something concrete to go on.” He smiled at the young officers, “Turner and Brady, you talk to the Baxter Street locals. Take a photo of Alexandra with you and see if anyone saw her last night.” he paused, “Or this morning for that matter.”

“We’re on to it boss.” Turner said, standing and buttoning his jacket.

Vascelli’s desk phone rang. He answered it and nodded to Newman, “It’s your S.I. pal. He has the information you requested.” Vascelli said and held out the handset.

CHAPTER FIVE

Alex strained her ears and waited. Sunup was only a few hours away. She knew she had to make a move before Sam Richards arrived. Stress interfered with her brain signals, but a message to trade the bushes for somewhere safe flashed with neon sign intensity. The sound of heavy boots on the boardwalk had her on red alert again. Tweedledum had sorted his injured manhood and was back in the game. The search party number had expanded. Tweedledee had joined the hunt.

Abuse was yelled at her. The message was clear. She'd be flushed out and punished. The end result would not be a pretty sight.

Alex's breath-holding marathon

continued until the sound of running-feet receded into the distance. She guessed the two tough guys were on their way to the car park. She was unsure of the immediate land formation, but decided to exit the bushes, take a sharp left, then sprint up the beach, using the cliff- overhang as a shield.

The moon was out again, but heavy cloud-cover cut the glow. It was just possible to see the dark shapes of boulders and other objects that might trip her up. Although an exercise in supreme self-discipline, Alex downgraded her pace to slow. Running was an attention getter; powerwalking was the safest way to put distance between herself and the marina.

Looking ahead Alex made out the silhouette of a huge landmass. When she reached it, she discovered a solid wall of

granite formed a barrier, making it impossible for her to continue. From this point on, the only way out was up. Without proper climbing gear, Alex doubted she'd be able to scale the cliff.

The overhanging cliff cut off the light from the moon. Alex groped the rocks, trying to understand the physical nature of the place. Wind erosion, possibly over thousands of years, had gouged shallow grottos into the cliff face. She found a narrow vertical ledge and hoisted herself on to it. She found another ledge above that one and quickly pulled herself up again. The horizon was flushed with the first signs of dawn. She knew it wouldn't be long before the sun revealed her position.

The tension left her body for the first time since her escape, Adrenalin was still pumping through her veins, but her leg

muscles finally relaxed, her head cleared, and she decided on her next move.

Alex strained to pick up sounds below but heard none. She was either too far away to hear what was going on back at the marina, or the boot-men had stopped looking for her. Of course, it might also mean, they were above, waiting patiently for her to show herself again. She had no idea what happened to Marcus after her escape but guessed he was still captive on the vessel. Sam Richards intended to sail at sunup. The only way she could help Marc was to get to safety and contact Vascelli.

The photos on her phone would give them what they needed to get a search warrant and keep Richards in the port. Alex inhaled heavily. Time was running out. If Marc was right about the vessel being cleared to exit at six a.m., she had no time to waste.

The soft, pre-dawn, light allowed Alex to see the coastline more clearly. It also allowed her to understand the local environment. She moved slowly along the ledge and discovered it opened on to a deep cavern that curved the full length of the bluff.

Alex explored the cave and found it ended abruptly. She pulled herself onto a narrow ledge that extended beyond the front of the opening and then clambered upwards. The unstable shale and sand made the going tough and the razor-sharp rocks sliced into her hands. Bleeding and exhausted she finally pulled herself to the top of the cliff. Tears of relief rolled down her cheeks when she saw a number of large houses in front of her.

Alex studied the homes and watched for signs of activity inside. There wasn't any.

It was still early, so she guessed the occupants were sleeping. Best not to wake them she told herself. Better to find somewhere safe to hide, then call Vascelli and wait for him to come to the rescue. She crept slowly forward, conscious of the fact the houses probably had surveillance cameras and alarms. Or even more worrying, dogs.

Accessing the properties was easy. All the homes were built close to the cliff face and none of them had front fences. Alex studied each house carefully, and then headed for the smaller one, at the far end of the row. She moved silently along a side pathway, saying a prayer of thanks for the extensive combat training she'd done at the academy.

In the rear garden she discovered a playhouse and decided the children it had

been built for, had long lost interest in treehouses and games of daring-do. A sturdy flip-latch held the small front door closed, but there was no lock attached. Alex squeezed through the narrow opening and found herself in a small square space. It was too low to stand at full height, but it was dry, and an old Persian rug covered the floor.

Alex pressed herself into a far corner and dug into her jacket for her phone. Her fingers moved around the large front pocket. It was empty. Panic made her stand too quickly and she cracked her head on the roof beam. She slumped back on the floor, inhaled deeply and told herself to get a grip. Slowly and systematically, she checked all the other pockets, but the phone was gone. “Oh shit.” she said aloud. “Freaking hell. This can’t be happening.”

Her shoulders slumped; her head fell forward and tears of frustration splashed onto her knees. After a moment of self-pity, Alex forced herself to focus again. It was useless to search for the smartphone. It could be anywhere. She had to find a payphone as quickly as possible.

Although she had no idea where to find a callbox, she knew that searching for one was at least a step forward. Hiding out in a kid's playhouse was a waste of precious time.

After a brisk twenty-minute hike along the headland, Alex came to a small fishing village. There wasn't a callbox anywhere, but a sign in the general store told her there was a payphone inside.

When Arthur Gilbert arrived to open the store thirty-minutes later, he was thrilled to find her sitting on his veranda. It wasn't

often he had someone new to talk to. A visit from a pretty young woman was as rare as finding a gold nugget on the beach.

Alex called Vascelli and gave him a cut down version of the past twenty-four hours. She held the phone away from her ear after she explained about the escape. Vascelli used words he kept for times of extreme anger and frustration. He told her to stay where she was and speak to no one. Alex promised, hung up, hoisted herself onto an ancient bar stool and chatted with Arthur over the strong coffee he had prepared.

Arthur was a genuine local. He had lived in the area all his life. He took over the store from his father, thirty-five years earlier. His father had taken it over, from his father, thirty-five years before that. Alex felt the stress of the past hours melt away.

Arthur was a charming raconteur. His village-life stories were funny and fascinating. His story about a local police officer who accidentally locked himself in a cell made Alex laugh. Seems the poor guy wasn't found for two days. It might have been longer if one of his mates hadn't decided to check out why the phones weren't working.

Alex felt a pang of sadness saying goodbye to Arthur when Vascelli and Newman arrived an hour later. She promised she would return one day soon.

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