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MIDNIGHT VENGEANCE

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• final cover coming soon •

Chapter One

Portland, Oregon

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'Inside/Out' Exhibit of Suzanne Huntington's interior designs

“Girlfriend on your six.”

A hard elbow jabbed into Morton “Jacko” Jackman’s hard side. It would have knocked a lesser man down. Former Senior Chief Douglas Kowalski wasn’t known for his gentleness or delicate touch. But then neither was Jacko. He was a former Navy SEAL too, just like the Senior. But both of them were out of the service and working in the same company, Alpha Security International, so Jacko could knock Senior on his ass and not be court-martialled.

Except, well, Senior was a good guy.

Senior’s elbow couldn’t knock Jacko down, but his knees nearly buckled at the thought of the woman behind him.

“Not my girlfriend,” he mumbled, hoping the tan he’d gotten over his dark skin this past week teaching Mexican federales in Baja the fine art of fucking with the enemy hid his red face.

Senior shifted his eyes sideways, a hint of a smile on his big ugly mug. “No?” He shook his head and jabbed him again. “So why the chubby every time you lay eyes on her?”

Fuck. Busted. Jacko pulled his tuxedo jacket lower. He’d learned to control his dick at 14. What was he—back in high school? Why couldn’t he be in jeans, like he was most times he saw her? Tight stiff ones that kept the hard-on down because it didn’t have anywhere to go.

Except you don’t wear jeans to a fancy art exhibit. Particularly not when your boss’s wife’s works were on show.

“Bravo red, moving fast,” the chief murmured. Anyone further than a foot from them wouldn’t have heard a word and wouldn’t have understood anyway. The orientation clock. Bravo red meant she was moving behind him to his right. Man.

Lauren Dare.

Oh. God.

Jacko thought he could smell her but that was crazy. Still, why not imagine he could smell her because she drove him crazy in every other way? Though smelling Lauren in a room full of hundreds of people, every single one—man, woman and other—wearing perfume or cologne, with caterers walking around with hot food on platters and glasses

of wine everywhere...well, that stretched even Jacko's sense of his own craziness.

He wasn't known for this. He wasn't what Suzanne Huntington, the big boss's wife and the star of the show, would call a fanciful man. He was known for being hard-headed and hard-hearted and hard-bodied. He was a roughneck from Texas who'd be in jail if he hadn't signed up for the navy. They'd pounded self-discipline and a sniper's focus plus a dozen lethal martial arts into him. He could handle any type of weaponry, explosives, hand to hand combat.

Not one ounce of his very extensive and very expensive training gave him a clue about how to handle Lauren Dare.

There she was! Alone and lost-looking against the wall across the room to his right. For such a beautiful woman, she was doing her best not to attract attention, though for Jacko that didn't work. Couldn't. It was like the roof opened up and the sun shot a beam straight down onto her like a spotlight. Jacko was surprised people weren't gasping and turning to watch her.

She was doing everything possible to keep a low profile. She didn't even want her name on the program, though all of the works on the wall were hers. Suzanne insisted she take the credit for them, but Lauren had insisted right back. Very few people knew this entire show was all hers. He had no

idea why she didn't want credit. Most people were happy to receive credit for things they didn't do, few refused it. But who knew why women wanted anything, anyway? Lauren didn't want anyone to know and for him, that was that.

Lauren was moving through the crowd like a ghost, nodding and smiling and never stopping to talk to anyone. Jacko couldn't understand how the men managed to avoid staring at her, but then he'd always known deep down that most men were assholes. You'd have to be an asshole and blind to boot not to realize that Lauren was the most beautiful woman in a room full of them.

Two of the beauties were married to his employers, John Huntington and Senior.

Lauren moved gracefully, not speaking a word to anyone, accompanied by notes from heaven. It took Jacko a full minute to realize that angels weren't sending down a sound track for Lauren Dare to move to. It was Allegra Kowalski, up on a dais, playing her harp. The notes morphed into a recognizable tune he'd heard the Senior's wife play a million times.

The Senior was married to a talented musician—a harpist and singer, Allegra. Jacko remembered the first time he'd met her, sent to be a bodyguard while the Senior hunted down the fuckhead who'd attacked Allegra and blinded her. Jacko would have done his duty, even lain down his life, for

a snaggle-toothed banshee girlfriend of the Senior but as it happened, Allegra Kowalski was beautiful and sweet and had played her harp for Jacko for a couple of hours while he sat in a chair facing the door, Glock 22 on his lap, finger along the trigger guard.

Allegra's music had fucked heavily with his head and changed him forever.

But Lauren was the one who messed with him the most. Those long, white, delicate hands of hers created things he couldn't even begin to imagine existed and yet became stone hard reality for him the instant he saw them.

He'd seen her drawings and paintings first. Suzanne, the wife of his other boss, John Huntington, aka Midnight Man, designed places where you walked in and felt like you were in some kind of stylish fairyland. Suzanne had sent him to pick Lauren up in her workshop to talk about creating images of Suzanne's designs. Jacko had walked in to a big airy room and had frozen because he was surrounded by the most beautiful things he'd ever seen in his life. He'd simply stood stock still and gaped, mouth open like some raw recruit watching SEALs in training.

And then Lauren had walked into the room and even her gorgeous watercolors and drawings vanished from his head like smoke.

Suzanne and Allegra were beautiful women. They were known for being beautiful, though they never used those coy tricks most good-looking women did. But Lauren—it was like she was another species. A cloud of shiny dark hair surrounding a heart-shaped face with silver-gray eyes on top of a body to make men weep. It had been a hot late summer day and she'd worn a sundress that showed delicate pale shoulders, slender arms and a tiny waist and when she spoke Jacko didn't hear a word she said.

His head was buzzing too loud.

She tried twice. He got that much. He saw her full mouth open and close and all he could think about was that mouth on his while his entire body buzzed and he got the first of many, many hard-ons that sprouted whenever he was around her.

At the third try, he tried hard to focus and managed to grasp that she was asking him a question. *Morton, right?* He simply stared at her. *Suzanne said she'd send someone called Morton?* And at the end there was this little inflection, making it a question. And fuck him if he didn't forget his own name was Morton.

He was an asshole and blown away by her and in his defense was the fact that only the navy ever called him Morton and that was only on official occasions or when he was being chewed out. He'd been Jacko forever.

It was only when he saw the first glimmerings of fear in her eyes and she took a quick instinctive step back that he pulled his head out of his ass. And felt ashamed. Having a 240 pound thug who lifted weights daily and had spent the last fifteen years training to kill people stare at you was probably not a good thing. Particularly if you were a beautiful woman with a slender build alone in a space with the thug.

So he'd used every single ounce of self discipline the navy and particularly SEALs training had beaten into him and nodded and said—*Yes, Morton's my name, most folks call me Jacko, Suzanne Huntington sent me to pick you up.*

She'd just stood there, staring at him. Well, he could do something about her unease. He'd tapped his cell and called Suzanne. When she answered he simply handed the phone to Lauren and watched as some color came back into her face.

And when he complimented her on some of the art works she actually blushed.

And Jacko was lost.

He drove her to Suzanne's office in Pearl, which was also the headquarters of Alpha Security International, where Jacko worked. He thought driving under 80 mph was for dead men but he kept it at a steady 40 and would have driven at 20 miles an hour if he could, just to stay in the vehicle with her. He waited for her as she and Suzanne talked then

drove her back. At 30 mph. When he dropped her off at her house, he drove around the block and stopped the car and waited for his hands to stop shaking.

When he found out that Lauren taught drawing at a community center he enrolled immediately and got another huge whack to his system. He was *good* at it. Damned good.

The past four months of his life had been work, thinking of Lauren, attending her classes, drawing maps and drawing Lauren in his empty apartment. There hadn't been room for much of anything else. No cycling out to the boonies and letting his Kawasaki Vulcan Voyager motorcycle rip. Megadeth, his favorite band, came through Portland, one night only, and he didn't go. It was a Tuesday and Lauren taught on Tuesday evenings. So no Megadeth.

No fucking, either.

That was a shocker. He didn't even realize he'd stopped fucking chicks until three weeks after meeting Lauren. It hadn't even occurred to him. When it did, he made a point of going out that evening to his usual hole, The Spike, and picking someone up because Jacko Jackman didn't do abstinence. Nope.

A couple of chicks he'd hooked up with before stopped by and made interested noises and to his enormous surprise, his dick said no. Fuck no.

As a matter of fact it felt like his balls tried to crawl up into his body.

He never tried that again and so he might as well have been a tattooed and pierced monk these past four months for all the tail he got.

And the reason was right in this room.

Jacko tracked Lauren as she made the rounds, speaking briefly with a few people when they spoke to her, then moving on. In the room full of trendy women dressed in bright peacock colors tottering on stiletto heels, she was low key in a midnight blue dress with ballerina slippers. Jacko couldn't even see the other women while she was in the room.

They all seemed overblown and shrill. Sharp laughing voices crackling. Lauren's voice was never sharp. It was soft, with an underlying tone like music, only not.

She was sweeping the room with her eyes and Jacko felt a change in the air when she saw him. Her face went from slightly sad to joyous in one second, and his heart nearly exploded out of his chest when she veered course immediately, making a beeline for him. He could feel himself stiffening in every sense.

"Incoming," the Senior muttered. "You're on your own here, son. I'm going to my own woman."

Palm Beach, Florida

“Go on in,” the muscle said, waving toward the door with his Sig 44, a weapon that probably cost more than he did.

Frederick Rydell stifled a sigh. The quality of Gutierrez goonhood had declined sadly since the death two years ago of that thuggish, though stylish, mobster Alfonso Gutierrez. The organization had fallen to his moron nephew, Jorge Gutierrez. Alfonso had had discreet, well-dressed security at the gate, Frederick passed through a metal detector and that had been that.

Jorge’s muscle had actually frisked him, rumpling Frederick’s Hugo Boss jacket, and had taken entirely too much pleasure in touching his private parts and between his buttocks.

Really.

Alfonso would never have hired this outlandish man-child with a backwards baseball cap and oversized jeans with the dropped crotch.

Morgan, Alfonso’s personal bodyguard, had always been impeccably dressed, able to serve tea or shoot you between the eyes without breaking a sweat. This goon looked incapable of thought, let alone style.

Frederick opened the door to the suite of rooms Alfonso had used as a study and had to work hard to hide his shock.

The two rooms were high-ceilinged and elegantly decorated. Alfonso's late wife had been a bitch of the highest order but a bitch with exquisite taste. And Alfonso himself was a thug with social ambitions. It didn't really make any difference in Floridian high society if you made your money running drugs and arms and trafficking in humans. As long as you made a lot of it, you were in. Alfonso had had a lot of it and Chantal, the new wife, knew how to spend it.

Alfonso's study wouldn't have been out of place in a lord's palace. It had been filled with superb antiques, exquisite rugs, decent art on the walls. And Chantal managed the staff like a general. Frederick had never seen the mansion less than perfect. Never even a fallen petal from the numerous floral arrangements.

Now it looked like pigs had rooted through the rooms, followed by the Huns.

After the deaths of Alfonso and Chantal, the staff had kept things going but Jorge had let the staff go, one by one, replacing the maids with the girls he fucked and who had no desire to pick up after themselves.

Frederick stopped on the threshold, willing his stomach not to rise. This was the worst he'd seen the rooms, a physical manifestation of the disintegration of Jorge's personality.

The rooms smelled of sex, expensive whiskey and overwhelming perfume. Someone had vomited and someone had shat and not flushed, so there was an overlay of that coupled with disgusting smells of fast food. The French chef had been the first member of the staff to go.

Two of the sofas had been pulled askew, cushions on the ground. Pizza and takeout boxes littered the marble floor. One of the antique mirrors—made by the same craftsmen who'd made the mirrors in Versailles, Chantal had told him—was cracked.

Frederick schooled his face to blandness but his mind was racing as he crossed the room. He stepped on a used condom and his throat quivered as his stomach shot up his gullet.

Jorge was sitting with his back to the huge two-inch thick bullet resistant windows that gave out onto a flagstone terrace that ran the width of the mansion.

“Party last night?” Frederick asked, keeping his tone light.

Jorge grunted. He was sitting in Alfonso's chair, forearms on the surface of the Chippendale table that had served Alfonso as his main desk. A satchel sat next to Jorge's right hand. As Frederick walked closer he could see that Jorge was keeping himself upright by his arms on the

table. Frederick checked Jorge's eyes, overly bright with pinpoint pupils. Christ, the man was wasted.

Jorge was going to talk business stoned out of his mind.

With an inner sigh, Frederick felt a pang of pity for himself pulse through his system. He'd earned a lot of money off the Gutierrez machine and now it was coming to a close. Like most good things, he supposed.

"So," Frederick said, sitting down on one of Chantal's antique chairs, noting with a repressed shudder that the seat cushion was stained. He couldn't bear to think of what might have caused the stain. "Here I am for my monthly report."

He'd had a not-unpleasant monthly appointment with Alfonso, to deliver ongoing reports. Frederick was the Gutierrez family's computer expert and the confidential conduit for communication with the various international...dealers Alfonso had business with. Alfonso owned two hotels, three nightclubs and four restaurants in Florida which, being Alfonso, were exceedingly well-run and turned a tidy profit.

But they were fronts for what earned Alfonso the real money—drugs, prostitution, people trafficking. All activities Alfonso managed at a remove with Frederick's help. He never got his hands dirty, directing everything via secure computer, which was Frederick's lookout. Vast amounts of money exchanged hands via bitcoins on the darknet, and

every month Frederick visited Alfonso, was treated to a superb brandy while delivering his report, and watched as 25K was deposited in his account in the Caymans.

Everyone was happy.

Since Alfonso's death, the businesses, legal and otherwise, had been going to hell. Very quickly. Frederick would have left long ago if it weren't for the fact that Jorge was desperately looking for Anne Lowell, Chantal's daughter, Alfonso's step daughter. Right after Chantal and Alfonso's wedding, Anne had fled from her family, disliking everything about her mother's new household. Anne had come from an upper crust family in Boston and hadn't mixed well, to put it mildly.

She'd been gone years before Frederick's association with Alfonso, and no one would have given Anne Lowell a moment's thought if it weren't for the fact that Chantal had died an hour after Alfonso, as his main heir. And then Anne had been Chantal's main heir.

So she had inherited most of the estate, the above ground one anyway, and Jorge had gone wild. Alfonso's brother had sent his only son up to Miami to learn the business and Jorge thought he had it made for life. But Alfonso soon understood his weaknesses and had made sure to leave everything to Chantal. Who would probably have wisely put Frederick in charge.

Alfonso had never said a word to Frederick about his succession. Alfonso had been a very healthy self-disciplined fifty-year-old and Frederick had looked forward to many more years of happy association with an empire efficiently run by Alfonso. But that happy scenario had come to a crashing halt when a drugged-up teen slammed straight into Alfonso's Panamera Porsche.

Frederick often wondered whether the teen had been hopped up on Alfonso's product. Alfonso had had a great sense of irony and would have appreciated it.

Frederick had been sorry for Alfonso but above all, sorry for himself. Alfonso's death had put a serious crimp in Frederick's plan to sock away five million in the Caymans before forty.

"Give me your report," Jorge said sullenly, slurring the words. With a sigh, Frederick complied, knowing that Jorge understood one word in ten. Concepts like bitcoins, Tor, arbitrage, currency conversion flew right over his head.

Only one thing mattered to Jorge—Anne Lowell.

Jorge had somehow got it into his head that if Anne Lowell died, everything would become his. Magical thinking, of course. Anne Lowell would certainly never leave anything to Jorge in a will. Jorge had no concept of the legal issues pertaining to estates and succession. Somewhere

in his drug addled mind, a dead Anne Lowell equaled a magical return to prosperity.

Frederick did nothing to disabuse him of the notion. An obsessed Jorge was going to pay the monthly retainer forever, though he had no clue how to do that online. It was strictly cash, in a satchel. Frederick had upped his price to 50K a month and had stopped looking very hard. He'd found Anne Lowell. Twice. It wasn't his fault Jorge was an idiot.

In college, majoring in computer programming, Frederick had had to take a course in creative writing and had been unexpectedly good at it. He loved movies and often thought he had the makings of a decent scriptwriter in him. Lately he'd been observing Jorge and his antics, thinking he could turn the situation into one of those tragicomic TV series everyone loved so much, like *Breaking Bad*.

Jorge and his minions trying to be crime lords, but fucking everything up. Frederick even had a title for the series. *Code Name: Moron*.

It was so annoying, being paid in cash. The bills were probably all laced with cocaine. Jorge pushed the satchel of cash over to him and then fixed baleful bloodshot eyes on Frederick. "You find the bitch yet?"

"I've found her twice for you," Frederick said, as he'd said many times before. "And both times your goons botched it."

Either she was very very clever or very very lucky. Twice they'd killed the wrong girl. Now she'd completely disappeared.

And he'd stopped prioritizing her. Let Jorge stew in his juices.

Jorge pounded a fist on the desktop. He was sweating like a pig. The side of his fist left a sweatprint. "Find that bitch! Find her now!" Jorge's attempt at being tough was beyond pitiful. "I'll give you a bonus if you find her before May 1."

Yeah, right.

Still, something was very wrong. Frederick had heard rumors that Jorge was deep in the hole with some very bad guys. Alfonso had left some well-run businesses but Jorge was crapping all over everything around him. He couldn't get it out of his head that finding Anne Lowell and killing her would—poof!—make all his troubles disappear.

Jorge was a cretin who wanted to run with the big boys and was in way over his head. Not that Frederick gave a fuck. He planned on cashing in 50K a month until someone smoked Jorge.

A dead Anne Lowell was not going to solve any of Jorge's problems. But Frederick wasn't about to say that.

Frederick would find Anne Lowell again, sooner or later, though he wasn't putting any effort into it. Who cared?

As long as he was being paid, Frederick would keep at it on a low-level priority basis. Nobody could hide forever in a country with fifty million surveillance cameras.

Pity. Anne Lowell was, by all accounts, a charming, kind young woman who didn't deserve getting whacked by a low life like Jorge.

But hey.

Chapter Two

Portland

This is a big mistake, Lauren Dare thought. A huge, potentially disastrous mistake.

The show was as terrifying as she'd thought it would be. Why oh *why* had she accepted Suzanne's invitation?

Lauren sighed. She knew why. Because Suzanne had insisted so strongly and just wouldn't take no for an answer. Because Suzanne had threatened to simply cancel the show if Lauren wouldn't at least show up. No matter that the show was important to Suzanne's career.

The drawings, pastels, gouaches and watercolors up on the walls were Lauren's. She'd illustrated Suzanne's brilliant interior designs, that was all. Lauren didn't want—couldn't have—her name on the program in any way and had made that abundantly clear, without explaining why. Suzanne had reluctantly accepted. But Suzanne had been adamant—if Lauren's name couldn't be on the program at least she'd attend the opening.

Suzanne was across the room, signaling her to come over, but Lauren didn't dare. Suzanne had a gleam in her eye and there was no guarantee she wouldn't let slip who had actually made the illustrations to someone she thought might

be important to Lauren's career. Suzanne was almost visibly vibrating with the need to praise Lauren in public.

She didn't understand that Lauren didn't have a career. *Couldn't* have a career.

Bless her. Suzanne meant well but it could cost Lauren her life.

She shouldn't be here at all. Being here was insane, a gesture crazy beyond belief. She was still alive at twenty eight against all the odds because she didn't *do* things like this. Hadn't put herself in the public eye in any way in two long, dangerous years. She'd stayed alive for the past two years by being invisible. And her Portland life for the last year was supposed to be all about keeping her head down.

So *why* was she here?

Affection, that was why. Her downfall. She had simply been embraced by Suzanne...

Glorious harp music began playing, notes beamed straight down from heaven.

...and Allegra. Both charming, lovely, talented women who hadn't taken no for an answer when it came to becoming her friends. A stone heart would have crumbled and Lauren's heart wasn't made of stone. Oh no.

Her life would have been immensely easier if it were.

And it wasn't just Suzanne and Allegra who had bound her in silken ropes of affection. No, there was also Claire

Morrison, their friend and the wife of a homicide cop. She'd horned in too. Friendly and smart like the others, warm hearted and funny. Simply irresistible.

And Lauren hadn't resisted much, had she?

It was unforgiveable. Lauren was alive because she kept her head low, she didn't make friends, she wasn't noticed in any way.

So she shouldn't be here, at a big social and media event. It was insane, and dangerous.

A trick to not making an impact, to not being noticed, was to keep moving. She'd arrived deliberately late by taxi, rebuffing offers of all three women to pick her up, and slipped in unnoticed, dressed in a dark, simple gown she could move easily in and ballerina slippers, no heels.

Because you never knew when you might have to run.

And that's when she met his eyes and broke out in a smile because she simply couldn't help it. Another reason she'd stayed on in Portland way over her new life's sell-by date.

Morton Jackman. Jacko.

He was her star pupil in her weekly drawing classes, though there was little she could teach him beyond the basics. He was a natural. Somehow he was always around, giving a hand in closing up at the community center, offering to drive her to the supermarket when her car broke

down, fixing her leaky faucets and cleaning out the grout. Putting in fancy new locks in her doors.

She had no idea why he stuck around her so much when she clearly made him uneasy. Spooked him, even.

Though she should be the one spooked. And she had been, the first time they'd met. Suzanne had sent Jacko to pick her up for their first business meeting. He worked for Suzanne's husband, who ran some kind of fancy security company, though Jacko looked precisely like the kind of guy a security company was designed to protect against.

He was pierced, tattooed, his head was shaved and his muscles had muscles. He looked like trouble. Your worst nightmare, come to life. And yet...

Morton "Jacko" Jackman had the soul of a poet, though he'd probably punch in the face anyone who said so.

Lauren had never seen anyone react the way he did to fine art and classical music. As if they had been designed precisely for him. He understood and reacted to art instinctively, in a way no education, however advanced, could teach.

And though not an untoward word had been spoken, though they barely ever touched beyond a handshake, Jacko had somehow become part of her life, too.

Well, she was going to stick with Jacko because sticking around Suzanne was dangerous. At any moment Suzanne

could spill the beans over who had created the artwork on the walls and there would be a fuss, the spotlight of attention would turn to her and blood would be spilled. Hers.

Jacko could be counted on not to say anything, simply because she'd asked him not to. Jacko wasn't the kind of guy to accidentally spill anything.

She swerved and walked straight to him, happy to see a friendly face.

Well...friendly. That might be going a bit far. He wasn't *unfriendly* around her. He was just stiff and formal. But she liked him in spite of himself and he made her feel safe.

No one would touch her—could touch her—while Jacko Jackman was around. He didn't do it deliberately but there was a definite *don't mess with me* vibe around Jacko that was like a protective force field. Lauren recognized that she liked having him around partly because she relaxed in his presence. No need to be tense or worry about the outside world. He did that for her.

As she walked toward him, she could see white all around his dark eyes. She smiled at him, placed a hand on his big arm.

“Hi, Jacko.”

He swallowed. “Ma’am.”

Lauren rolled her eyes. Being with Jacko was always interesting. He was fun to tease, like pulling the tail of a

dangerous tiger you knew wouldn't bite. "Lauren, Jacko. Not ma'am. I've told you a thousand times. Unless you want me to call you sir. Do you want me to call you sir?"

"No, ma'am."

She stepped closer and his eyes opened even wider.

"Jacko, how long have we known each other?"

"Four months, three days and seven hours. Ma'am."

Wow. That was actually...true. She had to think about it for a minute but he was right. "So don't you think you could bring yourself to call me Lauren? Considering the fact that we've known each other four months, three days and seven hours?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Lauren."

"Lauren. Ma'am."

She sighed again and looked around the room. No one was paying her any attention at all, which was precisely what she wanted. Nobody was paying much attention to what was on the walls, either, which was cool. Everyone was completely taken up with the hot hors d'oeuvres making the rounds on platters and the excellent champagne an army of servers was pouring into glasses. Allegra's music made for a gorgeous backdrop to the sounds of happy people drinking and eating and gossiping.

She hadn't really had a chance to see her work up on the walls. The work was hers but Suzanne had framed and hung the drawings and watercolors and Suzanne had a wonderful eye for color and balance. Now that everyone was eating, drinking or listening to Allegra would be a good time to look at what was on those walls.

She leaned close to Jacko and was surprised to find that he smelled really good. It wasn't something as overt as a cologne. It didn't have alcohol overnotes. So it must be soap. Citrusy and fresh. And his own smell. Mm.

"Jacko, will you walk around with me while I look at the drawings? I haven't had a chance to see them framed and hung."

"Yes, ma'am," he said and stuck his elbow out at an odd angle. She stared at it—was he going for a gun under his jacket?—and after almost a full minute realized he was offering her his arm.

Such an old-fashioned gesture from such a rough man, she hadn't even recognized it at first.

She took it and she relaxed another infinitesimal amount. There was just something so incredibly reassuring about Jacko. Holding his arm felt good. Really good.

She looked up at him and smiled and he flinched. Okay. She was relaxed, but clearly he wasn't. Somehow she made him uneasy. But still, he wasn't running away screaming, so

she tugged him toward the west wall. She knew it was the west wall because it was painted blue with gilt letters in cursive writing on the top—*West Wall*. The east wall was taupe, the north wall salmon and the south wall mint. Gilt letters proclaimed each wall. Suzanne had chosen the frames according to the colors of the walls.

They walked. Walking with Jacko in a crowded room was a very interesting experience. She'd bumped shoulders with about twenty people before. The room was full of people and everyone was intent on something else—food, drink or someone more interesting than she was. She'd been jostled and stepped on and shouldered aside.

Instead, now, it was like Moses parting the Red Sea. Everyone somehow made way for Jacko, shifting out of his way as if that were the natural order of things. Those who didn't instantly move got a glare that—once they saw it—made them scramble. No one jostled her, no one stepped on her toes, no one crowded her.

“Have you seen the works already?” she asked.

Jacko had been scrutinizing the crowd as if they were enemy insurgents, carefully and coldly. He looked down at her. “Yes, ma'am. Lauren. I helped hang them.”

“So which ones do you like?”

His dark eyes met hers. “All of them. Every single one.”

She faked a smile. Wrong answer.

“But the Morgenstern series is amazing,” he said. “And so is the Lachland residence. Never seen anything like it.”

Okay. Right answer.

“I’d really like to see up close what she did with the frames.”

“Sure thing.” He looked down at her and if she didn’t know better she’d say that was a *smile* lurking in his eyes. Jacko smiling? Nah.

But he walked her to the appropriate wall, people parting for them. Jacko snagged a couple of flutes of champagne off a passing silver tray and held one out to her. It was very deftly done, considering the size of his hands.

It had amazed her during drawing lessons, too. The number 2 pencil looked like a stalk of straw in his huge hands, yet that hand sketched the most delicate images imaginable. He was an expert on hand-drawn maps, and his own were exquisite.

They stopped in front of the Morgenstern series. Suzanne had gone all out in the presentation. Over the series was a long Perspex rectangle with *Morgenstern residence—24 hours* laser-etched across the top. The watercolors were framed with a gold passepartout within an elaborate wrought iron frame holding the entire ensemble together. She’d had the idea of the Morgenstern series as she sat on a park bench across from the façade of the home. It was a Belle Epoque

building and by some miracle of light and shadow, each part of the day—sunrise, noon, late afternoon and dusk—highlighted different parts of the façade.

So she'd done watercolors of the four parts of the day, each a slightly different hue, each shift of the sunlight highlighting different aspects of the ornate façade.

“Suzanne did a really good job framing them.”

That earned her an odd look. “The works are yours. Not hers.”

There was nothing to say to that.

She sipped the excellent champagne, holding the flute up so it caught the light. The crystal felt good in her hand, catching the light of the overhead chandeliers, so fine it was almost as if the bubbles were caught in air instead of glass.

She twirled the stem. Her family had had flutes just like this in Boston. Fifty of them. Three lifetimes ago.

For just a fleeting second sadness descended over her. She'd trained herself, *schooled* herself against it. Thinking of the past not only did her no good, it was actively dangerous. She had to be present, fully in the moment, every second, because danger could come leaping out of the darkness at any time.

The only way to survive was to be on her guard and to be grateful for every second, because every second could be her last. No past, no future, only the present.

And if it hurt her, just a little, not to be able to claim the watercolors and drawings she'd worked so hard on, if it hurt her, just a little, to remember her charmed childhood in Boston that could never come back, too bad.

That was life.

"Let's go look at the Agarwal house sketches over on the East Wall." She tugged at Jacko's arm.

"Sure. They're beautiful. My compliments." They were crossing the big room and he looked down at her and she thought she saw...again, could that be a *smile* in the depths of his dark eyes? Jacko was the most serious man she'd ever been around. His emotional tones ran the gamut from sober to grim and back again. Even the hint of a smile was extraordinary.

"Well, it was thanks to you." She gave him a sunny smile, straight up at him and his face froze. It looked like something hurt.

The sketches of the Agarwal house had come out well, she had to admit. It was thanks to Jacko that she'd been able to sketch the house at all. The Agarwal house was an extraordinary structure built by an Indian venture capitalist heavily invested in green energy. The house was built on a remote vast plot of land on the foothills of Mount Hood and had been designed to blend into the forest.

Lauren had sketched it in fall and deepest winter and had extrapolated what it would look like in spring and summer. She'd spent three full days filling ten notebooks with sketches.

When Jacko had heard through Suzanne—who'd received the contract to design the interior décor—that Lauren intended to spend a lot of time on the isolated estate he had insisted on accompanying her. The first time, Lauren had balked. She liked—no, needed—to take her time. She didn't want to draw hasty sketches with a bored guy tapping his size 14 boot waiting for her to finish up. But it hadn't been like that, not at all. Jacko seemed to have enormous reserves of patience. He found a bench where he sat quietly, simply waiting for her. Five minutes after she arrived in the morning, Lauren had forgotten Jacko's presence and only came up for air in the early afternoon after an orgy of sketching to find him waiting in the exact same spot in the exact same position she'd left him in.

Something told her he'd be able to do that for days and maybe even weeks, not just hours.

And, truth be told, the fact that he was there, watching over her, allowed her to lose her sense of time and do it right. Without him, there was a bit of her that would have remained tense and alert.

“You were very kind and very patient with me. I appreciate it.” She looked up and met his eyes and smiled sunnily at him. He blinked and his face became even more wooden.

“My pleasure, ma’am.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Lauren.”

“Lauren,” he repeated dutifully.

God it was fun teasing him. She tugged at the massive arm under her hand. “So come on, let’s go over to the blue wall.” They turned. “From what I can see of the frames, she did a magnificent—”

And then it happened.

And it cut her life in two.

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