

Chapter One

Through the silver rain dripping from the rim of my umbrella our eyes connected with a sharp magnetic click.

Boom.

I couldn't look away, didn't want to. He was gorgeously Japanese, tall and slim, about forty, dressed in a flawless black suit with a long overcoat. His straight dark hair had a deep glossiness that women would kill for, cut so that the front was long, meeting the shorter hair in the back, and moved over his brow in a sexy sweep as he walked with a smooth, sure, long-legged gait, with his black flashers fixed on my blue ones.

Ooh baby.

I entertained an arousing picture of him moving underneath me with that same grace, his hands firmly on my hips, mine pressed against his smooth bare chest, or sunk in that thick luxurious mane to give me a handhold; traction. If I hadn't been walking, I would have crossed my legs.

We were fifteen paces away and about to pass each other. Still his eyes held me, smiling a secret between us, and I felt that thrilling hook of a sexual jolt that I love so much, but that happens so rarely. I returned the smile knowingly and then continued past him and on into the open doorway of the bookstore, where I lowered my umbrella and shook off the rain.

I thought, he's watching me, waiting for me to turn. Arching my back just enough to accentuate my curves and opening my raincoat to reveal them, I turned flirtatiously, and looked up to greet his attentions.

But he was gone. Nasty little shock to my ego system. Most likely he'd disappeared into one of the second floor restaurants in the Little Tokyo Plaza. Damn. Oh well. My dark green umbrella stood out from the several common black ones when I leaned it next to the door and turned to search for treasure in the Japanese-American bookstore.

I browsed in and out of the aisles for at least thirty minutes, picking out the biggest most expensive picture books as well as some sexy paperback comics, selecting one with a sharp eyed, dark-haired hero that reminded me of Evan. I flipped through a few pages and admired the artwork; the hero with a gun, the hero with a sexy half naked

blonde, smiling to myself I thought, 'it is us' and I anticipated showing it to him that evening. Turning another page I saw an illustration where the heroine stood over the body of a bad guy with a smoking gun and I thought of how I had met Evan that way. Except I had been the one with the smoking gun.

But a glance at my watch told me that if I was going to make it back to the court house on time I had to get going, so I handed over six hundred some odd dollars in cash and was bowed out of the store by the happy manager. The package, wrapped with twine, was heavy. He offered to help me with it to my car but I responded with one of my usual smart-ass replies that I was still young and strong and heaved it up. Trying to look as though it were easy to handle, I went outside. To my left, under the same awning was a jewelry store with a smart Bulgari watch in the window. I went in and inquired about it. Stainless steel, black face, diamonds. The first thing the shop girl did was to tell me the price.

I hate that.

Turning away from the counter dismissively I perused a display case by the window. I glanced up over it and through the rain-speckled glass of the storefront I saw the handsome man again. He was listening with polite attention to the female half of a wealthy looking couple. The way he held his body spoke of elegant well-earned confidence and subtle sensuality. He knew I was there because as he bowed his good-byes to the departing couple, his eyes pierced the glass and space between us and he stood for a moment with that same heated smile. I regarded him with an intimate gaze, an unspoken acknowledgment of our mutual attraction, and then he bowed, and moved away.

I sighed, thought of Evan, wondered if I could ever really give up hunting, and then I went back to the shop girl who had made the mistaken assumption that I could not afford the watch I had asked about. I made an obvious motion of pushing back my hair so that my sleeve would fall down and reveal the Phillip Patek watch I was wearing, a little twenty thousand dollar birthday bauble from Evan. Her eyes spotted it and I watched her whole attitude change from contempt to one of simpering attendance.

I hate that too.

“Would you like to see the Bulgari?” she asked, all smiles and sweetness.

“Sure,” I said, disinterested now. I tried it on, watching her eye the Patek when I put it on the counter. She was checking to see if it was real. It was. “How much did you say this was again?” I asked, ribbing her now.

“Five thousand, seven hundred dollars.” A look of avid expectation on her face.

“Mmm.” I took it off, wrinkled my nose a little distastefully and said, “Is that all?” Then I smiled brightly at her surprised look and turned to go. I would buy the watch from someone who respected me.

I regretted my flippancy at not accepting help carrying the books as soon as the weight of the awkward bundle bit into my palm where I grasped the rough cord. I was wondering how I was going to handle the books with one hand while holding the umbrella with the other as I retrieved the latter from the damp bin outside the door. I set the package down on the last bit of dry ground under the awning and holding the umbrella by the handle I pressed my thumb on the button and it opened like a tiny parachute. The umbrella unfolded, the note that was in it did not. It fell to the white tile at my feet.

Trying not to look too obvious, I scanned around for a sign of whoever might have secreted a note but saw no one. Maybe it was just a receipt, dropped by mistake, and then again...I picked up the curiosity and placed it casually in the pocket of my Burberry mackintosh, lifted the books again, and headed out into the rain.

Back on the street I continued on through the clean, sparsely peopled shopping area. I wondered if it was the rain that made the place feel so deserted. As I crossed over a subterranean shopping level on a concrete bridge, I leaned out a bit to try to see what was down there.

What was down there was a girl, a man, and an ugly confrontation.

A large man, in an ill-fitting suit and a baggy overcoat, had backed a pretty Asian girl up against a wall in an awkward niche behind the curved stairs. No one on the same level with them could have seen the two, hidden as they were by the wall.

The girl was turning her head away from the man as he pressed against her, talking to her fast and angrily. I froze and looked all around me. Nobody. I backed up a few steps to the top of the stairway, keeping my eyes on what was happening below me. Neither of them had seen me. The stairway curved slightly and I would be out of sight

for a few seconds. I started down the stairs as noisily as possible. Hoping that it would scare the man away.

I coughed. I cleared my throat. I stamped down the stairs with purpose. Instead of going the obvious, straight way into the shopping tunnel I turned right into the little nook that reeked of urine and coughed loudly again. But even a few feet away the man seemed oblivious. He was so focused on the girl and spewing his anger at her that he didn't even seem to hear me. The girl's eyes, however, shot to me and there was a plea in them. Don't leave me, they begged. Her face was pale with fear and her features distorted with the confusion of a trapped animal, but even so, she was stunningly beautiful.

The man noticed her glance and followed her gaze.

"Just keep going, it's none of your business," he snarled at me.

"See, it looks more like personal than business to me," I said. It was all I could think of.

"Keep walking, we're fine." He tried to smile. "Just a little disagreement, that's all. Isn't that right, sweetheart?" He shook the girl a little, prompting her to answer.

But I could see her answer as her eyes looked down between the two of them and then back up at me.

I was sweating now. The tension was palatable and getting more grotesque by the second. I couldn't walk away. I wanted to scream at him, shout what a disgusting piece of vomit he was. I hated him for thinking he had superior power to me, for having the strength to overpower over her.

Instead I stepped in, almost casually, and smiled in what I hoped was a disarming and polite way.

"How about it 'sweetheart'?" I directed at the girl. "You think you two can work this out without counseling?" I took one more step forward; and he released her arm. He was still blocking her in with his body.

She tried to speak, to buy some time, to keep me there. "I don't know, I guess so." There was still terror in her eyes.

“My professional opinion,” I ad-libbed, “would be that you need at least a weekend seminar. Possibly a seven day retreat with some serious trust building exercises.” One more step, and I saw the gun in his oversized hand.

“Take a fucking hike!” The man growled at me, raising the gun toward me, to scare me. It worked. The girl saw him aim at me and with a scream she grabbed at the weapon; I knew that was a mistake. With the umbrella in my left hand I swung down even as his arm came up, trying to point the gun and both their hands toward the ground, knowing it was hopeless, that his arm was far stronger than the flimsy aluminum and nylon. The man grabbed the girl by the hair with his other hand and threw her toward me. I heard the gun go off, felt a pressure against my stomach as the girl screamed and hit me, shoving me, books, umbrella and all, to the ground. My left hand flew up and the back of it smashed against the concrete wall. In my abdomen I felt a sharp, stabbing pain. I’ve been hit, I thought. Oh God, I’ve been shot. I got a quick view of the man’s pants as he jumped over us and ran up a narrow ramp toward the parking structure.

The gunshot brought out the shopkeepers. They hung there in the doorways, fascinated and afraid until they sorted out that the man running away was the threat, we were just interesting. Then they watched the two of us on the ground like they would a high-speed chase on live TV, drawn in yet completely detached. Goddamn it. I don’t want to die like this, with blank staring faces watching me like I was the evening news.

The Asian girl was lying next to me rolled into a protective ball, stunned. She turned and looked first at my face and then at my stomach and my hands pressed tight against it; I was afraid that if I pulled them away I would start to bleed and never stop.

“Are you all right?” she asked quickly.

“I am the evening news,” I breathed, staring up at the tiny patch of sky I could see through the concrete structures. “I can’t believe it,” I added. The sky, I noticed, was the same color as the stone.

“What?” She sounded confused.

I turned my head and looked at her. “I don’t know. I don’t think so,” I answered her question belatedly. “Can you get my cell phone out of my purse and call for help?”

She turned to one of the boutique girls who had ventured closer for a better view of the action and screamed at her in Japanese. Not one of my languages, Japanese, but I caught '911' at the end of it. The on-looker seemed shocked to be drawn into our movie. I mean, here she was, enjoying the entertainment, and suddenly a character from the drama had called her by name and barked an order at her. She reconciled herself to this new reality in a few seconds and took off back into her shop, to the phone I hoped.

Then the girl turned back to me; with her assailant gone she became a confident, capable woman. She took off her raincoat and rolled it up, putting it under my feet. Then she put her hands over mine and looked into my eyes.

"Let me see," she said.

I nodded. There was nothing else to do. I pulled my hands away.

"I don't see anything," she told me.

"Here," I gestured, pointing to where the pain was, low on my right side. Efficiently but gently, she pulled down the edge of my slacks, I was conscious of the rain, light now, falling on my bare skin.

"It's just a scratch," she said, "but it looks like a nasty bruise is coming up. Maybe some internal bleeding, we need to get you to a hospital."

"What?" I sputtered. "Where's the round?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, "maybe it bounced off you." She pulled the edges of my white mackintosh, now sadly limp and dingy, over me. Then she retrieved my dented umbrella and held it over my face.

Quite a crowd had gathered now and I was disgusted to see several of them had video cameras running. What a world.

"By the way," said my capable nurse, "my name is Aya, Aya Aikosha."

"Nice to meet you, Aya. I'm Callaway Wilde."

“Thank you, Ms. Wilde.” Her beautiful dark eyes searched mine. “That was very brave. Thank you.”

“Oh, that,” I dismissed it, for the second time that day thinking of the man who had tried to kill me a year ago and ended up dead on the sidewalk, “that was nothing.” I waved a hand, “call me Cally.”