

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHRISTINA
DODD



HARD TO
KILL

When Captain Kellen Adams receives a job offer that sounds too good to be true, she finds herself balanced between fascination and fear. All she has to do is break a code and find a long-lost fortune...or die trying.

New York Times *bestselling author Christina Dodd kicks off her Cape Charade suspense series with Hard to Kill, a short story of treasure, treachery...and murder.*

Praise for
***New York Times* bestselling author**
Christina Dodd

“Christina Dodd reinvents the romantic thriller. Her signature style—edgy, intense, twisty, emotional—leaves you breathless from first page to last. Readers who enjoy Nora Roberts will devour Dodd’s electrifying novels.”

—Jayne Ann Krentz, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Sign me up for anything Christina Dodd writes.”

—Karen Robards, *New York Times* bestselling author

“No one does high-stakes, high-voltage suspense quite like Dodd, and her latest flawlessly written novel is another guaranteed keep-the-lights-on-late read. Dodd is at her most wildly entertaining, wickedly witty best.”

—*Booklist* (starred review) on *Dead Girl Running*

“[A]bsolutely gripping...a mesmerizing read.”

—*Amazon.com* on *Because I’m Watching* (Amazon Top Pick of September and Amazon Best Book of 2016)

“[An] exquisitely crafted, modern version of *Gaslight* that hooks readers and keeps them mesmerized until the end. A chilling and gripping tale, beautifully done.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review) on *Because I’m Watching*

“[A]nother smart, dramatic mystery that will keep readers flipping pages until the very end, with unexpected twists, psychological tension, and emotional depth.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review) on *Because I’m Watching*

“Scary, sexy, and smartly written, *Because I’m Watching* is Dodd at the top of her game.”

—*Booklist* (starred review, 2016 Best of Romance)

“This one is impossible to put down. A remarkable, mesmerizing series.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review) on *Obsession Falls*

“Dodd delivers another white-knuckle tale of romantic suspense.... The plot’s twists and turns are handled with a positively Hitchcockian touch, while the brilliantly etched characters, polished writing, and unexpected flashes of sharp humor are pure Dodd.”

—*Booklist* (starred review) on *Obsession Falls*

**Also available from
Christina Dodd
and HQN Books**

Dead Girl Running

Hard to Kill

New York Times bestselling author

Christina Dodd



Dedication

To the men and women who are serving in the military, and to the veterans who have served—thank you.

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Excerpt from *Dead Girl Running* by Christina Dodd](#)

“Captain, you’re an interesting woman.”

Kellen Adams glanced at Corporal Harlow Hackett, lounging in the seat beside her, his seat belt loose across his hips. Kuwaiti dust and sand rolled in sweaty drops down his sunburned face and off his chin.

For years now, Kellen’s mind had organized the personal details of her friends (and enemies) into data snapshots. Kellen flipped through the Rolodex in her mind...

HARLOW HACKETT:

MALE, CAUCASIAN, 22 YEARS OLD, 6’3”. BLOND HAIR, BLUE EYES. AVID RUNNER. JOINED ARMY AT 18 YEARS OF AGE. FROM RURAL NORTH DAKOTA.

She didn’t know how Hackett did it; she was sweating, too, but in the desert heat, it evaporated right off her body with the dry wind coming in her open driver’s-side window.

He dripped.

At least he was keeping hydrated. So many of the others refused to drink enough water, as though early training in football and marching band outweighed the fact that this was the desert, where water was life.

Focusing back on her right-hand man, Kellen said, “Corporal, you’re supposed to be watching the road.”

“Don’t have to. I won the toss.”

“For what?”

“I get to be in a Humvee with you. No one ever gets hurt when they’re with you.”

Kellen had been in the Army for six years, deployed mostly in war zones around the world, and she’d never heard that before. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re lucky, or you’re smart, or you see stuff no one else sees. That’s what makes you such an interesting woman. Don’t nobody get killed when you set the route and drive the Humvee.”

Sharply, she said, “Don’t nobody get killed as long as people watch for an ambush.”

“I’m watching.” He glanced around. “See?”

“Hackett, do you know the number of unexploded land mines loose in the world? Have you seen pictures of the civilians, children, who accidentally stumble onto one and die, or lose limbs? Now—watch!”

“Yes, ma’am.” He straightened up and started glancing around the sandy road. “But unless you’re the lead dog, the view is pretty much always the same.”

She grinned. She knew what he meant. The bumper of the armored personnel carrier in front of them never changed. She eased back a little. “How much time do you have left before your stint is done?”

“Three weeks, four days, seven hours and—” he glanced at his watch “—forty-nine minutes. But who’s counting?”

“What are you going to do when you get out?”

“Go to college,” he said promptly. “Like I should have done in the first place, if my folks hadn’t

been so dead set on me doing just that.”

“You joined up to spite your parents?”

“Yes, ma’am. The finest case of cutting off my nose to spite my face ever. I imagine you never did anything that stupid, not even when you were eighteen.”

She thought back on her high school graduation, on getting into her car and waving goodbye to her aunt and uncle and cousin, driving away from Nevada, across the country, seeing the sights, reveling in her freedom, getting to Maine and... She took a long breath. “No, I never did anything stupid.”

He sat up straight. “You did! What was it?”

She shook her head.

“Was it as stupid as mine?”

“So much worse. You’re too tough on yourself, Corporal.” The APC in front of them lurched along the sandy, rocky road. “The Army’s not all bad. You’ve got experience, you’ve got the GI Bill, you know enough now to appreciate that good time in college and you’re going back in one piece.”

Hackett turned white. “Shush, ma’am. You’ll jinx it.”

“Sorry.” She was. Stupid thing to say.

“Quick, spit out of the truck.” He gestured.

“Will that undo the jinx?”

“Unless you spit on a land mine.”

She laughed and spit, which was easier said than done, what with the dry air and the dust.

Satisfied, Hackett picked up the conversation. “I got something better than the GI Bill. I can run.”

She knew what he meant. The guy was fast; from the time he was in basic training, he had a reputation for running faster, farther, longer than the other recruits. He could sprint, yes, but on long-distance runs, his long legs ate up the ground. The only times he didn’t come in first were those times when his fellow soldiers, gasping and exhausted, hooked their fingers into his belt so he could drag them across the finish line.

Hackett continued, “I’m going to be the best runner in the history of college sports. I might go to the Olympics, and that’s going to give me a leg up—if you know what I mean—when it comes to sportscasting. That’s what I’m going to do. Communications degree, sportscasting job.”

“So, you’ve got a plan.”

“I do.” He turned toward her. “What about you? What are you going to do when you get out?”

“I’m in for the long haul. I’m career military.”

“But you’re pretty!”

She looked at him sideways.

“I mean... You don’t have to... Not that you’re not a damned good soldier...” He glanced around wildly, looking for an escape, stiffened, pointed and yelled, “Watch out!”

She jerked the wheel sideways, missed the mine, but the Humvee behind them was following too closely and wasn’t as lucky. The front right wheel impacted and exploded, blasting that Humvee on its top and knocking their Humvee on its side. Metal blew everywhere; in a spray of blood, Corporal Hackett flew over the top of her as she remained buckled into her seat.

How did he get out of his seat belt?

But Kellen didn’t have long to consider how dire the blast had to have been to sever Hackett’s seat belt. She hit the sand through the open driver’s-side window hard. Her ears rang, her vision blurred. The sand burned her skin everywhere it touched, her face and neck, her right palm.

Somewhere close, Corporal Hackett screamed.

She had to get up. She had to help him. There had been blood. She wiped at her face. Too much

blood. And the sand—it could roast them alive.

The Humvee. On its side. She unbuckled her seat belt, crawled through the interconnected shards of windshield, grabbed her camo jacket off the back of her seat and spread it in the shade under the Humvee's hull and over the blistering-hot sands. She wiped the blood from her eyes and located the first aid kit. She dragged it toward Corporal Hackett's crumpled form, out on the flats.

Why was he still screaming? She wiped again at the blood trickling down her face.

Wait. It wasn't all his. Some of this was hers. She ran her fingers through her hair and dislodged a shard of glass. More blood. Damn it. She should have left the shard alone.

Corporal Hackett first. She could faint later.

She staggered over—she couldn't seem to walk a straight line—and dropped to her knees beside him.

He stopped screaming. "You're a girl," he said.

"Last time I checked. You got a back injury?"

He struggled for breath. "No back injury."

"Good. I've got to get you out of the sun, so I'm going to drag you into the shade of the Humvee. Right?"

He was breathing deeply now. "Right."

She slid her arms under his shoulders. He was big, solid, heavy, but she tugged, and tugged again, hard enough to unfold him and pull him toward the Humvee. Good. Good. She could save him.

Then she saw.

One leg was gone above the knee.

Corporal Harlow Hackett would never run again.

She pulled him onto her jacket and lifted his head to give him water. When he had sipped, he said, "Captain, you don't look so great."

She squinted at him. He was getting smaller and farther away. "Don't feel so great."

Corporal Hackett started yelling for medics, which Kellen should have done in the first place.

Not far away, the ground rumbled and lifted in a giant explosion, bigger than the first one.

Kellen only had time to look in the direction of the blast before she was hit hard on the shoulder and sent flying across the desert to land on the burning sands.

So much for her luck.

The world disappeared.

She was alone in the familiar dim gray of unconsciousness.

Six months later, in Germany...

Kellen watched as Corporal Hackett pushed himself upright with the help of his physical therapist.

SUSAN HAWKER:

FEMALE, AFRICAN AMERICAN, 27 YEARS OLD, 5'2". CURLY BROWN HAIR, BROWN EYES. IN PEAK PHYSICAL SHAPE. ORIGINALLY FROM FORT WORTH, TEXAS.

Kellen had to hand it to Susan—the petite brunette’s arm muscles were incredibly impressive after years of picking up disabled soldiers to put them in wheelchairs and hold them over the parallel bars that would teach them to walk again. Even pushing Hackett around didn’t seem to faze Susan. She also studiously ignored Hackett’s deep blush at having a woman so close to him. Kellen guessed Susan was used to these college-aged kids idolizing her.

Susan placed Hackett’s upper body between the parallel bars, and Hackett, sweating buckets as usual, used his sinewy arms to hold his body weight above his two legs, one scarred flesh, one new and Army-issued.

“Okay, Corporal, same as yesterday. We’re looking to go five steps. No rush.” Susan’s voice was calm, but she stood at the ready to catch Hackett if he needed support.

Hackett grinned at Kellen and, like a little kid, said, “Watch this, Captain!”

With a deep breath in, he lifted his prosthetic leg, and slowly, he placed the leg a few inches in front of him. Sweat rolled down his face from the effort, but when he accomplished it, he yelled, “Ta-da!”

Kellen grinned.

She could never have been so good-natured about such an ordeal, but then, this was why she’d enjoyed having Hackett in her unit. Kellen clapped enthusiastically and grabbed a small towel from a nearby basket.

Susan nodded her thanks as Kellen wiped the sweat out of Hackett’s eyes. “Good job, soldier—but you owe your PT four more steps.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Hackett braced himself again on the bars, picking up his other leg and pushing it forward, inch by inch. When he’d caught his breath, he said, “Captain, tell me something interesting to keep my mind off this super-fun activity.”

Susan laughed softly at his obvious sarcasm.

“Where are you deployed to next?” he asked.

Kellen froze. She hadn’t really adjusted to the truth herself, so it was hard to say it out loud. But she owed Hackett the unvarnished truth.

“I’m not.”

Hackett looked up from scowling at his unresponsive leg. “What do you mean, ma’am?” He managed one more slow step, his knuckles white against the bars.

“Corporal, I mean that I’m being medically discharged, just like you.” Kellen smiled tightly. “No need to head back to all that dust and grime in Kuwait.”

Hackett was too young to hide his surprise. “Wow, Captain. That’s a really bad break. I know you wanted to stay in for the long haul.” After Susan cleared her throat, firmly and pointedly, in response to his comment, he turned his concentration onto his next step. His arms were shaking. He needed to get those last two steps in.

Kellen shrugged. “I’m not as lucky as you thought I was. The Army frowns at a captain remaining unconscious for two days for no reason except that she landed on her head.”

“Nah, I still believe in your luck. All those explosions, and we’re both still alive. Sounds pretty lucky to me.”

Kellen thought for a moment. If Hackett could look at the situation with such good humor and positive thinking, she could stop acting like her world had ended—though it still felt as if it had.

Hackett pushed his leg forward again, and when he stopped panting for breath (leading Susan to say, firmly, “Stop holding your breath, Corporal.”), he asked, “What are you going to do now? Head back to the States?” He cocked his head to the side, thinking. “Wait, I’ve never asked you—where is home for you?”

Kellen pursed her lips. “I don’t have a home.”

Hackett nodded and didn’t say anything.

A lack thereof was a fairly common theme in the Army.

Kellen continued, before Hackett could ask more revealing questions, “I’m not sure where I’ll go or what I’ll do. I’ve been checking out a resort job in Washington State.” Which was as far away from Maine as she could get and stay in the lower forty-eight. “The resort looks gorgeous, very out-of-the-way. But I’m not sure I ever want to go stateside again.”

Hackett pushed his leg forward one last time. His pain was evident in the tightness of his jaw, the paleness of his skin. But he still looked over at Susan and pulled a funny face. She chuckled and held him up so he could turn around and slip gratefully into the wheelchair she had waiting for him at the end of the parallel bars.

Susan leaned down to adjust his legs onto the foot stands. “I’m proud of you, Corporal. For that, you get a fifteen-minute break before we work on your flexibility.”

Hackett gathered himself and smiled. “You spoil me so, ma’am. I will take your kind offer!”

Susan and Kellen both laughed.

“If only more kids were like Hackett,” Susan said to Kellen. “He never says ‘I can’t.’” She went over to the mats on the other side of the small gym to prepare the foam rollers, stretch bands and towels for Hackett’s flexibility regimen, leaving Kellen and Hackett alone.

“What about you, soldier?” Kellen asked quietly. “Where are you off to once you get back on your feet—no pun intended?”

Hackett chortled softly at her joke. “I’ve had to change my plans up a bit. Seems to me I won’t be running in the Olympics any time soon.” For a split second, he looked incredibly sad; a man watching his boyhood dreams crumble. But he held himself straight in his chair, showing courage in the face of his personal tragedy.

Kellen thought quickly and said, “Wait, what about running prosthetics? You could be a Paralympic star!”

“No, ma’am.” Hackett shook his head slowly. “The Army won’t pay for specialized prosthetics, and my parents can’t afford one.”

“How much are we talking here, Hackett?”

“Upwards of fifty grand.”

Kellen let out a low whistle. “That’s a bundle, all right. What about sportscasting? Are you going

forward with that plan?"

Hackett chewed on his cheek for a moment. "Sometimes dreams have to change. I'm a grown man with a US-government-issued prosthetic. I'm glad to have it, and I'm determined to work hard enough to deserve it." He paused. "My parents wanted me to get a college education. Sure, I love to race down a country road with the wind in my face and the smell of the prairie in my nose. But now I need an education so I can get a normal job, nothing flashy, maybe get married, have a couple of kids."

"Sounds like a good dream to me." *For you.* For Kellen, it was a tarnished dream.

"I'm a country boy at heart, and I want that house with a white picket fence. That's easier to come by when you're not traveling to sporting events."

"So that's it? You're going back home, and your goal is to get a desk job?" Kellen really wanted to know. She wanted to see his response; she wanted to understand if he was ever going to be truly happy after this terrible turn of events.

Hackett sighed and rubbed his clean-shaven chin. "I doubt it'll ever get easier—looking down to see metal instead of skin. But it'd be a shame to waste that GI-Bill college funding..." He gathered himself and grinned at Kellen. "So, yes, Captain, it's the life of a grunt for me."

"Okay! Time for flexibility work!" Susan said cheerily from the gymnastic mats in the corner.

"She's tryin' to kill me, Captain," Hackett said, playfully grim.

Susan said, "I'm trying to relieve Captain Adams of your care so she can go take care of herself. How is *your* PT going, Captain?"

Kellen didn't particularly like thinking about having been unconscious for two days while she underwent shoulder surgery and the military began processing her medical discharge paperwork. Waking to find that not only was her shoulder thoroughly crunched but that the Army no longer needed her services was a double blow. But she reminded herself not to take out her frustration on Susan.

"It's going fine. My physical therapist is confident I'll work out the kinks if I do my exercises every day...forever."

Susan smiled. "You're a hard worker, Captain. Your shoulder will thank you someday."

"In the meantime, my hand-to-hand combat is suffering," Kellen said morosely.

"From what I hear, you were the best in basic training," Susan said.

"Still is. She kicks ass," Hackett said.

"I only kicked your ass once," Kellen reminded him.

"Once was enough." He rubbed at his butt.

"There you go," Susan said. "It'll come back. Give yourself time."

Kellen got to her feet.

Hackett sagged in his chair. "You headed out?"

"Yep. Gotta go check on my discharge paperwork, and then I'm off to find my own dream—whatever that is."

"Best of luck. I'm sorry for not rising, Captain, but it's been a pleasure serving with you." Hackett saluted stiffly.

Kellen pushed the tears back from her eyes and saluted back. Then she leaned down for a hug and whispered, "I hope you find your picket fence, Corporal."

Hackett closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them, Kellen was gone.

Kellen reviewed the job posting for a Washington State resort called Yearning Sands. There was a photo of the hotel, and it looked like something out of a postcard. The pristine blue of the Pacific Ocean offered a gorgeous contrast to the resort itself—the main building looked like a German castle, and the cottages on the outskirts of the resort were the definition of rustic. Kellen was excited to see that there were running paths that wandered across the resort and a beautiful, albeit chilly looking, beach reserved for resort guests.

She reflected that being the assistant manager of a resort that size wouldn't be a picnic. The security alone must be very intricate to keep track of all those rich folks and their baubles. She couldn't imagine anything that was less like the Army.

The job description was very honest, it seemed. While the pictures showed the resort in brilliant sunlight, the posting was quick to point out that this was the Pacific Northwest, and applicants should be prepared for inclement weather to be the norm. Rain, winds, fog and occasionally snow would sweep in off the ocean, and getting a little wet—and sometimes even muddy—was expected of every employee.

Kellen smiled. She didn't mind a little mud, and after her time in Kuwait, she could use a nice rain shower.

As Kellen pondered whether applying for the position was even a good idea, Major Brock Aimes entered the room at his usual breakneck speed.

MAJOR BROCK AIMES:

MALE. WHITE. 32 YEARS OF AGE. 6'1", 185 LBS. BROWN HAIR, BLUE EYES. AIDE-DE-CAMP TO GENERAL LAWRENCE SLATER. PURPLE HEART FOR INJURY SUSTAINED IN AFGHANISTAN. I'D HAVE TO SEE THE SCAR TO BELIEVE IT.

Since Kellen had arrived on the German Army base, she had met Major Aimes once. He had once stopped speed walking long enough to hold a brief conversation. Mostly his name, position on base and a quick welcome designed to impress her. Her knee-jerk reaction: maybe General Slater kept his aide that busy, but Aimes seemed to her to be one of those guys who moved quickly to give the impression of going somewhere.

Kellen stood at attention and saluted. Aimes responded in kind before saying, "Captain Adams, General Slater would like to see you."

Not only did he walk too fast, the man sounded like he had a stick up his butt.

When she didn't move, he added, "Now."

"Of course. Lead the way, please, Major."

As she followed Aimes through the brightly lit hallways, she admitted to herself that she was intrigued by the general's request. She had worked with the general in Afghanistan. He was a good officer and followed the letter of the law and Army regulations in a way that respected both the United States Government and each of the soldiers under his command. She remembered him as curt, calm and distant, but then again, those mountains, the biting cold and the constant guerilla activity would get to anyone after a while.

Afghanistan had tested her, too.

He never took advantage of his power, either. One of the reasons Kellen remembered him so clearly was that he acted quickly but never rashly. He had the final say in troop movements and tactics, but he knew the particular talents and knowledge of each of his soldiers and was always willing to consult with them. He would ask the kid from Idaho how best to deal with fighting in desert conditions, and then he would pick the brain of the soldier with a background as a car mechanic before determining the timeline for fixing a broken Humvee. He was beloved by his troops and, even covered in dust and sweat, a darn good-looking man.

But why would he want to see her?

She didn't have to wait long to find out. Major Aimes practically pushed her into the general's office, and as she passed the threshold, he grabbed the heavy door and closed it softly but firmly.

GENERAL LAWRENCE SLATER:

MALE. WHITE. 6', 170 LBS. SQUARE JAWLINE, BROAD SHOULDERS, FULL HEAD OF SALT-AND-PEPPER HAIR. GRAY EYES. 54 YEARS OLD. WIDOWED. NO CHILDREN. CAREER MILITARY; THREE STARS.

As Kellen saluted General Slater, she surveyed the room. His office was harshly lit with plenty of fluorescent bulbs above and piercing sunshine from the open windows. There were stacks of papers on his desk, each with a heavy object—stapler, tape dispenser, desk clock—holding them down against the wind coming in through the windows.

General Slater answered her unasked question. "I always request an office on an outside wall. After all that time in the field, I need fresh air."

Kellen nodded crisply. "Yes, sir. Good idea, sir."

"Sit down, Captain. I've got a proposition for you," Slater said, flicking his hand at one of two stiff-backed chairs that looked like they'd been commissioned from the cafeteria. Kellen sat in the nearest seat, her back straight, her hands held gently in her lap.

Slater scrutinized her. He made her nervous, as if she was on display. As if he was assessing her in some way she could not define.

"One of my soldiers, a corporal, showed me something I thought you could help me with, Captain. What do you know about the Monuments Men?"

Kellen wrinkled her brow. *What a strange question. Where is this going?*

"Sir, I know the basics. During World War II, a group of art historians and archivists were commissioned to recover the art and artifacts the Nazis had stolen from the countries they conquered. I believe the idea was to save those objects and return them to their original owners, if possible."

General Slater smiled slightly. "That is, indeed, the basics, Captain." From one of the stacks on his desk, he produced a small leather-bound book, cracked with age. "What do you make of this?"

Kellen leaned forward to take the proffered book and flipped through the first few pages. They were beautiful. The lettering looked almost medieval. It was an illuminated manuscript—each new section started with a hand-painted miniature. But the sentences (if that was what they even were) made no sense. Shaking her head, Kellen said, "I'm sorry, sir. I don't know what to make of it. It appears to be in code."

Slater leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. If the general had had a mustache, she would have expected him to start stroking it like a Bond villain. A very handsome Bond villain. "That's right. A nearly unbreakable code at that. Let me back up. Almost a year ago, one of my

soldiers, Corporal Benjamin Roy, showed me this book of code. He told me that his great-grandfather Chester Roy fought in World War II and was chosen as one of the famous Monuments Men. As the story goes, Chester worked around Europe, retrieving precious works of art, and when he got to Germany, he found a cave.”

“A cave?” She leaned forward, her interest caught.

“Right. Corporal Roy wasn’t sure about everything his great-grandfather found in that cave, but one thing was notable—a famous painting stolen by the Nazis and hidden deep inside for safekeeping. Are you with me, Captain?”

Kellen thought he might honestly be pulling her leg with this fantastical tale. Warily, she said, “Yes, sir. I’m with you.”

“Good. At the time, Chester Roy couldn’t extract the painting—the war was ongoing at this point, and the chances of the painting getting blown up outside of the cave were greater than if it remained concealed inside the cave. He and his men decided to hide the entrance to the cave.”

Kellen looked at the leather-bound book in her hand. If she was understanding General Slater correctly, he was inviting her on a treasure hunt.

“Over the next few months, the Monuments Men had a rough time, and nearly everyone who knew the location of the cave was killed, including Chester Roy. Corporal Roy says his great-grandmother received that book among her husband’s possessions after his death.” General Slater paused in his story.

Kellen opened the book again and ran her fingers over the writing. “Sir, are you saying that this book contains the location of a treasure cave?”

“According to his widow, yes. She died of Alzheimer’s a few years back, and one of the things she said on her deathbed was that her husband was a ‘treasure hunter’ and he ‘found a priceless painting in a cave in Germany.’ He must have written her a letter at the time...”

Kellen shook her head. “He wouldn’t send his wife that type of classified information. She had to have cracked his code.”

“Exactly what we thought.” Slater nodded approvingly. “But she’s the only one who did.”

“Sir?”

“Corporal Roy came to me with this diary because no one in his family can figure out what it says. They’ve asked for help from professional code breakers with no luck. Not even the computers are up for the task.”

“How did Mrs. Roy manage it?” Kellen asked.

“Ah. It seems Mr. and Mrs. Roy met in Washington, DC, where she was a secret code breaker for the war effort.”

“Wow. That’s spectacular!”

Slater smiled a rare smile. “Yes. Very romantic.”

Romantic. She leaned away and turned her eyes back to the book.

Slater wasn’t charming. Not like Gregory. But he was older, handsome, powerful—a man to be reckoned with. She had admired his leadership in Afghanistan, but with Gregory, she had proved she couldn’t trust her own judgment.

Without pause, Slater continued, “The corporal needs help with this diary—he’s very firm on needing to find that painting and restore it to the descendants of its original owners or the museum from which it was stolen. I suppose you’d call it the kid’s quest.”

Kellen looked up.

General Slater seemed to be oblivious to her discomfort.

Get a grip, Kellen. He said the word *romantic* and he smiled. It didn't mean he was interested in her.

He looked at her straight on, his flinty gray eyes snapping with excitement. "That's where you come in, Captain. I know about your particular prowess with codes and maps and details. I know the kids in your unit have always believed you're lucky and can't die. I need your help with this."

"You're asking me to crack the code in this book. Sir, this isn't something I've ever done before. I'm not Mrs. Roy. I have no training. And—" she rotated her shoulder "—I'm in no shape to dig."

"Young woman, I'm a general." His voice held the snap of a man who had long been in command. "You're a captain and would be the code breaker. You won't be required to dig. Aimes will hire help for that."

She laid the rest of her cards on the table. "I'm also in no shape to fight or dodge bullets. A treasure hunt is, by definition, dangerous."

"Perhaps. If we told people what we were doing. I've had this journal in my possession for eleven months, looking for the proper person to break the code. Today I've told you. Should you accept, I'll tell Aimes. I've proved I can be discreet. Let us assume both of you have the same ability, and that we won't be hunted through some German forest by some Nazi ghost army seeking vengeance."

Kellen inclined her head.

"Before you tell me why you can't do it, let me tell you why you can." He ticked the reasons off on his fingers. "You have the security clearance to dig into the files and get into Roy's mind. You don't have a home to go back to. Your enlistment papers are pretty clear on that point, since your next of kin are listed as N/A."

So far, he wasn't selling her.

"There's a reward to be had—the Victoria and Albert Museum is offering a substantial reward in exchange for the rights to display the work for the first two years after it's found, provided it's not provably the property of another museum."

"Substantial reward?" Now he had her attention.

"Substantial," he said firmly. "They worked those terms out with the family—who knows how much they're being offered. But for us, the reward will be split fifty-fifty. You get half, and Benjamin Roy and his family get the other half, because you're our best chance of breaking this code."

Kellen was speechless. Not only did he know an eerie amount about her, but he also wanted to turn her into Indiana Jones.

Still, he was right. She didn't really have anywhere else to go.

Clearly, General Slater could see her leaning toward a *yes*. He clarified the terms further. "Part of our agreement with the Roy family states that the book must be kept 'on or about my person at all times while the code is being studied.'" Slater rolled his eyes slightly at the legal language before continuing. "That means, Captain, you'd have to move into my home, off base, in order to study the text."

Kellen opened her mouth to protest.

Before she got started, Slater held up his hand. "Captain, this is strictly hands-off. I'm a widower, and I'm twenty years your senior. All I want is the code, so I can help out a soldier who has been a real asset to me in the field."

Still, Kellen hesitated.

"If it makes you feel better, Major Aimes will always be around as chaperone." Slater leaned toward her, conspiratorially, and said softly, "This is his first time being aide to a general, and he's leaning toward overzealous. He's essentially shadowing everything I do." Slater shrugged. "To be

honest, it's flattering."

Surprised, Kellen laughed shortly. Finally, she stood up and said, "Thank you for thinking of me for this operation, sir. I accept your terms. But, sir, I'm supposed to be medically discharged any day now."

Slater waved his hand dismissively. "When you're done with this project, I'll put the paperwork through myself, and you can start your life post-military."

"Thank you, sir. I'll look forward to that." After she saluted, Kellen turned to the door only to hear the general clear his throat. Turning, she saw his hand outstretched toward her.

"The book, Captain."

Kellen looked down and realized she still held Chester Roy's masterpiece. She returned and handed over the diary. "Of course, sir, my apologies."

Slater nodded curtly. "I expect you at my house tomorrow, at 0800 hours. Dismissed."

Kellen shifted her duffel bag on her uninjured shoulder and knocked on the door of the general's house. The house itself looked quintessentially German—or, at least, what an American would think was German. It had decorative eaves, brightly painted shutters and an enormous oak door carved with pine trees.

A short, plump woman came to the door and welcomed Kellen in accented English. She introduced herself as Greta, General Slater's housekeeper and cook. She was clearly good at her job—Kellen could not see one speck of dust as Greta showed Kellen around the house.

"This is the breakfast nook, where the general takes most of his meals. The dining room is used for dinner and special functions. Over here is the library, where you will be working. See, we've set you up with a desk. The general's office is next door, if you need to consult with him," Greta continued as she led Kellen up the stairs. "Here, at the end of the hall, is your room and toilet."

"This is lovely, Greta, thank you." Kellen wasn't being facetious. Not only did her room smell of lemon and beeswax, but she had windows looking out toward the river and a beautiful four-poster bed covered in handmade quilts.

Greta beamed at the compliment. "I'll leave you to put your things away. The general would like to see you in one half hour."

Kellen busied herself by pulling her few belongings out of the duffel bag and arranging them around the room until it was time to head back downstairs. As she descended the stairs, though, she could hear General Slater ripping someone to pieces. She realized it must be over the phone because she couldn't hear any responses.

Major Aimes popped into the hallway from the library, and seeing her surprised look (she had never heard the general so angry), Aimes leaned in conspiratorially and whispered, "He's frustrated by the code breakers. He was hoping to get you more information to get you started on Chester Roy's code." Aimes paused dramatically. "He's very invested in getting that painting."

Aimes flinched when Slater slammed down the phone in his office. "Excuse me, I'd better get in there before he blows up again."

Kellen was left alone in the hallway, wondering if she'd made a grave mistake by accepting this "quest."

* * *

Kellen had such a headache.

Apparently her injuries weren't going to heal quickly through her sheer force of will. Her shoulder didn't feel like it was being pulled out of the socket by a giant anymore, but still, she was in a huge amount of pain, and her left temple was constantly pounding where she landed during the Humvee crash. It was impossible to get anything done while taking the pain pills the Army's medical team had prescribed her. Instead, she lay in bed with a pillow over her eyes, blocking out the light, and breathed calmly through her nose, as the doctor had ordered her.

But remaining calm was hard for Kellen. She'd spent too long imprisoned on Gregory's estate to ever be calm when her vision was obstructed.

She had started the coding job by thumbing through Chester Roy's diary and trying to get a sense of

how he organized his thoughts. The parchment contained no lines or denoted margins, but nevertheless, he wrote in straight lines, with straight margins. He clearly had good spatial reasoning.

Because of that, Kellen started by studying the maps Roy had carefully drawn into the text on a few of the pages. They were simplistic drawings and contained no place names to orient her, only numbers, which did not appear to coincide with anything in the lettered code. From what Benjamin Roy had told General Slater, the cave was in Germany, but Kellen refused to rule out that the location was somewhere else in Europe.

Chester Roy's diary seemed even older than its seventy-five years. The cracked leather cover held pieces of parchment, brittle from age. But the lettering itself was exquisite calligraphy with miniature paintings within the text.

Exquisite and tiny. Even with a magnifying glass, studying the diary was killing Kellen's eyes. With her head aching all the time from her injury, she had to limit the amount of time she spent staring at the lettering.

Still, General Slater treated her well. He never reproached her for her lack of progress. She sat down every evening with him and Major Aimes at 1900 hours for a hearty dinner. The things Greta could do with a potato!

The general did seem lonely. His wife had died two years prior, and the house still showed her decorating influence in the thick, deep red and gold carpets and the still-life paintings of red apples and golden pears. It was certainly easy to tell what Mrs. Slater's favorite colors had been.

But for all his loneliness, the general stayed carefully hands-off with Kellen. In fact, she couldn't think of one time he had actually touched her since she moved in. He did get a little too close for comfort when she was working on cracking the code in the diary, but then again, she was very sensitive to older men hovering over her. Gregory had taken care of that.

Besides, Slater was clearly interested in her code work. He asked after her progress every night at dinner, and he was charmingly enthralled by the smallest movement in the direction of cracking the code. Regardless of the lovely meals and the hospitality, she felt trapped, held in this house until she cracked the code.

General Slater was incredibly dedicated to the work. If she asked for reference materials, Major Aimes provided them the next day. If she needed access to confidential documents about Chester Roy, they appeared as if from thin air. She *liked* working with General Slater on this mystery. If only he would back off a little.

The person she was less enamored with was Major Aimes.

He was constantly underfoot, running messages to and from base, with the help of General Slater's driver, Eugene, and racing around the house to make sure the general had everything he could possibly need to work and live.

It was impossible to lose Aimes. Even when he wasn't near Kellen, she could hear him practically running down a hallway somewhere in the house.

When Aimes skittered around the corner and into her study late in the afternoon, five weeks into the project, Kellen had finally decided to give up for the day, but she made a concerted effort to look alert and not at all tired.

"Captain Adams, the general would like an update on the project." He stood at attention, all spit and polish and obnoxious devotion.

"Major Aimes, you may tell the general that I'm feeling confident that soon we'll be able to follow the code, and I hope we'll get that reward for Corporal Roy."

Aimes could not hide his surprise. "Corporal Roy?"

Kellen was confused. “Yes, the soldier General Slater is trying to help by cracking his great-grandfather’s code.” Certainly Aimes must know this. The general kept him in the loop on everything.

Still, Aimes’s face looked like a giant question mark. He seemed to gather himself and put on a more neutral look.

At that moment, Kellen realized that something was terribly wrong.

Aimes kept his expression carefully blank. “I’ll pass on your message to the general. Have a good evening, Captain.”

Then he was gone, leaving Kellen alone with her computer and the files on Chester Roy. She searched the files but found nothing about Roy’s great-grandson and his military career. But when she typed “Corporal Benjamin Roy” into a search engine, an obituary from a local paper in Nebraska came up immediately.

Reading through the short article, Kellen felt a cold sweat break out.

Corporal Benjamin Roy, only son of James and Laurie Roy, was killed last month in a friendly fire incident outside of Kabul, Afghanistan. Benjamin was a local hero prior to joining the Army through his extensive volunteer work with the Boys and Girls Club, as well as his winning streak as the star running back for the local high school’s Fightin’ Falcons. He is survived by his parents, his sister, Katrina, and his beloved dog, Samson.

Kellen could barely believe it. Corporal Benjamin Roy was dead. Killed by friendly fire in a war zone, no doubt under the command of General Slater. Kellen put her elbows on the desk and her face into her open palms.

General Slater had lied to her.

Now there was no way out for her. He was her source of information; she was quite sure he wouldn’t look kindly on her request to review the file of the apparently dead Benjamin Roy. Especially since he’d told her that half the reward was going to the corporal.

Kellen felt sick to her stomach. Her headache returned, drumming against her temples.

General Slater had lied to her. And she knew the hard truth. A greedy man who would kill to claim another’s share of fame and fortune would kill again. If she could break the code, her life would be worth nothing.

When she broke the code, he would eliminate her.

5

With the fear and anger of discovering Benjamin Roy's death fueling her, Kellen sat up through the night. In the early hours of the next morning, she rubbed her eyes and sat back in the squeaky office chair in her study.

She was so screwed.

She had managed to break Chester Roy's code.

The next morning, Kellen woke at her desk, an old, familiar nightmare chasing her into wakefulness. She had dreamed Gregory was trying to push her off a great precipice. She tried to fight him, tried to scream, but she was helpless. Always so helpless. Then as she was falling, she looked up, and instead, General Slater stood at the edge of the cliff, a cheery smile on his face.

Trying her best to shake off the dream, she wiped the sleep from her eyes—and gasped and jumped.

Major Aimes stood in the doorway.

What a way to begin her day.

“Captain, when I mentioned to the general that you worked through the night, he was hopeful that you’d had a breakthrough.” Major Aimes stared at her expectantly.

Kellen carefully considered what to say. She was trapped in the general’s house. She was required to break the code. Until she did that, she had no chance for escape. So—“I’ve broken the code, Major.”

Major Aimes looked like the cat that got the cream. “Wonderful news. You know, I suggested you for this job.”

General Slater had claimed that Aimes didn’t know about the Roy journal until after he had hired her.

Liar. Someone was a liar.

“I’m expecting a promotion once we recover the painting,” Aimes said. “Tell me what you discovered!”

Yeah. Like I’m going to tell you, asshole. “Where might I find the general?”

Aimes’s excitement faded, and observing her caution, he became wary. “He’s in the breakfast nook.”

Kellen gathered her books and papers and put them in her backpack. She walked into the sunlit breakfast nook and found the general sitting at the table. He looked up from a report he was reading.

Kellen poured tea and added milk before she seated herself across the table from him and said, “General, I have good news. I know where the painting is hidden.”

He pushed his report aside, and his flinty gaze rested on her with expectation and...something else. Caution? Contempt? Did he think she would easily fall prey to his conspiracy?

She gathered herself to play the game, to give the information necessary and withhold the information that would save her life. She opened the book and pointed. “It’s the paintings. They don’t look like the usual miniatures on an illuminated manuscript. These are created using thick layers of paint. They rise above the page by an eighth of an inch in some places, and under the lamplight, they cast shadows as they did not in the daylight. Each miniature’s shadow provided a number and a place name. As I worked through the night, I was able to match the place names to the numbers on the four maps drawn into the diary.”

She had General Slater’s full attention. “That’s brilliant. Not a code so much as an illusion.”

“Exactly.” For a moment, she met his gaze and saw in him the same appreciation she felt for such a clever ruse. Determinedly, she ignored the warmth she felt, and when she looked again, nothing of enthusiasm remained in his expression.

She showed him the first two maps—the two that led to a cave under the Altdorf Forest. “You can

see here that Chester Roy noted the amount of rubble he packed at the tiny entrance of the cave,” She pointed to the second map. “We’re going to need excavation equipment.”

“I’ll alert Aimes to acquire some men and shovels. The sooner this is done, the better, and you can go your way.” Clearly, he wanted to be rid of her.

“Yes, sir, when I’ve received my medical discharge, which you will now expedite.” She matched his flinty-eyed stare.

“The discharge papers just arrived on my desk.”

So now all she had to do was stay alive long enough to collect those papers. The general didn’t realize the kinds of battles she’d fought long before she joined the military. She was a survivor, and she intended to deflect the general’s attacks with a combination of force...and deception. “There’s more,” she said. “I was going over and over these two numbers that are written on both of the maps. Eleven and forty-three. At first I thought they must be latitude and longitude. But that would put the cave in Djibouti.”

“Unlikely,” he responded. But she had his attention.

“Last night I realized there was another system that uses two numbers. The Bible.” Kellen pulled an old copy of the King James Bible from her backpack. “I found this in the library. Look, John 11:43 is Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.”

“What exactly does that tell us?”

“I researched paintings missing after World War II, and I came across this.” She pulled a printout from between the pages of the Bible and handed it to Slater.

He read the information in a glance, and then he looked up, his eyes snapping. “Are you telling me we’re going to re-acquire a Rubens?”

Kellen was almost giddy with excitement. “I believe so, sir. It’s called ‘Raising of Lazarus’ by Peter Paul Rubens. And it has been missing since 1945.”

General Slater sat with his mouth agape, and then he broke out in a grin. “I knew I had backed a winner when I picked you.” Then his grin disappeared. “More tea, Captain?” Without waiting for an answer, he rose from his seat, brought the teapot over to the table, walked to Kellen’s right side and refilled her cup.

“Thank you, sir.” She reached for it.

He grabbed her wrist hard enough to bruise. “I don’t know what the hell you think you’re doing, but you’re not going to get away with it. Don’t even think you can.”

Looking up into his twisted face, Kellen could only think of her husband. She would never let someone hurt her like that again.

But Major Aimes must have been hovering just outside the door, for he appeared at just the right moment to divert a fight.

Slater dropped her wrist and strode to the other side of the table. He gathered up the pages of his report and turned to Aimes. “Captain Adams has cracked the code. As soon as you assemble men and equipment, we’ll head to the cave’s location.”

Aimes gave his obnoxiously smug smile. “I anticipated your needs, sir, and we can be on our way within an hour.”

Suck-up, Kellen thought.

“Very good,” Slater said. “Captain, be ready to go by 0900. This mission is almost finished.”

Slater and Aimes left the room, leaving Kellen to her tea. But she found her hands were shaking too much to get the teacup to her mouth. Today would decide her fate—would she be honorably discharged and start her life over, or would her life end in a dark cave in Germany?

Once General Slater had the painting in hand, how did he intend to kill her?

Major Aimes drove the general's personal truck through narrow mountain roads, the general at his side, while Kellen sat cramped in the back, dreading their arrival at the cave. Behind them, a pickup full of men followed with shovels. Behind them, an art historian followed in her Volkswagen; the general had contacted Samantha Becker to ensure the removal of the painting was done with proper care.

With so many witnesses, Kellen didn't see how Slater could eliminate her. But he was a general; strategy was his strength, and he'd managed to murder Corporal Benjamin Roy quite efficiently. Friendly fire was probably his modus operandi. A quick bullet to the back when she was done procuring his painting would be an effective finish for her. The cave would be a good tomb. No one would ever find her bones...

She focused on the maps, giving Aimes instructions until they reached a lush green section of the Altdorf Forest, with a few fallen trees and what appeared to be a rockslide. According to the map, they had arrived.

Aimes and Slater climbed out of the front seats, leaving Kellen to struggle out on her own.

Yes, the general's gentlemanly facade crumbled now that he had achieved his goal. She squinted at Roy's map. "General, the map says this is the entrance to the cave. We'll need to clear this debris."

General Slater crossed his arms over his chest. "Major, you heard the captain."

Aimes gestured to the assembled workers. "You heard the general. Get these rocks moved."

The men started digging.

General Slater said, "Aimes, grab a shovel and get to work."

Kellen did not smile. She did not smile. She did not...until Aimes had turned his back and started shoveling. *Then* she smiled, and broadly, too.

The general saw her, and he winked.

She didn't know what to think of him. He blew hot and cold, he liked her and he didn't, he wanted to kill her and...and that was all that mattered.

"Show me again the parts of Chester Roy's diary relating to this excavation," General Slater said.

She showed him what she had discovered, and added, in a voice laden with regret, "Parts of the code are still unintelligible."

He pulled a couple of camp chairs out of his truck, set them up and invited Kellen to seat herself. "You'd better continue with your code breaking, Captain. We don't want to find any unpleasant surprises in the cave."

"As you say, sir." She bent her head to the diary.

Hours later, a dust-covered Aimes shouted, "General, we're through!"

General Slater came to his feet.

Kellen tucked the diary into her backpack and followed more slowly.

Aimes ordered the excavators to keep digging and widen the opening to the cave, as Aimes and Slater, along with Kellen and the art historian, Miss Becker, climbed over the remaining rubble to duck into the cave. Behind them, the men continued to pull rocks away from the cave entrance, letting in more of the weak forest light.

The air inside the cave was stale, cool and dry.

General Slater, Major Aimes, Miss Becker and Kellen each held a large flashlight, and it didn't take them long to search the corners of the dark cave. There on the north side of the cave, amid rock dust and cobwebs, stood the immense Rubens painting, coated with dirt, framed in gilt and absolutely glorious.

Kellen thought Miss Becker might faint on the spot.

Slater rolled his eyes in Kellen's direction. "Did you think to mention its size, Captain?"

Kellen smiled. "It's eight and a half feet by six and a half feet, give or take, but the truck is large, the cave entrance is getting bigger every minute and we have enough men to carry it. Miss Becker, it looks all right, doesn't it? It's weathered well?"

Miss Becker still looked like she would expire at any moment, but in a heavy German accent, she breathlessly said, "It's breathtaking! I'll get the men in here to move it to the truck and take it directly to the airport. The Victoria and Albert Museum will want to authenticate it immediately."

Kellen looked bemused by General Slater's look of horror. "What do you mean?" he said indignantly.

Miss Becker looked taken aback. Clearly, she wasn't used to explaining art terms to nonartists. "Paintings are often forged. Before the museum will release the reward to the Roy family, they will need to ensure this is, indeed, a Rubens." Anxiously, she added, "It's no reflection on your integrity, General Slater."

Kellen almost snorted. His integrity, indeed.

The general relaxed. "I see. Get on with it, then."

Major Aimes and Miss Becker went to the mouth of the cave and collected the men needed to carry the enormous, weighty framed canvas. Slater and Kellen watched as the painting disappeared through the opening of the cave.

Kellen clicked on her flashlight. "I'll look to see if there are more works of art." She wandered toward the back of the cave.

The general watched her for a long moment, as if assessing her intentions, and then he began to use his flashlight as if he were searching, too.

She didn't know if he was actually looking or scoping out his theater for murder.

Miss Becker directed the workers to turn the painting on its side, cover it in canvas and a ridiculous amount of Bubble Wrap and strap it to the back of the lead truck.

When the Rubens was secure, Miss Becker reentered the cave. "Find anything?" she called.

Kellen shook her head. "Not a thing."

Miss Becker was unfazed. "Finding a Rubens is enough for me. Thank you for this opportunity. I'm going to head back with the workers. I'll need their help getting the painting onto the plane. You'll go, too?"

"Aimes will drive us back in a moment," Slater said, stepping forward to shake Miss Becker's hand. "Keep our painting safe."

Miss Becker smiled and bobbed back out of the cave, called goodbye to Aimes and climbed into the truck. The workers piled into the other trucks, ready to leave the dark forest.

As the sound of the trucks receding echoed in the cave, Major Aimes returned. "I thought there would be more treasure in the cave. My research said that often the Nazis hid multiple works of art in one location."

Slater walked toward the back of the cave. "Sorry, Major, but this drop-off looks like the edge of the cave."

"I did research and found many missing works of art, including a Botticelli, a van Gogh and two

beautiful Monet paintings,” Aimes insisted.

Kellen walked to the edge of the precipice and looked down. Without her flashlight on, there was no end to the dark abyss below. “If Roy’s maps are to be believed, the Rubens is all there is in this cave. There’s nothing beyond to be recovered. Here it drops off into an unimaginable abyss. No one has ever found the bottom of this cave.” Kellen watched the general out of the corner of her eyes, waiting to see if this was the moment he would strike.

Behind them, she heard the click of a safety being removed.

In that instant, she knew she’d been suckered.

General Slater got a chagrined look on his face.

Aimes had caught them both.

They both turned to face Major Aimes.

Aimes pointed his sidearm at them and smiled in a way that made Kellen’s insides grow cold. “It really is too bad that General Slater and Captain Adams were both killed during the recovery of the Rubens painting. Cave-ins can be so unpredictable. But since Kellen and I were in a deeply romantic relationship, and I was integral to retrieving a stolen masterpiece, I’m sure the museum won’t balk at giving me her share of the reward.”

Kellen’s anger welled up inside of her. “As though anyone would believe you and I were together.”

Aimes laughed. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, my dear, but I’m the consummate actor. They’ll believe it.”

Time to do her share of acting.

Turning to General Slater, she yelled, “You might die, but I’m not going down with you.” She rushed at him, slamming him in the solar plexus with her good shoulder.

He stumbled backward, arms flailing, and fell into the abyss.

Major Aimes took his shot.

The bullet grazed her shoulder—what did everyone have against her shoulder?—and the impact knocked her over the edge of the precipice, into the dark.

Kellen hit the shelf five feet below the edge of the precipice and landed with an “Oomph!” on the prone form of General Slater.

He cushioned her fall—and grunted.

She put her hand over his mouth, rolled off and shoved him toward the rock overhang at the inner edge of the shelf.

He was a soldier; he knew there was a time to fight and a time to hide. When the other guy held the gun, he hid.

They huddled together and listened as Major Aimes moved to the edge of the abyss. His flashlight roamed the black rock where they had landed, paused at the smear of blood at the edge where the next ledge broke off and swept beyond, into the darkness.

Kellen watched as the light roamed about, looking for anyplace where they could possibly be safe. Aimes chuckled softly. “Yes,” he said softly, and his footsteps echoed as he walked toward the excavated entrance.

General Slater was ready to vault back into the cave.

Kellen held him back.

The footsteps faded, and a muffled boom echoed back and forth across the rock walls.

Suddenly, the darkness was total.

With a small explosive, Aimes had sealed the entrance to the cave once more.

General Slater sighed loudly and said into the darkness, “You know, I was never particularly a fan of small, dark places. I never thought I’d die in one, though. Why did you stop me?”

Kellen felt like laughing, but she figured that was the mild hysteria sinking in. “You’re not going to die here, sir.”

“No?”

“No.” All this time, it had been Major Aimes. Kellen was surprised how relieved she felt, even in this dark cave, that it hadn’t been Slater who had sold her out. “Aimes...it was Aimes. And he was always so nondescript.”

Slater guffawed. “Don’t beat around the bush, Captain. *Annoying* is the word you’re looking for. The man was annoying, though he seemed to be a fine soldier before he got that little taste of power.”

Kellen retrieved a flashlight from her backpack, turned it on and placed it on the ground.

General Slater looked eerie in the blue-white light, a little battered, with a bruise forming on his forehead, a cut on his hand and scrapes on his knuckles.

“You’re injured.” Slater noted the blood trickling down Kellen’s arm.

“At the last moment, I turned away from his shot. It’s only a scratch.” Hurt like a son of a bitch, though. “I fell on the other shoulder, so that’s good. But if you could wrap the injury for me...”

Slater helped her pull her shirt off her arm, and then, with a small knife retrieved from his belt, he cut a long strip from his undershirt. “You seem to know, so tell me—what exactly just happened?”

She wished she could make herself sound less gullible. But... No way, so she might as well explain in plain words. “I thought the moment you got the painting, you were going to do away with me, so I held back information I’d learned from some of the code. I knew that the precipice was a fake.” She paused to give her pronouncement a proper weight. “I also know that the Rubens is a forgery.”

Slater stopped wrapping Kellen’s arm and was stunned silent. Then he chuckled deeply. “That

poor art historian. I've never seen anyone more excited." He sobered and finished tying off his bandage. "Although I guess we're not going to get out to see the punch line of that particular joke. Are we?"

With his help, she donned her shirt again. "Sir, I have one or two more tricks up my sleeve." She moved her arm. "As it were."

"The way out?"

"That. And hopefully—the real treasure."

"I'd be happy to get out of here alive." General Slater cleared his throat. "But supposing I was interested—what kind of treasure?"

She laughed at his dry tone. "Chester Roy wasn't specific about what it was, but it's at the far end of the cave. And it is the *far* end. According to the map—"

"The map you never shared with me?"

"That's the one. According to that, it'll take us at least another day of walking and crawling to reach our destination." She took a drag of water from her canteen and offered it to him.

He accepted it and drank. "How much water do we have?"

"Not enough. I thought I'd be making this trek alone."

He stood and shook the dust off his pants. "Then we'd better get going." He offered Kellen his hand.

She recognized a peace offering when she saw one. She took it.

He easily pulled her to her feet. The man was in good shape, she knew that for sure after landing on him. He was powerful and capable. He was not the villain she had believed him to be, and they were about to spend a lot of time together in the long dark.

Hmm. Time to get moving. "This way." She secured her flashlight to the bill of her cap, and together they edged along the rock shelf to a dark corner of the cave, which lead to an opening large enough to crawl through.

"Ladies first," Slater said sarcastically.

"In case there's a drop-off?"

"That. Or spiders." His voice held a verbal shudder.

She grinned. "Be nice to the person with the flashlight, General." On hands and knees, she entered the cramped tunnel.

He followed. "Wise words, though it's your fault I don't have one—I dropped it when you pushed me over the edge of a cliff." A pause. "You saved my life, Captain."

She answered promptly and lightly. "It's a life worth saving, sir."

"It's a debt I'll somehow repay." He sounded far too sincere for comfort.

The darkness was fraught with more than the possibility of cave-ins and spiderwebs.

She crawled faster.

He easily kept up. "What did you mean when you said you thought I'd do away with you once you found the painting?"

"Oh. That. Yes." Let him explain this. "You had said half the reward would go to Benjamin Roy. When I mentioned that to Major Aimes, he looked surprised. Baffled. He wasn't exactly given to shows of emotion, so I did some research."

"And?" General Slater sounded grim.

"Really, sir, you don't know? Benjamin Roy was killed outside Kabul. By friendly fire."

Kellen heard the general stop behind her. "That son of a bitch killed him, didn't he?"

Kellen shook her head in the dark. "Or had him killed. But I have no proof. Since you became more

and more standoffish and occasionally frightening, I believed you must have arranged the death. After all, with the proper arrangements, you were the one who stood to benefit.”

Slater sounded sad, like the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. “No, Captain, when last I saw him, Benjamin Roy was healthy and returning for a stint in the States.”

“I’m so sorry, sir.”

“Me, too. He was a good kid.” Slater sighed shakily.

Crawling on their knees and elbows for another twenty minutes brought them into a larger opening in the tunnel. Kellen slipped down the slope into a larger cavern, the general close behind. They stood and looked around.

Bats hung in the thousands from the ceiling.

“I guess we know why it’s so slick,” General Slater murmured.

Kellen looked at her grimy hands. He didn’t like spiders. She didn’t like bats, and she most definitely didn’t like bat poo. “There’s supposed to be an underground stream farther on.”

“Let’s keep moving.”

They found their stream and performed a necessary washup. Then they seated themselves on the nearest dry rocks and shared a protein bar out of her backpack.

He broke the silence. “I bet you’re wondering about my side of the story. Since you thought I was being ‘standoffish and occasionally frightening.’”

“I’m interested,” she acknowledged.

“General’s aide is a position of some importance. It requires discretion, intelligence, the ability to filter information and assign importance to the constant demand’s on my time.” He sounded very much like an officer instructing a recruit.

“Yes, sir. I know, sir.”

“Of course you do.” He sat and stared across the cavern. “I was looking for an aide, and Aimes came to me highly recommended. He was described as an exemplary soldier. I trusted him, as I have all my aides.”

“Of course.”

General Slater cleared his throat. “Excuses for an embarrassing, nearly deadly mistake. After you’d been in the house a few weeks, Aimes came to me with information. He claimed you had come to him with a proposal to do away with me.”

“Kill *you*?”

“He told me you wanted the entire reward for yourself and that you were willing to sleep with him to keep him quiet.”

Kellen found herself on her feet. “Sleep with him? With that officious little prick?”

General Slater gestured for her to calm down. “I know. I know. It seems silly now. But the idea that you were willing to kill me for money, and you’d have sex with Aimes but would barely look at me...well, it really stuck in my craw. An old man can only take so many wounds to his delicate sexual ego. It really pales in comparison to getting killed.”

Kellen chuckled and subsided. She did like General Slater. That was something to remember.

“I figured you were going to try to kill me in the cave.” Bitterly, he said, “I asked Aimes to watch my back.”

“Aimes had us monitoring each other, rather than paying attention to him.”

“When it comes to manipulation, the man’s a genius. Though still such an incredible prig.” General Slater stood. “Captain, we understand each other better now. Let’s move on.”

Over the next few hours, they came upon more spiders, an aquifer—with water, which they didn’t

dare drink—and more bats, but they occupied their time with conversation.

“Tough break for your friend Hackett, losing his leg like that,” General Slater said. “But he sounds like he’s holding up as well as can be expected.”

“He’s a good kid,” Kellen said, her eyes misting over. “I want to do more for him. All the kids in my unit were great. Well, some weren’t kids, I suppose—but they were a damn fine team. I’ll miss them.”

“I heard you had many visitors in the hospital,” Slater said gently.

Kellen said slowly, “It’s nice. They care about each other and about me. It’s not something I’m used to. Look!” She crawled out of their latest cramped tunnel. “I think we’re here!”

The cave opened up, revealing an enormous underground cavern, faintly lit, dry and empty...except for two large pieces of gorgeous artwork.

“The missing Monets,” she said.

“Holy shit.” General Slater looked dazed.

“Yes, sir.”

* * *

Kellen and General Slater emerged from the cave through a small hole in the rock wall, into the bright morning light of the forest, feeling hungry, thirsty, dirty and triumphant.

General Slater pulled out his cell phone, consulted his map app and then pointed down the hill. “We’re about two miles west of a village. Come on, I’m ready for a good, hearty German breakfast.”

“Wait, sir.” Kellen stopped him and handed him the diary. “Sir, I can teach you the diary’s code and how to read the maps, and I’d appreciate it if you’d handle transporting these paintings to the museum. I’d like to avoid publicity as much as possible.”

Slater nodded. “I’ll revel in that publicity. It’s the least I can do for our mutual friend Aimes.”

“I wish I could see his face when he realizes you’re alive.” She reveled in the thought.

General Slater grinned evilly. “I intend to enjoy that.” He sobered. “And, Captain Adams, I’m glad to help you avoid publicity, if you’re sure that’s the way you want it.”

“I do. You’ll look dashing in a fedora for the photo op.”

“A *fedora*? God, no. How about an Army cap?”

“With all your insignia?”

“Allow me some modesty. I’ll wear my stars.”

Tongue in cheek, she said, “That *is* modest.”

For all his declared intention to hunt out a meal, he lingered and looked at her far too perceptively. “Where will you go now?”

“I’ll check on my team members who are still in the hospital. Then I guess I’ll head to Washington State—see if I can enjoy some open spaces for a while.”

“I was hoping you’d stay. It has been nice having a woman in the house again. I’d be happy if you would remain a part of my life.”

A proposition, or even a proposal, nicely rendered, without undue pressure. Kellen knew now she could trust him not to hurt her, and with a man like this, her life would be pleasant and easy.

But no. She wasn’t ready for a relationship. She didn’t know if she ever would be again.

Gently, Kellen touched his arm. “General, I will always be your friend.”

Kellen sat back in the leather seat and accepted the glass of pinot noir from the flight attendant. She had never traveled first class before. The gate agent had said something about her status as former military, but Kellen suspected that General Slater might have had something to do with it.

Wrapping her complimentary blanket around her legs, Kellen reviewed the news stories on her computer. She found an article in *The Times* out of London about the flurry surrounding a Rubens painting called “Raising of Lazarus,” found by US Army Major Brock Aimes and examined by the Victoria and Albert Museum. Before the reward could be granted, the painting was found to be the work of a master forger. The official was held on suspicion of trying to trick the museum with a fake masterpiece. In addition, the article noted, in a sensational scene, Aimes had been accused of attempted murder by his commanding officer and faced military court-martial.

Kellen smiled out the window at the clouds and sky.

What a delightful end to that story.

She remembered what General Slater had said to her on the curb at the airport in Munich.

“Kellen, I’ve kept my promises. You have your medical discharge. The Victoria and Albert Museum declared the Monets are authentic, and James and Laurie Roy recently received a visit from two officers stationed near their home in Nebraska. They were informed that while nothing could replace their child, the United States Army was proud to present them with a hefty sum because their son’s efforts to decode his great-grandfather’s diary had led to the recovery of priceless works of art.”

“Very good, sir!”

“Yes, I thought you’d like that last part—since you didn’t want the credit, anyway.”

“I’m delighted for the Roy family. Thank you.”

“You have your portion of the reward. What will you do with such a sum?” Once again, he was watching her too perceptively.

“I’ve earmarked it for a particular project.”

“I thought that might be the case... I hope you keep a little of the money for yourself. It will give you a sense of security as you interview for that position you mentioned—what was it? Assistant manager at Yearning Sands Resort?”

“Yes, sir.”

“No need to call me ‘sir’ anymore, Kellen. I’m not your superior officer now. I’m your friend, and that’s an honor I recognize. From now on, you can call me Lawrence.” Slater offered his hand.

Kellen shook it. “Thank you, Lawrence. I’ll let you know if I’m ever back in Germany.”

“Have a safe trip back home.”

She felt his gaze on her all the way into the airport.

Now, as she sat in her comfy seat on the plane and looked out the window at the darkening sky, she contemplated where her reward had been sent, and she smiled.

In North Dakota, Harlow Hackett ran down a country lane near his home. Maybe one day he would

run in competition again, but in the meantime—he smelled the prairie grass and felt the breeze in his face, and his legs—the good old leg that had gone to war with him and his new running prosthesis—moved with the rhythm of his joy.

* * * * *

Can't get enough Kellen Adams? Don't miss the first book in New York Times bestselling author Christina Dodd's pulse-pounding Cape Charade series, Dead Girl Running, available now! Read on for a sneak peek...

Dead Girl Running

by Christina Dodd

I have three confessions:

1. I've got the scar of a gunshot on my forehead.
2. I don't remember an entire year of my life.
3. My name is Kellen Adams...and that's half a lie.

*Washington State's Pacific Coast
Yearning Sands Resort
January of this year*

On January 27, a low tide revealed ocean caves normally submerged by water, Leo and Annie Di Luca left on vacation, a woman's mutilated corpse was found on the grounds and it rained.

The rain was business as usual.

In early November, US Army veteran Kellen Adams had accepted the position of assistant resort manager. Annie had warned her she had arrived at the beginning of what the locals called the Monsoon Season.

Kellen had chuckled.

But they weren't kidding. In winter, on the Washington coast, wind blew. Rain fell. The sun rose late and set early. Every day was an endless gray. The holiday season had been busy and full of guests and lights and cheer, but when the decorations came down and January trudged on, their few guests came for discounted prices on meals and rooms. The resort used the downtime to paint, repair and clean, and Annie practically pushed the hospitality staff out the doors, telling them to go somewhere sunny and come back refreshed and ready to face the Valentine's Day rush. Everyone snatched at their chance to vacation elsewhere, and they knew where to find deals. They were, after all, in the hospitality business. They had connections.

Kellen told Annie she had nowhere to go, no relatives to visit and no desire to smell coconut-scented sunscreen. She stayed, reveling in the isolation, determined to learn everything Annie could teach her, and kept so busy she fell into bed at night and rose early in the morning. She loved the schedule; it left her little time to think, to remember—and to not remember.

Then on that dark, cold, rainy morning of January 27, Annie followed her own advice. She and Leo prepared to fly to warm and sunny Bella Terra, California, to celebrate their family holidays at the original Di Luca family resort.

Under the hotel portico, a group of elderly tourists climbed into a tour bus, so Annie rolled in her wheelchair through the rain toward the limousine.

Her assistance dog, a black Lab named Hammett, trotted beside her.

Kellen walked on the other side, holding an umbrella and protecting Annie from the windblown blasts of rain, her brain's little quirk kicking in, her mind subconsciously scrolling through its catalog of data on the elderly woman:

ANNIE DI LUCA:

FEMALE, WHITE, ELDERLY, HEIGHT UNDETERMINED. TOO THIN. CURLY WHITE HAIR, GREAT CUT, BROWN EYES. WHEELCHAIR BOUND. RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS. RESORT MANAGER. BRILLIANT WITH STAFF AND GUESTS. KIND TO A FAULT. FRAIL. HUSBAND: NAPOLEONE (LEO) DI LUCA, MARRIED "SINCE THE EARTH'S CRUST COOLED."

“We’ll be back in two weeks,” Annie said. “After my last experience with an assistant, I was determined not to hire a replacement. But Leo insisted, and you know the only reason I relented was because you were a wounded veteran.”

“I wasn’t that wounded.” Kellen rotated her shoulder.

“Enough that the Army discharged you!”

“Men were killed.” *I was unconscious for two days. Had an MRI to discover the cause of my coma. Tricky things, land mines. Woke to find myself being discharged; I hadn’t realized the military could process paperwork that fast.*

“I’m sorry, dear, about the deaths. I know how you feel about your comrades in arms.”

They reached the car where Mitchell Nyugen waited to drive the Di Lucas to the airstrip. Again her mind spun and Mitch’s info popped up, like a little index card:

MITCHELL NYUGEN:

MALE. VIETNAMESE AMERICAN, SECOND-GENERATION, 26, 5’9”, 160 LBS., EXCELLENT PHYSICAL CONDITION, NEEDS LITTLE SLEEP. NO AFFECTIONATE ATTACHMENTS. ARMY VETERAN, HONORABLE DISCHARGE. EXPERT LICENSED DRIVER—MILITARY VEHICLES + COMMERCIAL DRIVER’S LICENSE (CDL) (TRACTOR TRAILER). EMPLOYED 79 DAYS—DRIVER, MECHANIC, ELECTRONICS. FRIEND.

Mitch was one of Kellen’s men. Skilled woodworkers, electricians, maintenance and handy workers didn’t have to come to Washington in the wettest, darkest, most miserable time of the year, so when Annie appealed to Kellen for a chauffeur, Kellen had in turn appealed to Mitch. Mitch, who had been driving long hours for a trucking company, leaped at the chance to work at the resort.

He was the first of her people to arrive at Yearning Sands.

Now he opened the door and Hammett hopped onto his cushion on the floor. Mitch dried the dog, then picked Annie up and deposited her on the seat.

“Thank you, Mitch. When Leo comes out, will you help him with the bags?” she asked.

“Of course, Mrs. Di Luca.” Mitch backed out of the car.

“That boy is so formal,” Annie said to Kellen. “I’ve told him to call me Annie, and he won’t.”

“He’s from the South. Houston. Things are more formal there. He still calls me captain.”

“Half of the staff call you captain.” Annie patted the seat. “Won’t you come in and sit for a minute?”

Kellen shed her rain poncho and handed Mitch the umbrella before easing inside. She took a second towel and dried Hammett some more, then scratched him under the chin. As she stroked his soft head, the anxiety she felt about taking charge of the resort faded.

Mitch shut the door, encasing the two in quiet leather luxury, and walked around to put the wheelchair in the trunk.

Annie shivered, and Hammett abandoned Kellen to snuggle closer to Annie’s legs.

Annie took Kellen’s hand in her cold, fragile fingers. “Every day you’ve been a blessing. I never dreamed anyone could pick up the hospitality business so quickly.”

Kellen couldn’t explain. She didn’t even understand herself how she could meet a person and forever after see them as a list of attributes, or view two timelines and mentally integrate them, or take four spreadsheets and shuffle them through the circuits of her brain and instantly come up with ways to improve operations. It was a gift.

She touched the scar on her forehead. A gift that had come at a great price. “Business I understand,” Kellen said. “The guests and the staff are the challenge.”

“You are very private.”

For good reasons.

“Yet you handled people when you were the officer in charge of moving men and goods around a war zone,” Annie said. “No one’s shooting at you here. This has to be easier.”

“The people I managed in the Army had one thing in common—they were soldiers. We were united in one goal—to come out alive.”

Annie laughed. Probably she thought Kellen was joking.

“We—my military friends and I—are all of us grateful that you’ve welcomed us so generously.”

“Leo says I take in strays.” Annie looked startled at her own insensitivity. “I’m not trying to say that you’re a...”

“It’s all right. I understand. Since my discharge, I have been adrift. It’s difficult to go from being part of a close-knit military community to being...alone.”

“I can promise, you’ll never be alone again.”

Another odd statement from the normally diplomatic Annie. Perhaps leaving on vacation made her lose her usual delicacy. “The staff we left in place for you to manage is well trained. Everyone is up-to-date on their first aid certifications, and they can handle all the jobs—although some better than others. We have very few scheduled guests incoming, so hopefully difficulties will be few and far between.” With an expression of dismay, she knocked on the limousine’s rosewood interior. “Now, why did I say that? I’ve doomed you to difficulties.”

Kellen shook her head. “I’m not superstitious.” *I’m simply afraid of the darkness that stalks me in my own mind.*

“At least there are not too many children scheduled as guests,” Annie said. “That will make it easier for you.”

“Wrong time of the year. Not many school vacations. But it doesn’t matter. I don’t mind children. I’ve just never learned how to handle them.” *No point.*

Annie asked, “Who do you foresee as your greatest challenge?”

Kellen promptly said, “Sheri Jean.”

“Ah, yes. Sheri Jean.” Annie sighed softly. “The best way to handle Sheri Jean is to accord her the respect she deserves.”

“As I always do.”

“Her personality is split between her mother and her father, and the two halves are constantly at war. She terrorizes her staff, yet no one makes the guests more comfortable than Sheri Jean.”

“She’s good at her job, but it’s hard to decipher when she’s going to take offense. Most of the time, I don’t know what I said, and I was raised by my aunt and uncle, and my aunt is a delicate flower.”

“Really?” Annie’s eyes gleamed. “So you *do* have relatives?”

Mistake. Uncomfortably, Kellen admitted, “My uncle and cousin are deceased. My aunt and I don’t communicate.”

Annie’s kind face grew distressed. “I am sorry. Family can be a blessing and a trial. Like marriage.”

Kellen’s strained smile faded. Why had Annie introduced the topic of marriage into the conversation? Kellen never wanted to talk about marriage.

“When I hired you,” Annie confided, “Leo didn’t trust you.”

Oh. This was about Leo. “I suspected he didn’t trust me when he demanded my records—” birth

certificate, undergraduate degree from University of Nevada and business degree from Vanderbilt, honorable discharge from the Army “—be examined to see if they were original and investigated their authenticity.” He had uncovered no deception, of course, but even when he was satisfied, he had continued to watch Kellen like a hawk.

“It was because of that girl. A nice young woman, but misguided.”

Was Annie rambling? “What girl?”

“The girl I hired first. Priscilla Carter.”

Kellen had heard mutterings about Annie’s first attempt to hire an assistant manager. “The one who left without notice?”

“She didn’t have to do that. We had already realized she was unsuited for the job and intended to help her find another position. We’re not without heart!” Annie’s cheeks flushed.

“You’re lovely!” Kellen pressed those cold fingers.

“Leo says I give too much. I don’t think that’s true, but I did hire Priscilla...” Annie stared out the side window at the wide spread of lawn and the ring of rhododendrons that tossed with each gust of the storm. “Priscilla imagined the resort would be her stepping-stone to a life as a rich man’s wife. Leo reprimanded her twice. I should have reprimanded her myself, but I’m a coward. Then she volunteered to take guests on a tour of the property—and left them out there on the cliffs. It’s one thing to make the resort look bad, but she abandoned elderly guests out there. No compassion!” Annie sounded so hurt.

Kellen barely knew what to say. “She sounds like a piece of work.”

“The guests said she fell ill, promised she’d send someone out after them. Sheri Jean didn’t realize the guests had been left until one called. They were worried about Priscilla! We were all worried about her until Leo discovered she had packed her bags, gotten in her car and headed south. She never even contacted us for her final paycheck.”

“I promise I would never do that.” With a fair amount of humor, Kellen added, “I like my paychecks, and anyway, I don’t have a car.”

Annie’s brow knit fretfully. “So I should worry when you buy one?”

“Not even then.”

“Thank heavens. I...I don’t know what I’d do if you disappeared, never to be found, and I hadn’t told...” Annie seemed to drift off.

“Told...?” Annie’s rambling was so unlike her, Kellen was concerned.

“Told him... He’s suffered so much. He’s fretted. He’s searched...”

“Who? Who’s searched? For what?” Kellen leaned forward, her eyes fixed on Annie’s, and in her brain, a new slot lit up, empty of information and hungry to detail this new person.

In a normal tone, Annie asked, “Do you have any final questions?”

“Um, I...I don’t think so. Just, you know, what you were talking about before. Or who you were talking about.”

Annie brushed her hair off her forehead. “I didn’t sleep well last night. So excited. To go to California, to see the family. But I want to make sure you feel comfortable in your role as resort manager.”

Because Annie suddenly seemed to need reassurance, Kellen said, “With Mr. Gilflen to handle security, with the tight staff and the small guest list, this is a great way to introduce me to handling the job of resort manager.”

Annie fussed with the folds of her long black velvet skirt. “Yes, Vincent Gilflen. He’s a difficult man, you know. Obstinate. A little odd.”

“I do know that.”

“He does things his own way. He’ll always do the right thing.” Annie avoided Kellen’s gaze. “You go along with whatever happens. It won’t be so bad.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Kellen felt as if she’d missed something. Like the point.

Annie leaned forward and affectionately took Kellen’s face between her palms. She looked into her eyes, and in a dreamy voice, she said, “I told Sarah and June about you. They could barely believe you’d come back.”

“Came back?” Kellen pulled out of Annie’s clasp. “Came back from where?”

Annie blinked as if trying to clear a fog from her brain. “What?”

“What did you tell Sarah and June about me?” Sarah and June were Annie’s sisters-in-law and best friends. But Kellen didn’t know she’d been the topic of discussion and she didn’t like the sound of *They could barely believe you’d come back*. “Is this to do with the man you didn’t tell about me?”

“What man?”

“You said you didn’t know what you’d do if I disappeared and he hadn’t been told...” Kellen trailed off enticingly, exactly as Annie had done.

“My head aches.” Annie closed her eyes and rubbed her neck. “I’m so old and creaky.” She opened her eyes. “Could you hand me a bottle of water?”

Kellen realized Annie’s eyes were too bright. “Are you all right?” Kellen placed her hands over the top of Annie’s. “You feel warm.”

Even with the heated seat, even with Hammett pressing close, Annie shivered. Yet she sounded sensible and prosaic when she said, “Don’t make trouble, dear. I just need water.”

Kellen pulled a bottle out of the cooler, opened the top and pressed it into Annie’s hands.

“I’ve looked forward to this celebration for months.” Annie took a small sip, then put the bottle in the cup holder. “It’s the Di Luca family Christmas, you know. We’re a large family and all so busy with the resorts and the wineries, this is the only time we can get together.”

“I know.” Kellen got a throw out of the warmer and slid it around Annie’s shoulders. “But you feel as if you’re running a fever.”

“I’m fine. Look, there’s my darling Napoleone headed our way with our overnight bags rolling behind him. The dear man will not let the staff do their job. He is so stubborn.”

“Like someone else I know,” Kellen muttered.

“Hmm?” Annie raised her eyebrows. “Dear, we can’t leave him standing out in this weather. I’m not the only one with creaky bones!” She offered her cheek.

Kellen kissed it. It was warm, too. “Have fun.”

“Believe me, we will. We Di Lucas always have a riotous good time.”

Kellen slid across the seat and put her hand on the door handle.

Annie stopped her. “When I was interviewing you, I asked what your goal was in coming to Yearning Sands. Do you remember what you said?”

Kellen met her gaze. “I said I wanted a home.”

“Do you feel as if you’ve found what you wanted?”

Kellen’s mind produced the globe of the world and spun it like a top. She saw where she was now, on the far edge of the North American continent. She saw those places she feared and avoided: not Afghanistan, not Kuwait, but Maine, New York and Pennsylvania, black holes that swallowed every ray of light and joy. On that day five months ago when she was told she would be released from the Army with an honorable discharge, she had gone looking for a position that would fit her unique talents. At first she had hesitated to come back to the United States. But her first job as a civilian had

proved that nowhere in the world was safe. Yearning Sands had proved to be a shelter, and the terror that had once driven her to always glance behind had diminished. She had grown comfortable here in the job. “I could live here forever.”

“We would like that. And your friends?” Annie gestured toward Mitch. “The ones we’ve hired. Are they happy?”

“I can’t speak for them, but I think so. They came back from combat in need of employment and they found it here, where they could use their skills to make a living. That’s a great thing.”

“I want to keep my staff for years. I like to make sure they’re happy.” Annie squeezed Kellen’s arm. “I’m so glad you told me you’ll stay. The resort needs you. I need you.”

“Wow. That’s...great.” Kellen broke her hold, snatched up her yellow plastic poncho and leaped into the blustery weather. She pulled the poncho over her head and flagged Leo down.

LEO DI LUCA:

MALE, ELDERLY, FORMERLY 6’, NOW 5’10”. 190 LBS. SHOULDER-LENGTH GRAY HAIR, GANDALF EYEBROWS. MARRIED “SINCE THE EARTH’S CRUST COOLED.” RESORT OWNER. AMERICAN WITH STRONG ITALIAN ROOTS. SUSPICIOUS OF NEWCOMERS.

He bent to hear Kellen when she said, “Keep an eye on Annie. I think she’s ill.”

He sagged. “She won’t ever take it easy. The arthritis has weakened her immune system, and...” He gestured toward the car. “Thank you for letting me know. I’ll do everything I can to protect her.”

Outside, the downpour increased. The wind blew. The tourist bus moved on. Some early guests arrived, and Russell, their doorman, welcomed them and carried their luggage inside.

Kellen lifted her face to the cold, rainy sky. To be bound by the iron constraints of need and affection Annie put upon her...so foolish. She knew better. *Yet...need*. Being needed was her weakness.

She could hear Gregory’s voice in her head, courting her, winning her. *I need you, my darling Cecilia. I need your vitality, your warmth, your smiles, your youth.*

Young Cecilia had fallen at his feet—and into a marriage of horrors that she had barely survived. Her cousin, the real Kellen Adams, had died.

ISBN-13: 9781488034176

Hard to Kill

Copyright © 2018 by Christina Dodd

All rights reserved. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereafter invented, without the express written permission of the publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 22 Adelaide St. West, 40th Floor, Toronto, Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental. This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

® and ™ are trademarks of the publisher. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Intellectual Property Office and in other countries.

www.Harlequin.com