

“It’s like watching the preppy, well-bred versions of you and me trash-talking.” He headed off to the showers.

Huxley looked offended by this. “I’m not *that* preppy.” Naked except for his shower shoes, he took out a pair of neatly-ironed boxer briefs from his duffle bag and pulled them on.

Nick decided to redirect the conversation. “So how did your meeting with Jordan Rhodes go today?”

“Fine. We got together at her house and went over the details for Saturday. If anyone at the party asks how we met, we’re going to say that I’m a customer of her store. I know enough about wine to be able to pull that off without a problem. And I have to tell you—we couldn’t have picked a better person to help with the op. Jordan was able to give me a detailed description of Eckhart’s office. I’m not anticipating having much trouble getting the bugs placed quickly.”

“You’ll have to figure out a way to sneak away from the others,” Nick pointed out.

Huxley slid on a light blue dress shirt. “Already got it covered. Jordan is going to pull Eckhart aside and talk to him about some special wine she’s been trying to locate for him. While he’s distracted, I’ll slip away from the other guests and make my way to the office.”

He gave Nick a knowing look as he buttoned his shirt. “Look, I know Davis asked you to babysit me on this.” He held up his hand. “I get it, it’s my first undercover op. But trust me, I’ve spent three months working on this case—no one wants Saturday night to go smoothly more than I do. I’m ready for it.”

From the sound of things, Nick couldn’t disagree.

Twenty minutes later, Nick crossed the parking lot to his SUV, unlocked the door, and climbed in. Damn, it was cold. Six years had taught him that New York had nothing on Chicago in terms of bitter winters. He started the car and let it warm up for a few minutes. He was just pulling out of the parking lot when his cell phone rang, the sound carrying through the speakers via the Bluetooth system in his car. Nick checked the caller ID on the radio display.

Lisa.

He hadn't spoken to her in six months, since before he'd begun the Fivestar investigation. Frankly, he hadn't planned on speaking to her again. Sure, they'd had a couple of fun nights, but he'd made it clear from the beginning that there wasn't anything serious between them. Still, he didn't want to be rude and ignore her.

He answered the phone. "Lisa, hello."

A woman's earthy voice sounded through the speakers. "I heard you were back in town."

"Got your spies out?" Nick teased.

"Maya said you picked up carryout from Schoolhouse Tavern the other night," Lisa said, referring to the waitress who'd rung up his order.

"Right, I forgot that she teaches part-time at your yoga studio."

"She says you look exactly the same."

"It hasn't been *that* long, Lisa."

"Six months."

"Well, I told you it would be a while before you heard from me." *If ever.*

"But now you're back. Any chance you're free tonight?"

she asked invitingly.

Nick sensed that this was the moment where he needed to politely—but firmly—make a clean break from Lisa. Actually, he thought he'd done that six months ago.

From the start, he'd explained to Lisa the same thing he explained to every woman he got involved with: he didn't do relationships. Working undercover for months at a time virtually precluded the possibility. Right now, he was focused on his job, and he liked being focused on his job. He'd been working undercover jobs for six years now, and he was good at it. While he reported to Davis, he generally handled his cases the way he wanted, which suited him well.

When he was a kid, Nick had seen the look of relief on his mother's face every time his father walked through the door after one of his police shifts. Unlike his father, however, there were many nights, and weeks, and months, when he didn't come home at all. He may have been focused on his career, but at least he knew not to inflict his unpredictable lifestyle on someone else.

“Lisa, look—we talked about this before I went undercover. This was just a casual thing,” he said.

“But I thought we had fun together.”

“We did. But I've got a few things going on with work, and some personal days I plan to use after that, so this isn't a good time for me.”

Lisa's voice turned suspicious. “There's someone else, isn't there? You don't have to lie about it.”

“There's no one else. I'm just not in a position to give you what you're looking for.”

The phone went silent for a moment. As much as Nick

tried to be a stand-up guy about these things, sometimes women got a little pissed when they realized that—hot sex notwithstanding—he really meant it when he'd said that he wasn't looking for a relationship.

“Fine. But being by yourself all the time is going to get lonely, Nick,” Lisa said. “When that happens, you remember the good times we had together. And give me a call.”

She hung up.

Nick exhaled in relief and made sure the call had disconnected. That hadn't been too bad. When he didn't call Lisa back, she'd move on. After all, it had been just *sex*. No sweet nothings, no endearments, no promises of the future. Soon enough, she would realize that she could get a better deal elsewhere.

He had just exited off the highway at Ohio Street when his cell phone rang again. He glanced over and checked the caller ID.

Shit.

He quickly backtracked, thinking about how long it had been since their last conversation, and realized he undoubtedly had another pissed off woman on his hands. Perhaps this was one of the reasons he preferred to stay undercover. No accountability.

Bracing himself, he clicked the button on the steering wheel to answer. “Ma—I was just about to call you.”

“Right. I could be dead and you wouldn't even know it.”

Nick grinned. Despite being perfectly healthy and fit at almost sixty, his mother issued frequent proclamations about her death and the ways in which people would inevitably wrong her in it. “I think Dad, Matt, or Anthony would

probably call me if that happened.”

His mother, the illustrious Angela Giuliano, who had once disappointed every smitten, fiery Italian man of marriageable age in Brooklyn (as the story was frequently told to Nick and his brothers) by allowing the strong, silent, and decidedly non-Italian John McCall to drive her home from the Moonlight Lounge on a fateful New Years Eve thirty-six years ago, snorted in disagreement. “What do your brothers know? They both live less than fifteen miles from this house, and your father and I never see them.”

Nick happened to know that both of his brothers, as well as practically every living relative in New York on his mother’s side of the family, had dinner at his parents’ house at three o’clock every Sunday afternoon, no exceptions. His father had long ago accepted the weekly Italian invasion as the price one paid for marrying into the Giuliano family.

As happened every time he spoke to his parents or his brothers, Nick felt a pang of guilt. He was more independent than his two younger brothers, and in that sense, the thousand-mile separation from his parents wasn’t entirely a bad thing. But still, he sometimes missed those Sunday dinners. “You see Matt and Anthony every week. You see everyone every week.”

“Not everyone, Nick,” his mother said pointedly. Then her voice changed and turned warmer. “Well, except for this upcoming weekend.”

Nick paused at this. It could’ve been a trap. Perhaps his mother suspected something was up with her birthday and was fishing for information. Although it was surprising that she’d come to him—she usually went after Anthony, who

had the secret-keeping skills of a four-year-old.

“Why? What’s happening this weekend?” he asked nonchalantly.

“Oh, nothing much. I just heard something about a sixtieth birthday party your father and you boys are planning for me.”

Fucking Anthony.

“And don’t go blaming Anthony,” his mother said, quick to protect her youngest. “I’d already heard about it from your aunt Donna before he slipped.”

Nick knew what her next question would be before the words left her mouth.

“So? Are you bringing a date?” she asked.

“Sorry, Ma. It’ll just be me.”

“There’s a surprise.”

He pulled into the driveway that led to the parking garage of his condo building. “Just a warning, I’m about to pull into the garage—I might lose you.”

“How convenient,” his mother said. “Because I had a really nice lecture planned for you.”

“Let me guess the highlights: it involved me needing to focus on something other than work, and you dying heartbroken and miserable without grandchildren. Am I close?”

“Not bad. But I’ll save the rest of the lecture for Sunday. There’s going to be a lot of gesturing on my part, and the phone doesn’t quite capture the spirit.”

Nick smiled. “Shockingly, I’m looking forward to it. I’ll see you Sunday, Ma.”

Her voice softened. "I know how busy you are, Nick. It means a lot to me that you're coming home."

He knew it did. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Early Saturday morning, Nick received yet another call.

He opened his eyes and saw that it was still dark outside. He rolled over in bed and peered at the clock on the nightstand. Five thirty-eight A.M.

He reached for his phone and checked the caller ID. Huxley.

Today was the big day, and Nick could certainly appreciate the junior agent's enthusiasm. Huxley had every right to be excited about his first undercover operation.

Just not at 5:38 A.M.

He answered the phone, his voice low and rough with sleep. "At this hour, somebody better be dead, Huxley."

There was a tortured groan on the other end of the line. Nick sat up in bed. "Huxley?"

A weak voice answered.

"No one's dead. But I think I might be close."

Seven

Nick rang the bell to Huxley's wood-frame duplex. As he waited on the front steps, he took a look around. Despite the blizzard that had hit earlier that week, the steps, walkway, and front sidewalk were shoveled pristinely. The yard had not one speck of litter, and the evergreens in front of the porch were shaped in a neat row of perfect triangles.

Definitely Huxley's place.

He rang the bell again and waited a few more seconds before trying the door. Huxley had said to come in if he didn't answer, in the event he was indisposed. Nick pushed opened the front door and entered the quiet house cautiously. He instinctively reached for the gun holstered in the shoulder harness underneath his jacket, then caught himself. From the sound of things, whatever had gotten a hold of Huxley could not be stopped by bullets.

Nick paused in the entranceway. "Huxley? You alive?" There was a staircase to his left leading upstairs, and a dark hallway in front of him. No lights appeared to be on anywhere inside the place. He checked the bathroom to his right. Empty.

Then came a feeble voice. "In here."

Following the voice, Nick cut through the hallway, the soft thud of his footsteps on the hardwood floors the only sounds in the house. The hallway opened into a spacious

great room and kitchen area that looked like something out of a Pottery Barn catalog. There, he spotted Huxley.

Or at least, what he *thought* was Huxley.

The well-groomed agent he was used to seeing in three-piece suits and sweater vests sprawled facedown across the beige sectional couch, with one hand limply clutching a garbage can on the floor next to him. Far from a three-piece suit, he was dressed in a navy sweatshirt and checkered flannel pants. Strangely, he wore only one sock.

Nick slipped off his coat and came around the couch. Huxley weakly lifted his head. His eyes were glazed, and the hair on the left side of his head shot up into the air in a blond Mohawk.

“I wouldn’t get too close,” Huxley warned. The effort of holding up his head proved too much, and his face fell back into the pillow.

Nick took a seat on the far opposite end of the sectional. “Wow. You look awful.” He peered more closely. “What’s going on with your hair?”

Huxley spoke into the pillow, his voice muffled. “The stomach pains came on when I was in the shower. I had to get out ASAP. Mid-shampoo.”

Nick nodded. “And the missing sock?”

“In the laundry. I puked on my foot.”

“Oh.”

With painstakingly slow movements, Huxley rolled himself over. He groaned and his head lolled against the pillow. “The good news is, I haven’t thrown up for twelve minutes. Before that I only made it nine.”

“I don’t think it’s like labor contractions, Seth. Whatever

you've got doesn't look like something that will pass quickly. Could it be food poisoning?"

"Doubtful. I have a fever. One hundred and two."

"The stomach flu, then."

"It appears so."

Before Nick could say anything further, there was a knock at the door.

Huxley closed his eyes. "That's probably Jordan. I called her right after you and left a message saying we had a problem."

Oh, they had a problem, all right. A couple of them. For starters, Eckhart's party was that night and his partner clearly wasn't anywhere up to par. Second, there were about five thousand jokes Nick wanted to make about Huxley's hair, and he wasn't sure he could hold back much longer.

"I'll get the door." Nick cut through the hallway, working through their options. He grumbled to himself, realizing that they only had one at this point. This was *supposed* to be a simple assignment. A consulting job, Davis had promised. And now he was stuck.

He said a few Brooklyn-flavored curse words under his breath as he opened the front door.

Nick blinked at the sight of the woman standing before him. He'd expected to find the stylishly dressed and designer-clad sophisticate he'd met five nights ago. Instead, Jordan stood on the porch wearing a black ski jacket, black body-hugging leggings, and pink snow boots. She had her long hair pulled back in a high ponytail, with a few layers framing her face. She wore not a speck of makeup, had rosy cheeks from the cold, and her blue eyes sparkled in the

winter morning sun.

Interesting.

This was new side to Jordan Rhodes. Without the designer clothes, it was a good thing for him that she was still blond with ne'er-do-well relations, or he might be in danger of thinking she was quite cute. And given that his role in the Eckhart investigation had just expanded about tenfold, he didn't need to be distracted by cuteness right then.

Seeing him standing in Huxley's doorway, her eyes widened in surprise. "Agent McCall."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "Nice boots."

She leveled him with a glare. Apparently the boots were a taboo subject.

"You said that if I saw you today, it meant that something had gone really wrong with the undercover operation," she said.

He stepped to the side of the doorway. "I think you should probably see for yourself." He shut the door behind her, and they stood in the small entranceway. "But I warn you—it's a little disturbing." He led her down the hallway and into the living room, where the death-warmed-over version of his partner lay on the couch.

"Oh my gosh, what happened?" Jordan asked.

Shivering, Huxley mustered a faint smile. "I guess I look as bad as I feel."

"It's mostly the hair," Nick offered diplomatically. "It's . . . ridiculous."

"I can't deal with a comb right now. Too heavy." Huxley sighed wearily. "I'm a little under the weather," he explained to Jordan.

“That seems to be putting it mildly,” she said. “You’re shaking—are you cold?”

“It’s the fever.”

She spoke under her breath to Nick. “Is there a reason he’s wearing only one sock?”

“He puked on his foot.”

“Oh.” She turned back to Huxley. “Can we get you another sock? Maybe a blanket or something?”

Huxley sat up, looking pained by the effort. “That’s okay,” he groaned. “I’m heading upstairs. If you two would excuse me . . .” He clutched his stomach. “I think this is going to be a rough one.”

Jordan watched as Huxley clung to the railing and dragged himself upstairs. When she heard a door shut, she turned back and saw that Nick had moved into the kitchen. She followed him and watched as he began opening cabinets, searching for something.

“I know Huxley. He has to have it somewhere,” he muttered to himself. “Ah—got it.” He shut the cabinet door and held a bottle out to Jordan.

Hand sanitizer.

“Don’t say I never got you anything,” he said.

Despite herself, Jordan smiled. “Thanks,” she said, taking the bottle from him. She poured an extremely generous amount onto her hands and made a mental note to touch as little as possible inside the house.

Upstairs, she could hear the faint sounds of Huxley groaning. “Should we do something?” she asked Nick.

“I think he’d probably prefer to be alone right now.”

She nodded. She said the words first, needing to get it out there. “He’s not going to make it to the party tonight, is he?”

“No, he’s not. And that’s a shame, because I know how badly Huxley wanted this. But he’s shivering, he looks terrible, and he can’t stay out of the bathroom for more than twenty minutes.”

Jordan felt bad for Huxley. Aside from his obvious physical discomfort, she knew how much he’d put into this investigation. But selfishly, she had other issues on her mind at that moment, like the fact that this had been her one chance to get her brother out of prison. “Does this mean we’re scrapping the plan for tonight?”

Nick leaned against the counter opposite her, stretching out his tall, leanly muscular body. He wore a navy crewneck sweater, jeans, and a gun harness that made him appear even more dangerous than he had that first night in her store. She took note of his strong, angular jaw, which was once again dark and stubbled.

It wasn’t the *worst* look she’d ever seen on a guy. She wouldn’t go as far as to say she liked it or anything, but she supposed some women found this sort of overt . . . manliness attractive.

“We’re not scrapping the plan,” he said. “This may be our only chance to nail Eckhart. But this development with Huxley means we need to make certain adjustments.”

“Such as?”

His green eyes held hers. “Looks like you’ve got yourself a new date this evening.”

Balls.

“I had a feeling you were going to say that, Agent

McCall.”

He shook his head. “No more Agent McCall. From this point on, I’m Nick Stanton, a self-employed real estate investor,” he said, referring to the cover story they’d planned to use with Huxley. “I own several multiunit apartment buildings on the north side of the city that I rent out mostly to college students and recent graduates. We met when I came into your store to buy a bottle of wine for my property manager, Ethan, who just got engaged to a girl named Becky, an advertising executive originally from Des Moines who used to live in one of my buildings. You helped me pick out the perfect bottle of wine, and I was so entranced that I didn’t pay any attention to what I bought.” He scratched his jaw, putting on a show of trying to remember. “What kind of wine was it again, sweetie? Something French I’d never heard of.”

Jordan noticed that he was going off the script a little. “A gamay?”

Nick snapped his fingers. “A gamay—that’s it.”

“With Huxley it was a carménère from Chile. And he picked it out.”

“Well, Huxley knows a lot more about wine than I do. Since I don’t have time to learn, my character is going to be more of a novice.” He grinned. “Your character finds this refreshing in contrast to all the stuffy wine snobs you usually meet.”

“But my character probably won’t emphasize that fact tonight, since most of those stuffy wine snobs will be at this party,” she threw back.

The two of them looked over as Huxley stumbled his way into the living room and sank onto the couch.

“I overheard you talking. You’ll take my place, then?” he asked Nick.

“It’s our only option at this point.”

Huxley shook his head dejectedly. “Three years working for the FBI and I’ve never had to take one sick day. Today of all days, this happens.” He leaned back against the pillows and looked Nick over. “You’re going to need a suit.”

“I have several suits,” Nick said, appearing offended.

Huxley did not seem impressed. “A *real* suit.” He held up his hand, cutting off Nick’s objection. “No offense, but Men’s Wearhouse or whatever isn’t going to cut it tonight. You want to blend, remember? Every person at the party will be checking out the guy walking in with Jordan Rhodes. You need to look like someone they would expect to see her with.”

“*Hey*. I would date a guy who wore a suit from Men’s Wearhouse,” Jordan said indignantly.

Nick sized her up. “Huxley’s right. I better get a new suit.”

Jordan folded her arms across her chest, on the defensive. “You two are way off base with these assumptions about me.”

Nick turned to face her, taking the bait. “Okay, I’ll eat my words right now if you can honestly say that you’ve dated anyone in the last three years who wore a suit from Men’s Wearhouse.”

Jordan stared him in the eyes, wanting to prove him wrong like nothing else.

But.

She sniffed reluctantly. “Just to be clear, it’s not a criteria

I have. True, I tend to meet mostly men who have white-collar jobs. And if they want to spend their money on expensive suits, well, that's their business."

Nick shrugged. "You don't have to explain yourself to me, princess."

Jordan's eyes widened in surprise. She stepped over to him, pulling herself up to her full five foot five inches. "Listen, I don't know who you are, or where you came from, but nobody's calling anybody a *princess* around here."

"Brooklyn."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm from Brooklyn." The edges of Nick's lips curled up in a grin. "Your majesty."

Jordan stared him in the eyes for another moment, and then turned to Huxley. "Doesn't the FBI have some sort of top-secret vitamin shot they can give agents in these circumstances? Something that can get you up and running by tonight? Anything?"

"Sorry. I'm afraid you're stuck with Nick."

Lovely.

"Trust me, I'm not exactly thrilled about it, either," Nick said. "No offense, but being cooped up in a van for seven hours sounds more fun than hanging around with some elitist wine crowd." He glanced at his watch and swore under his breath. "We don't have a lot of time to pull this all together. Now that I'm taking your place, I need to find a backup man and get him up to speed," he said to Huxley. "And I need to go shopping, too."

He was so bent out of shape about the darn suit. Because of that, Jordan was tempted to hold her tongue and let him

figure things out by himself. But like it or not, for Kyle's sake, the two of them were in this together. So she pulled out her cell phone.

"I'll take care of the suit." She scrolled through her contacts list, found the person she was looking for, and dialed.

A man's voice on the other end answered. "Please tell me you're coming in to shop. We've been dead this whole week because of the blizzard."

Jordan smiled. Two years ago she'd discovered Christian, a personal shopper at the Ralph Lauren store, and he'd never let her down no matter what the fashion emergency. "Are you working this morning? I need a man's suit. Fast."

"No problem. I'm at the store already."

"Perfect. He doesn't have a lot of time to shop, so do me a favor—pull some suits in advance. Shirts and ties, too. Nothing too trendy, something classic. I need a size . . ." She looked expectantly at Nick.

He didn't look thrilled that she was taking charge, but he didn't object either. "Forty-four long."

She repeated the information to Christian, who sounded intrigued.

"You've never sent me a man before," he said. "This forty-four long must be special."

"Oh, he's special all right. And he'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Wait," Christian said before she hung up. "I'm dying here, Jordan. You've got to give me something. Who is this mystery man?"

She hesitated for a second, then realized she had to bite

the bullet and start the lies at some point. Might as well cut her teeth on Christian.

“His name is Nick. He’s . . . my boyfriend.”

On their way out, Nick held Huxley’s front door open for her. “Boyfriend, huh? I didn’t realize we had taken things to that level.”

“Oh, I’m sorry—this is my first undercover operation,” Jordan said. “I’m a little unclear about the rules. Are we seeing other people in this fake relationship?”

He followed her down the steps to the sidewalk. “You expect me to make this decision on the spot? I’m a man, Jordan, I can’t be pressured into these kinds of things.”

She flashed him a sweet smile. “Lucky for you, it will all be over soon. Tomorrow you can have a fake freak-out over commitment issues that will lead to our fake breakup. After that, I think our characters will need some very real time apart.” She began walking toward the street.

Nick caught her by the sleeve of her coat. “I think we need to make sure we’re clear on something. You may be used to ordering your personal assistants around, or the minions at your wine store, but this is my investigation now. Which means that I’m in charge here—only me.”

She pulled out her cell phone and cocked her head innocently. “Should I cancel the suit, then?” When he glared at her but said nothing, she smiled. “I’ll take that as a ‘Thank you, Jordan. I appreciate you helping me out in a pinch like this.’”

She headed in the direction of her car, but Nick caught

her by the sleeve again. “Where are you going? You’re coming with me to the Ralph Lauren store.”

“Why would I go?”

“Because I’ve got about eight hours to make sure this undercover op is successful, and you need to fill me in on everything you told Huxley on Thursday. Particularly the description of Eckhart’s office.”

Jordan pushed up the sleeve of her coat and looked at her watch. “It’s after nine. We’ll be cutting it too close if I go downtown with you. I’m supposed to open my store at ten and I need to go home and change first.”

“Can’t you get someone to cover you?”

“Unfortunately, no,” she said. Martin and Andrea—one of the two associates who worked at DeVine Cellars—were both set to cover the store that evening while she was at Xander’s party, and her other sales associate, Robert, was out of town that weekend. Plus, they were having a closeout sale on several wines her distributors were unloading at bargain prices and she needed to get shelf talkers in place before the store opened. “Is there another time we can talk?”

Nick looked over at her car. “Does that Maserati come with Bluetooth?”

For over a hundred grand, about the only things it didn’t come with were ejector seats and a parachute. “Yep.”

“We’ll do this by phone. I have your number.”

Of course he did.

They separated at the street and climbed into their respective cars. Immediately after starting hers, Jordan pushed the button that warmed the tan leather seats. Like good wine and great shoes, heated seats on a February

morning were at the top of her most-prized list of luxuries. She let the car idle for a minute before easing it out of its tight parking spot. Heading in the same direction as Nick, she took the one-way side street toward Lake Shore Drive and caught up with him at a stop sign.

She saw him glance at his rearview mirror, spotting her behind him. A few seconds later, her cell phone rang. When she answered, his whisky-rich voice came through the car's speakers.

"So I've been thinking about your question. My character has decided he doesn't want to see other people."

"What made you change your mind? Let me guess—the Maserati."

He chuckled. "Our cover story is that my character has been smitten from the moment he met you. He's not about to let another man get anywhere near you."

"Your character sounds a little possessive. Is this something my character should be worried about?"

They came to a stop at the light that would take them onto the Drive. Nick's voice was low, even smoother than the car's engine. "I think your character secretly likes it. You've been dating boring, uptight guys for too long. You've been looking for something different."

Jordan looked sharply at the SUV in front of her. "I think your character presumes too much."

His eyes caught hers in the rearview mirror. "Does he?"

The light turned green, and they drove off in opposite directions. As Jordan headed north, away from downtown and with Nick's car safely out of sight, she decided it was time to change the subject. "What do you want to know about

the layout of Xander's office?"

"As much as you can tell me."

As she sped along the Drive with the gray expanse of Lake Michigan on her right, Jordan filled him in on as much as she remembered. She finished the call with Nick just as she pulled into her garage. She hung up and sat in her car for a moment, thinking about his comment.

You've been looking for something different.

Presumptuous words. Very presumptuous. But she couldn't help but wonder if there was any truth to them. Pushing the thought from her mind, she opened the car door and hurried into her house. There was one thing, at least, she knew without a doubt.

It was far too cold to be sitting outside thinking about Nick McCall.

Thirty minutes later, suit in hand, Nick walked along Michigan Avenue toward the parking garage where he'd left his car. He made a phone call.

It was a truth universally acknowledged that FBI agents in possession of great skill and talent, even those who frequently engaged in the practice of trash-talking, understood that there were times when all bullshit needed to be set aside in order to get a job done.

This was one of those times.

After two rings, another agent answered Nick's call.

"Pallas."

"It's McCall. I've got a problem."

"The Eckhart op?"

“You got it. Huxley’s out with the flu.”

“What do you need?”

“Backup in the van.”

“I’m on it.”

“Meet me at the office in ten minutes.”

“Yep.”

Nick hung up the phone, mentally running through his checklist. Ridiculously overpriced Ralph Lauren suit? Sixteen hundred dollars, all of which had better be reimbursed by the Bureau. Backup man? Technically free, although he’d be hearing about this from Pallas for a long time. Nabbing the moneymen of the city’s most notorious gangster while infiltrating an exclusive wine tasting?

Priceless.

Eight

After a ten-minute pit stop at home to change her clothes and throw on some makeup, Jordan hurried out the door and walked the three blocks to DeVine Cellars. The streets were relatively quiet since most stores and businesses hadn't opened yet. Her cell phone buzzed loudly in her purse. She saw that it was Christian and answered.

"You couldn't at least send me a metrosexual to work with?" he asked.

She grinned at that. "How did the shopping go with Nick?"

"We survived. That's about all I can say. You should've seen his expression when he saw the colors of the ties I'd pulled to go with the suit. He told me that where he comes from, men don't *do* boysenberry. I shudder to think such a place exists."

"Boysenberry? You *are* lucky you survived. Thanks, Christian. I appreciate your help." Jordan made a mental note to send him a bottle of wine from the store.

"Feel free to send me all the suit-buying customers you want. And I think you'll be pleased with the results." His tone turned sly. "Happy Valentine's Day, Jordan. I have a feeling it's going to be a good one for you."

Right, she thought as she hung up the phone. Because

Nick was her *date*. And of course any woman spending Valentine's Day with a date who looked like Nick was guaranteed a night of endless great sex.

Hot, scruffy-jawed, throw-me-down-on-the-table, mind-blowing sex.

Probably with dirty words.

Perhaps not a horrible way to spend Valentine's Day, she conceded. But it wasn't in the cards for her.

Jordan let herself into the store and hung her coat in the back room. She changed out of her snow boots and turned on the lights and music. She loved opening the store—that time of day more than any other was when it truly felt like hers.

Mornings were typically slow until about eleven, so she had a good hour to put out the shelf talkers and signs for the closeout sale, do inventory, and clean up. She doubted, however, that much cleaning would be necessary. Martin had closed the night before, and he tended to be as much a neat freak as he was a wine snob. Not an unwelcome quality in an assistant manager.

She checked the sales receipts from the night before and saw that they'd had a good night. In addition to regular sales, they'd added four new customers to their wine club.

The wine club was something she'd started two years ago. As often as customers asked for her and Martin's recommendations, it had seemed to be a worthwhile endeavor. Each month, she and Martin selected two wines with a combined value ranging from one hundred to one hundred and fifty dollars. She'd hesitated at first at the price, and had asked Martin whether they should consider offering more budget-friendly wines. She'd worried that at those

prices, people wouldn't be willing to sign up for memberships.

"If I pick it, they will come," Martin had whispered dramatically.

She'd given him six months to prove he was right.

He had been.

With nearly eight hundred members, the wine club was a huge success. They sometimes took a gamble with the wines they chose—excellent in quality, but often from boutique, lesser-known wine makers. And Martin, a traditionalist, always insisted on choosing one Old World wine, despite the fact that research indicated consumers preferred New World wines because of their user-friendly labels. Yet no one in the wine club had complained thus far.

"They love you. Seriously, when are you going to open your own store and run me out of business?" she'd teased Martin one day.

"It's not me. It's you," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Hardly—you deserve the credit. If it had been up to me, this wine club would've been ninety percent California cabs. Ten-dollar New Zealand sauv blancs in the summer."

"And you still would've had eight hundred members," Martin said. "Let's be honest, Jordan. Rich people like what other rich people like. They buy the wines I pick because *you* tell them to."

She had immediately opened her mouth to object—the conversation sounding far too *The Emperor's New Clothes* for her tastes—but part of her suspected that Martin wasn't entirely off the mark. Market share-wise, she knew a vastly greater proportion of wealthy Chicago wine buyers

frequented her store. She may have been financially independent, but her father's money was there nevertheless, and with that came a certain level of fascination by others.

"You're sort of like the Paris Hilton of wine," Martin had offered.

She'd nearly keeled over in horror.

"If you promise to never, *ever* make that analogy again, I'll let you pick two Old World wines for next month," Jordan had said.

Martin had rubbed his hands together eagerly. "Can I make one of them a Brunello di Montalcino?"

"You always say the quality of the Brunellos is erratic."

"And for a lesser man, that might pose a problem," Martin had said. "I'm telling you, Jordan, with your name and my impeccable taste, I think we can really go places with this store."

So far, he hadn't been wrong.

Nine

Nick parked his car a half block from Jordan's house and walked the short distance in the cold. He opened a tall wrought-iron gate and stepped onto a front patio and garden area.

He had assumed her home would be nice—very nice—and hadn't been incorrect. The brick house stood two and a half stories above the ground, with elegant Juliet balconies curved around the arched glass windows of the main level. A large brick and limestone balcony, part of what he guessed was the master suite, looked over the front patio from the second floor.

As he climbed the stairs to the front door, he caught himself wondering if Jordan's father had bought the house, or if she made enough money to afford it on her own. Not that it was any of his business, he was just . . . curious.

He rang the doorbell and could hear its melodic chime through the door. When a minute or two passed without answer, he reached up to ring the bell again.

The door flew open.

"Sorry," Jordan said breathlessly. "Zipper problems."

Nick tried not to show any reaction as he just . . . stared. From where he stood, he saw no problems whatsoever.

The deep purple fabric of her dress hugged all the curves

of her slender frame. She wore her hair up, and a few errant blond chunks swept across her smoky-lined, ocean-colored eyes—eyes that sparkled even more radiantly than the diamonds in her ears.

She braced one arm against the door frame. “That’s the longest you’ve gone without talking since we met, Brooklyn. I take it you like the dress.”

Busted.

Nick regrouped. “Don’t get too cocky. I was just trying to figure out where we’re going to stash a microphone in that thing.”

Jordan stepped aside as he entered her house and shut the door behind him.

Nick’s eyes nearly fell out of their sockets.

My God, the back of her dress . . . it dipped invitingly low, practically begging him to stare at her ass.

“What’s this about me wearing a microphone?” she asked.

He blinked cluelessly. “Excuse me?”

“You said I’m wearing a microphone?” she prompted him.

Right. The microphone. Undercover op. “It’s just a precautionary measure. I want to be able to hear you and Eckhart talking while I’m downstairs in his office.” Nick reached inside the pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a wireless, quarter-inch-sized microphone. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

Jordan examined it curiously. “I can’t believe how small it is.”

“It picks up voices from fifty feet away, even through

clothing. All you need to do is tuck it inside your bra.” His eyes went to the V of her neckline. “Assuming you’re wearing a bra with that dress.”

“Nope. Just Band-Aids over my nipples.”

Six years working undercover for the FBI, another five years on NYPD vice, but damn if Nick had a clue how to handle that predicament.

Jordan grinned. “I’m kidding.” She twirled her finger. “Turn around.”

He complied. *Don’t think about her nipples. Don’t think about her nipples.*

He was thinking about her nipples.

“Are you done yet?” he asked brusquely. Perhaps things would go faster if he lent her some assistance . . .

“I think I’ve got it,” Jordan said from behind him.

Nick turned around and watched as she adjusted her neckline, making sure her bra was hidden once again.

She straightened up and faced him. “What do you think? Good?”

His eyes roved over her. *Good* was putting it mildly. But instead of answering, he gestured to the door. He’d seen the car waiting for them out front, and it was time to go. “Ready for this?”

Jordan took a deep breath. “No. But I’ll do it anyway.”

Because of all the wine they’d be offered at Xander’s party, Jordan had rented a Town Car for the evening. It was what she did every year, and Nick had emphasized that it was important for her to stick to her routine as much as possible.

Sitting in the backseat next to him, she tried to ignore the butterflies in her stomach. She officially was about to take part in an undercover sting operation, and an excess of nerves could only hinder her objectives tonight. Previously, the closest to danger she had ever come had been the time a drunk, homeless man wandered into her store and knocked over a display of syrah before passing out on the floor. Really, though, the only danger had been that she would step on a piece of glass or stain her shoes as she cleaned up the mess, as the man had been so inebriated he hadn't woken up after his dramatic entrance. And Martin had been there to protect her, standing over the man with a loaded bottle of Côtes du Rhône until the police had arrived.

Jordan looked at Nick, who she suspected was carrying something far more powerful than a Côtes du Rhône. Although where he could fit a gun in that perfectly tailored suit was anyone's guess.

He'd shaved for the evening, and centered in his chin was a small cleft she hadn't noticed before. The back of his dark brown hair brushed against the collar of his coat—he'd gotten a haircut as well.

When he had arrived at her house, there'd been a moment when she'd been struck by how refined and handsome he looked in his dress coat and suit. He would blend in at Xander's party without any problem. Interestingly, however, she thought she liked him better with the scruff and jeans. Thank God he annoyed her a good ninety-five percent of the time they were together, because she had absolutely no intention of being *attracted* to Nick McCall. Stanton. Whoever the heck he was that night.

He caught her looking at him just as the car pulled up in front of Bordeaux. The driver got out and walked around the car to Jordan's door. Nick studied her carefully, as if gauging her mood.

"So this is it." She tried to sound nonchalant, but there was a slight shake to her voice. The driver opened the door and she shivered when the cold, February air rushed into the car.

Nick leaned forward to address the driver. "We'll need just a moment." He pulled the door shut to give them some privacy.

He spoke quietly. "Jordan, look at me."

She did, and he held her gaze.

"You'll be fine. Trust me."

She nodded, finding comfort in his steady tone. "Okay."

Then he put his hand on her chin and moved closer—*wait, was he going to kiss her?*—and she felt the warmth of his breath against her neck as he whispered in her ear.

"But if anything goes wrong tonight, find the red-headed bartender. She's a friend."

Jordan's eyes flew open. *Wrong?*

She didn't have time to ask what could possibly go wrong, because Nick pushed open the door and the driver automatically reached for her hand. So she put on her game face and stepped out of the car. Nick followed, and together they walked to the restaurant's front door and stepped inside.

Jordan had been to Bordeaux several times before, but the elegant décor continued to impress her. Soaring eighteen-foot ceilings, crystal chandeliers emitting a warm glow, and creamy silk wall panels all gave the place a light, airy feel.

To their right, across the dining room, was a cream-lacquered arch that led to the VIP wine bar. On the opposite end of the dining room was an outdoor terrace that overlooked the river and another bar, which Xander maintained at comfortable temperatures via heat lamps in the winter months. According to the plan, she would invite Xander to join her for a drink on the terrace to discuss a wine she'd located for him, and that was when Nick would make his move.

She and Nick checked their coats with the hostess and made their way into the restaurant. Jordan immediately spotted several guests she knew, but hesitated before heading over. *Just one more minute.* That's all she wanted before she introduced her "date" to the world, and this game of theirs became very real.

Nick seemed to read her mind. "Why don't we get a drink?" He caught the eye of a waiter passing by.

"Cristal?" the waiter asked, offering them each a flute. Jordan took note of the bottle as he poured—a 2002 Louis Roederer Cristal rosé. As always, Xander had spared no expense.

Focus on the wine, she told herself. Nick had the challenging part of this assignment, not her. Over the course of the next few hours, she didn't need to do much except smile her way through several glasses of the beverage she'd spent the last several years becoming a semi-expert on.

Nick eyed his drink skeptically after the waiter left. "Conveniently, when you invited me tonight, you failed to mention there would be pink drinks."

She felt some of the tension leave her. She hadn't known what to expect with the whole pretending-to-be-dating

routine, but so far it seemed to be business as usual between them. “It’s a rosé.”

This appeared to register with him. “Oh, like white zinfandel. My grandmother used to drink that.”

Thank God Jordan hadn’t taken a sip of her champagne, or she would’ve just choked on it. “First rule of the evening: never, ever mention white zinfandel around this crowd. Or things could get ugly very quickly.” She lifted the champagne flute to her nose and instinct took over. She closed her eyes and inhaled, smelling baked apples, almonds, and dried fruit. She took a small sip, letting the champagne dissipate in her mouth before swallowing. The flavors flirted in her mouth, light and coy.

She opened her eyes and noticed that Nick was watching her closely.

“Good?” he asked.

That was an understatement. “Try it.”

“I don’t do pink drinks.” He cocked his head. “Think you’re ready to take on the wine bar yet?”

Jordan got the message—they needed to keep moving. “Sure. Let’s see what Xander has in store for us tonight.”

Together, they made their way to the private room. The wine tasting had begun, and the bar was loud as guests discussed their drinks. Nearly immediately, Jordan noticed the redhead bartender, presumably “the friend” Nick had alluded to earlier. She was attractive, and not at all what Jordan expected an FBI agent to look like. For a moment, she caught herself wondering just how good a “friend” the woman was to Nick. Then she remembered that was none of her business.

“Just starting?” the redhead asked as they approached the bar. She gave away no sign that she recognized them.

Jordan noticed that the bartender’s curly hair was styled in a way that covered her ears. To hide an earpiece perhaps? Curious, she made a note to ask Nick about that later. “We’ll take whatever’s first.”

“So how does this work?” Nick asked after the bartender set a glass in front of each of them. “This is my first tasting.”

“Hmm, a wine-tasting virgin,” Jordan said. “There’s so much I could teach you.”

“Just keep it simple, Rhodes. The basics.”

“Okay, here’s my prediction for tonight: unless Xander plans to break some rules, we’ll start off with a couple light-bodied whites, move on to a chardonnay, then switch glasses and start with the reds. That’s where the fun really happens.”

Nick grabbed one of the tasting menus from the bar. “All right. Let’s see how good you are. Call the first one.”

“A sauvignon blanc,” Jordan guessed. “Likely one from the Loire Valley. Then a Riesling, a pinot gris, and a California chardonnay.”

He looked impressed. “Not bad.”

She shrugged. “I know my way around a tasting.”

“Except you screwed up the chardonnay.”

Surprised, Jordan took a look at the menu. In the past, Xander had always picked a California chardonnay, but this year’s selection was from Burgundy, France.

“Interesting, don’t you think?” said a man to her left.

Jordan turned and saw Rafe Velasquez, co-owner of a lucrative hedge fund based out of Chicago. Like her, he was a

regular of the party. She greeted him with a smile. “Hello, Rafe.” She looked around the room. “Where’s Emily?”

“She decided to stay home—most reluctantly. Our youngest has been fighting the flu all week, and she didn’t feel comfortable leaving him with the nanny. I think something’s going around. Everyone I talk to these days is sick.”

Jordan thought back to Huxley, sprawled across the couch with his blond Mohawk. Something was going around all right, and it wasn’t pretty. Turning to Nick, she made the introductions. “Rafe Velasquez, Nick Stanton.” As the two men shook hands, she breathed a sigh of relief. She’d made it through the first intro without screwing things up.

“So you must be proud of yourself,” Rafe said to her.

She cocked her head in confusion. “Meaning . . . ?”

Rafe pointed to the wine menu. “The reds?”

“I haven’t gotten that far yet—I’m still stuck on the fact that Xander didn’t go with a California chardonnay.”

“Forget the chardonnay—check out the cabs.”

Jordan’s eyes skimmed over the menu. She pulled back in surprise when she read the names of the two cabernets Xander had chosen for the evening.

“What do you make of that?” Rafe asked slyly.

She didn’t answer immediately. She had a feeling she knew what Rafe was suggesting, but it couldn’t mean . . . well, *that*.

“Looks like somebody has a secret admirer,” he said.

Nick frowned, suddenly very interested in their conversation. “I think I’m missing something here.”

Rafe explained. “At last year’s party, Xander, Jordan, and I got into a discussion about his red selections. See, Xander always picks Screaming Eagle as his cabernet—which is a fantastic wine, don’t get me wrong. But Jordan jokingly said that if he ever wanted to shake things up, she’d be happy to give him some suggestions. So Xander asked what *her* favorite cabernets are.”

Nick turned to Jordan. “What did you tell him?”

“I . . . may have mentioned the Vineyard 29 estate cab,” she said.

Nick checked out the tasting menu. “That’s on this list.”

Yes, it was.

“And she also said that she was a huge fan of the Quintessa meritage. Which I completely agree with, by the way,” Rafe said.

Nick checked again. “That’s also on this list.”

Yes, it was.

Nick’s eyes narrowed. “So to be clear: two of the five red wines on this highly exclusive list are ones that *you* said are your favorites?”

Well, when he put it that way . . . Now on the defensive, Jordan felt the need to point something out. “I do own a wine store, you know. This is likely a professional compliment, not a personal one.”

“Are you sure about that?” Nick’s green eyes probed hers intently.

Before answering, Jordan thought through her recent interactions with Xander. Nothing jumped out at her as abnormal, no conversations she could immediately recall that signaled any particular interest in her. Sure, Xander came by

the store often, but so did a lot of her regular customers. And he flirted with her from time to time, but Xander flirted with everyone. He was a notorious womanizer and constantly dated women he met in his clubs—usually leggy brunettes under the age of twenty-five. Being blond, five-foot-five if she stood really straight, and thirty-three years old, Jordan met none of his criteria.

But now that she was specifically thinking about it . . . there had been that one slightly odd conversation—five months ago, right before Kyle had been arrested, and just after she'd gotten back from a trip to Napa Valley. Xander had dropped by the store, and she'd filled him in on some of the new wines she'd discovered.

“Must be a tough life, going to Napa Valley several times a year on business,” Xander had teased her as he perused the store's shelves.

Jordan had chuckled as she handed him a glass of a new pinot noir she'd just opened, not disagreeing with him. “Oh, and you have it so bad. You go wherever you want, whenever you want.” She should know, he bragged about his exotic trips whenever he visited the store.

Xander took the glass of pinot from her. “Yeah, but Napa's different. That's not the kind of place you want to go alone. You should be with someone who can appreciate the experience.” He took a sip of the wine. “It's good.”

“A waiter recommended it to me. I liked it so much I had two cases shipped back here.”

Xander followed her over to the bar. “Where did you stay while you were out there?”

“Calistoga Ranch. Have you been?”

“No. But I’ve heard good things.”

“It’s amazing,” Jordan said. “I stayed in a private lodge overlooking a canyon. Every morning I had breakfast on the deck as the sun came over the hills, and at night I sat under the stars drinking wine.”

“Now tell me that wouldn’t have been better with someone else there.” Xander folded his arms across his chest, as if daring her to contradict him on this. He wore a crisp black designer shirt with the top two buttons undone, charcoal gray pants, and a brand new Jaeger LeCoultre watch. He was a good-looking man, but he had a certain air about him that occasionally rubbed Jordan the wrong way. He seemed very eager to show off his money, particularly around her.

Because he was such a good customer, she smiled, humoring him. “Maybe next time. There’ll be plenty more trips to Napa for me. I already have one planned for the beginning of March.”

“Why wait until then?” Xander pulled out his cell phone. “I can have us booked first-class in two minutes.”

She laughed. As if she could drop everything right then and hop on a plane. “I wish it were that easy.” She grabbed a couple bottles of the pinot and carried them to a bin near the front of the store.

“Jordan.”

The serious tone in Xander’s voice stopped her. She looked over her shoulder and saw that he had the oddest expression on his face.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

Just then, Martin strolled into the room, having finished

checking inventory in the cellar. “I think we should order another case of the Zulu. People have been going crazy for South African wines—oh, Mr. Eckhart, I didn’t realize you’d stopped in.” He paused and looked between them. “Am I interrupting something?”

Jordan thought she saw a flash of irritation in Xander’s eyes. But then it was gone, and she assumed she’d imagined it. Xander liked talking to Martin; the two of them had very similar tastes in wine. She saw no reason why he would be bothered by her store manager’s presence.

Xander waved off the question. “No interruption. Just enjoying this new pinot.” He gestured to his glass. “What’s the price point?”

“Thirty dollars a bottle.” Jordan continued to watch for any sign of the tension she’d seen on his face a moment ago. But there was nothing—he appeared as relaxed as always.

“I might have to start carrying it in my restaurants,” he said.

The three of them discussed the wine’s Robert Parker rating, and Martin’s belief that it had been unfairly undervalued because of Parker’s preference for big, bold reds. Shortly after that, Xander had left and Jordan didn’t give a second thought to that one odd moment.

But now, with the advantage of hindsight, she perhaps had a different take on the conversation.

Now, she couldn’t help but wonder if Xander had been interested in more than a new pinot that day. She’d assumed he’d been joking about the trip to Napa, but maybe not. Shortly after that conversation, Kyle had been arrested, and her life had fallen into complete chaos. She’d dropped out of

the social scene and had taken a break from dating.

Perhaps Xander had been lying in wait since then. Holding off for a more appropriate time to reveal his feelings. Like tonight, with his “Homage to Jordan” wine list.

She locked eyes with Nick.

“We . . . may have a problem.”

Ten

A problem.

Not the words Nick wanted to hear right then. No agent in the middle of an undercover assignment wanted to hear those words.

He smiled politely at Rafe. “Could you excuse us for a moment? I need to have a word with my date.”

Without further ado, he took Jordan by the hand and pulled her off to the side of the room. He braced one hand on the wall next to her and peered down into her eyes. “Honey, before we came to this party, you might’ve mentioned that the host had the hots for you.”

She stared back up at him, not looking particularly intimidated. In eleven years of law enforcement, Nick had made many a suspect sweat under the duress of what he knew was an impressive don’t-fuck-with-me face, yet she didn’t so much as bat an eye. Granted, none of those suspects had been wearing a knockout dress with a slit nearly down to the ass, so perhaps the don’t-fuck-with-me face wasn’t in top form right then.

“I didn’t know myself, *darling*,” she said. “And we still don’t know that for sure. But let’s say for argument’s sake that Xander has more than a professional interest in me. Will that be a problem for you?”