

# CHAPTER 1

Classy slumped onto the stool as the bartender pushed an Irish coffee to her. She sipped it and marveled at the taste as it warmed her throat and insides. “Thanks, Randy.”

“You through for the night?” Randy asked.

“The sun’s up isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I just wondered,” Randy ignored her querulous answer. “Pender was in here looking for you. Said he had a whale.”

“Yeah, that probably means he wants me to do a four-hundred pounder.”

“Jesus Classy, why don’t you get out of this business. A looker like you, you could find a decent job.”

“You think Pender would just let me walk away,” Classy huffed. “I’m his biggest meal ticket right now.”

“Yeah, and he’s using you up. How many last night? Ten Johns in twelve hours.”

“Look, Randy. I told him I wanted out. He said the only way I was leaving this job was in a body bag.”

“He’s just trying to scare you. Pender’s all bark and no bite. That’s why he runs girls. He can intimidate them.”

“Just take your money and run, Classy. Get the hell out of Dodge.”

Classy studied Randy for a long time. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should leave. Go back home and start over. This certainly isn’t what I had planned for my life.”

Another customer entered the bar. “We’re closed, sir,” Randy advised him.

The man asked for directions and Classy closed out the sounds around her. As she always did, she withdrew to a place where no one could reach her. A place where Classy

didn't exist. A place where . . . where . . . she couldn't even recall her own name.

"Hey, you deaf?" Pender shook her elbow. "I swear. Classy. Sometimes I think you go into a trance or something."

"Sorry, Pen. I'm just exhausted." She drained her coffee cup and slid from the bar stool. "I'll see you tonight."

"Wait, I need you to take care of one more john."

"Seriously, Pender. I can barely stand up."

"Thousand bucks. Twice your usual take," Pender dangled the carrot in front of her. "He's waiting for me to call him. He'll pay with PayPal."

"Like I'd ever see that," Classy snorted.

"I'll pay you cash, right now. Just . . . please Classy. He requested you. Look!" Pender pulled a wad of money from his pocket and started counting out hundred-dollar bills. "Your twenty-five hundred from last night and another thousand for this fellow."

Classy licked her lips as she recounted the money. *With this and what I have saved I can get out of this town*, she thought.

"Okay, but he's the last one today." She slipped the greenbacks inside her bra.

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Barron Windom drove his Mercedes through the gates of his thriving business, Mulch & More Landscaping Supplies. His daughter was getting married tomorrow and he needed to move some money around in his accounts to cover the expenses that had skyrocketed.

"Boss, you'd better come look at this," his manager skipped from one foot to the other. "I've never seen anything like it."

Barron laughed. "What is so exciting you can't stand still, Willie."

"At the back of the lot, where the road dead ends." Willie's wide-eyed glare made Barron pay attention.

“Is it something bad?”

“Yeah, boss, really bad.” Willie sprinted a few feet ahead of Barron as if checking out things before his boss proceeded.

“There,” Willie pointed a shaking finger toward something half buried in the mulch pile.

Barron pushed past Willie for a closer look. “Oh, dear Jesus,” he exclaimed before he threw up.

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## CHAPTER 2

Java Jarvis half listened as the Director droned on about the purpose of the new task force. She was more interested in the brunette at the other end of the conference table.

They were introducing themselves, their name, rank and serial number. Each talked about their specialty, areas in which they excelled.

“I have a license to . . .” the redhead faded away as Java wondered which of her own licenses would be required for the assignment they were undertaking. Java had a driver’s license, a commercial driver’s license, a concealed carry license, a license to practice medicine, a license to perform weddings, baptisms and funerals, a license to kill, a license from Microsoft declaring her a computer genius—to go with her degree from MIT, a notary license, a license to practice law in the US, a liquor license and did I mention a license to kill? Her weapons of choice were a knife and her bare hands.

“Java, it’s your turn,” the director repeated. “Would you like to share your areas of expertise with us?”

“Umm, I have a driver’s license and I love computers.”

“That’s it?” The brunette smirked.

“Oh, and a concealed carry license,” Java added smirking back.

“You look like a girl scout,” the brunette taunted her.

“That’s my other specialty,” Java grinned. “I look harmless.” She wiggled her eyebrows at the brunette. “Trust me, I’m not!”

The brunette gave her a sultry look and shrugged.

*She’s flirting with me,* Java thought. *Yep, she’s flirting with me.*

“Your base of operation is a restaurant called Home of the Blues,” the director continued. “Java actually owns it and has operated out of it for several years. It’s amazing how

much information one can glean from a tongue loosened by booze. As always, Java will run the operation.”

“Barbie, you’ll do your dumb blonde waitress routine.” The Director addressed a cute little blonde with dimples to die for, who was anything but a dumb blonde.

“I need a better cover than a waitress,” the brunette demanded.

“Oh, we have a better cover for you,” Java grinned. “You’re the chief dish washer.”

The brunette didn’t rise to the bait. She knew she’d be front and center in the operation. That was why she was here.

“Chris you’ll take over as head cashier and part-time hostess. Kat, you’re the resident blues singer during this maneuver.”

The brunette raised a perfectly arched brow and gave Java a “I told you so” look.

Katrina Yvonne Cane was one of those breathtaking beauties that drove both sexes mad. Brown bedroom eyes with a permanent “think you can handle this” look and a right cross that would lay low anyone who tried, made her irresistible.

“You’ll report to Java,” the Director concluded.

Java locked gazes with Kat. “That means you’ll be working under me,” Java’s devilish grin made Kat blush and scowl.

“It means I’ll file sexual harassment charges against you if you even glance at me sideways,” Kat threatened.

“Oh, she scratches,” Barbie giggled. “I see claw marks and blood in your future, Java.” Everyone laughed.

“Ladies,” the Director quieted them. “We’re after a killer—or killers—that travels between Louisiana and Texas. “Java, you want to bring us up to speed?”

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Java pushed a remote control that raised a panel exposing their electric white board.

“I miss chalk,” Barbie spouted.

Java zipped a “Z” across the electric whiteboard with her finger. “I don’t know,” she grinned. “I rather like fingers, don’t you Kat?”

“Director, must I work with her?” Kat glared at Java.

“You four were handpicked, Kat,” FBI Director Karen Pierce snorted. “You know Java’s just trying to get a rise out of you. This is one of the goriest cases I’ve ever worked. Before we finish, I think you’ll welcome Java’s attempts to distract you.”

“Personally,” Barbie laughed, “I’m looking forward to working under Java. She’s a legend in the world of—.”

“Bedrooms,” Kat butted in.

“I was going to say criminal investigation,” Barbie smirked. “But maybe you know more about Java than I do.

“Thank you, Barbie,” the smile disappeared from Java’s face. “Each of you were selected for this assignment because you have special skills.

“Although Kat looks like a sexy cream puff, her abilities in hand-to-hand combat are phenomenal. Trust me she can kill a man faster than you can blink an eye. Kat’s married and I respect that. As far as I’m concerned that takes her off the market, which makes my teasing harmless. Have you noticed that I keep the table between Kat and me when I razz her?”

Everyone laughed, and the group relaxed. Beginning to meld into the cohesive unit they would need to be to survive their assignment.

“Although we’re all licensed to carry guns, we won’t during this operation. We were selected because of our hand-to-hand combat abilities.

“Chris Canton’s weapon is pressure points. Let Chris get her hands on you and you can be dead or paralyzed within a few seconds.

“The newest member of our team, Barbie Wallace is as deadly as a rattlesnake. Her specialty is poisons. I’m

guessing that Barbie has enough poison on her person right now to kill everyone in this room. Am I right, Barbie?"

"Maybe," Barbie blushed.

"Don't be fooled by her innocent, blushing. She's a blonde. Blondes can blush at will." Java demonstrated letting a slow redness creep up her chest to her face. "It's in our genes."

"How many women has that worked on?" Kat demanded.

Java cleared her throat. "I've lost count."

"Director Pierce will supply us with every gadget imaginable. If we need it Karen will get it for us." Java continued.

"Drop the titles and ranks. Always call each other by your first names. Use the alias last names we've assigned to you. They're all backed up in every database imaginable. Beau Braxton will be our police coordinator with the local authorities. He's working another decapitation murder right now and couldn't make this meeting. He'll join us for dinner and drinks later tonight."

"This case has been turned over to us because we have the heads of four women and no bodies. We think we're dealing with one or more serial killers."

"Were all the heads found in Louisiana?" Barbie asked.

"No, two in Louisiana and two in Texas."

##

"May I buy you a drink, Kat?" Java asked.

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to," Java grinned her best little girl grin settling into the seat next to Kat. "Where's your husband? If I had a woman like you, I'd never get very far away from her."

"If you had a woman like me, you wouldn't know what to do with her."

"Try me," Java growled.

Kat leaned over and whispered in Java's ear. Java's eyes darted around the room as Kat's soft lips brushed her earlobe.

The team watched as the two sparred with each other. "Is that a controlled blush that just enveloped you," Chris laughed, "or is Kat setting you on fire?"

"I was just asking Java an innocent question," Kat purred.

Java cleared her throat and licked her lips. "There's no such thing as an innocent question."

The four talked and danced as they waited for Beau to join them. It was obvious Barbie was enamored of her new boss.

"I swear Java, I keep expecting you to rip open your shirt and expose a big S on your chest," Barbie giggled as she touched Java's arm.

"Yes, I'm sure she's had a big ass on her chest," Kat retorted.

"S a big S as in Supergirl," Barbie hissed.

Java smiled, enjoying the good-natured teasing going on between her teammates. Kat shot her a smoldering look and Java sobered. "Enough joking around ladies. We've got some nasty work to do."