

Sample Chapter

Ana gets religion

"And bless this country in the name of the Lord, our God, Amen," thundered through the attic sound system from my ostensible landlord's desk.

Startled, I nearly dropped the file folder on Graham's antique Persian rug before he hit the sound button. That minimized the prayer, but it was too late for my fractured nerves.

I was accustomed to the silent flash of multiple monitors on the office walls, but our landlord's obsession with spying on the world did not often lead to him actually *listening* to anyone, much less to passionate televangelists. The blaring speakers had to be some form of joke.

Amadeus Graham, secret operative extraordinaire, would be a founding member of Robots-R-Us should such an organization ever exist. Robots do not express emotion, much less pray, and he was not praying now but studying the screen.

I've only seen the man do passion once—and that had been explosive and of a satisfyingly sexual kind that had left *me* intrigued and hungry for more. Not Graham, who apparently did not indulge in normal human appetites—he had not even turned around at my entrance, although he knew I was there.

If only to prove my point to myself, I grasped his wide shoulder and leaned over the back of his chair to place the folder on the console. My breasts pressed into his impressive biceps. He didn't flinch a muscle, and his thick dark head of hair didn't swerve to indicate a break from his concentration on keyboard and screen.

Our one passionate encounter had been when he'd been holed up in a hotel, on the run, over a month ago. Despite all my provocation, we'd not shared so much as a hug since then. That gave me one more reason to want to smack him, but he wasn't even engaging in our tension-relieving kickboxing matches lately.

I returned my attention to the wide screen that held his attention. Other men watched football. Graham watched street corners and public buildings and... televangelists, apparently.

"Is that Joshua Arden?" I asked, examining the golden-haired preacher bowing his bare head in front of an enormous outdoor crowd. December in D.C. wasn't precisely warm, and I shivered just watching all those huddled masses in puffy nylon overcoats. The good reverend disdained bulky outerwear. Instead, he displayed his massive former-quarterback's shoulders in a form-fitting

cashmere sweater.

"Pretty," I said, acknowledging his good looks since there wasn't anything in the preacher's sermon to hold my interest.

Graham rubbed the wicked scar marring his otherwise handsome forehead. He'd been severely burned and injured attempting to rescue his wife from the Pentagon on 9/11. I'd seen his visible scars and knew they were bad. His inner scars were far worse.

In my unbiased observation, he'd been trying to make up for his failure to save his wife ever since that catastrophic day.

Once, I would have ignored his unusual gesture of self-consciousness. Lately, I'd been softening to the grouch. The contents of the file folder I'd handed him made me downright magnanimous.

"He's *too* pretty," I corrected, studying the perfectly sculpted features filling the screen. Arden's styled and tinted blond hair stayed solid in the brisk wind. The blue of his eyes was so clear and vivid that it was obvious he wore colored lenses. And the golden tan? Give me a break. One does not acquire tans in DC, and certainly not in December. "Pretty is a weakness. Pretty people get noticed too easily. It gives them unwarranted confidence which leads to arrogance. Arrogant people don't have the sense to watch out for themselves, much less others."

Graham's shoulder relaxed a fraction as he scrolled over the crowd. He wasn't watching a public television program but a security camera that he controlled. "Says the arrogant virtual assistant," he murmured, hitting more buttons.

Miffed, I smacked his arm, leaned over his shoulder again, and opened the folder. "I'm not arrogant. I just know what I do best and stick with it. And you will note that, unlike pretty people, I make it a point *not* to attract notice until I want something. Which is now." I tapped the top page in the folder. "Sign this, and you'll be half a million richer than you were last June."

Graham and I had been feuding for six months over the DC mansion we shared. The house had once belonged to my grandfather, Rathbone Maximillian. When he'd died, Max had left his home to his grandchildren—one of whom would be me. Long story short—Max's executor had been scum who'd sold the house to Graham and absconded with the funds before I even knew my grandfather was dead.

As Max's long-time protégé, Graham had picked up the enormous, antique-filled mansion near prestigious Dupont Circle for a pittance. He claimed to be looking after our family's interest. In reality, he didn't want to disrupt this nifty attic fortress he'd established with Max's permission.

Graham glanced at the folder holding all my dreams. Then, as if it were of no moment, he returned to refining his search. Golden-boy Arden was relegated to a smaller screen, and the big

one was now occupied with boring cashmere-coated old guys. "I'll study it later."

"You've already studied it," I scoffed. "You snoop through everything on my computer. I'm offering half a mil more than you paid for the place. That's more than fair appreciation and interest for less than a year's use of your money."

"The house is worth ten or twenty times that amount," he reminded me, unnecessarily.

Chances were I might actually be able to pay that exorbitant amount, and he knew it, since he'd helped me retrieve Max's hidden funds. But Graham had also stolen our inheritance by buying it from a corrupt lawyer.

Six months ago, I'd been living in a basement in one of Atlanta's worst slums. Now I—and my half siblings—were worth a fortune. As eldest, I was currently acting as Max's executor in place of his crooked, dead attorney. The responsibility was almost worse than the one I'd once run away from—keeping my family safe in war zones. Money is as hazardous as war to one's health.

"I can't spend the entire family's future for a single house," I argued. "Max meant this to be our safe haven, a place we could all retreat to in times of need."

"Which in your family is pretty much every day of the week. Are you planning on living here for the rest of your life to look after them?" The screen now showed the street of stately mansions outside our front door.

I'd run away from my family and their problems when I'd been young, poor, and helpless, knowing they had better opportunities without me. Things were different now, but still, the money was too new and unreal for me to plan anything except my current goal—making this house mine. Or my family's—same difference.

"That's none of your business, is it now?" I said coldly. "Oppenheimer is still willing to take you, as well as the executor's firm, to court. I was trying to settle this part of the case amicably."

Oppenheimer was the shark we'd hired to go after the crooked attorney's law firm.

Instead of answering, Graham zoomed in on a tall, handsome boy striding past the evergreen-decorated light pole on our street corner. The kid looked cold in his hoody, with his hands shoved in his pockets, but he carried his heavy backpack with ease. He kept glancing from side to side, either looking for something or nervous, or both.

Although the young man's clothes looked American, he had a vaguely European cast to his features, and his brown skin was real, not an artificial tan. The coloring could have come from any number of exotic or not-so exotic countries. Our neighborhood consists mostly of embassies, so we see a lot of foreigners coming and going—mostly via limousine—which made the boy look out of place and suspicious for lack of transportation alone. Why did *South African* come to mind?

Wishful thinking, for one.

But suddenly bells and whistles clamored in my head, and visions of Christmas miracles danced like storied sugar plums. Could it be? How could it possibly be? Not lingering to ask, I dropped the argument, forgot the house, and dashed for the main stairs. My brain performed mental aerobics as my short legs carried me down two flights. I'd made wild suppositions in the past, but my current instinctive leap of hope surpassed all logic.

Graham could track my every move on his security system if he liked. Having deliberately zoomed in on the stranger meant he was already a dozen steps ahead of me. That he'd bothered focusing on the boy made my hope at least a tad more reasonable.

The doorbell rang before I reached the last flight. EG—Elizabeth Georgiana, my nine-year-old genius half-sister—had figured out how to change the chimes. In deference to the season, for the last few days, the bell had been pealing some Christmas song I vaguely recognized as having a line about sleigh bells ringing. Chip off the old geek humor block—not that either of her parents had a sense of humor. Our techie half-brother Tudor had probably provided the instructions.

I shouldn't be so excited. A stranger at the door almost always meant bad news. I didn't expect this time to be any different. But my mental gyrations had put two and nine together and reached fourteen, which only made sense to me.

My mother—Magda Maximillian Llewelyn Bullfinch Hostetter, the self-proclaimed Hungarian Princess—had borne eight children. She's Catholic and one of the few church rules she adheres to is the one on contraception, a serious point of contention for us, had we ever discussed it. Which we don't. I assumed, after my father's tragic death, she went looking for love in all the wrong places. Except the men she married or hooked up with were always conveniently wealthy and powerful.

I'd been Magda's live-in babysitter, bodyguard, nanny, and tutor for the half-siblings she dropped like cuckoos into the nests of all her acquaintances. The South African paternal family of her twins had rightfully objected to this behavior and snatched them from my arms when the kids were almost four, and I was around thirteen. I hadn't seen them since. They'd be about twenty now.

Having had them ripped from my young arms had broken something inside me that had been exacerbated by the death of my baby sister in a war zone years later. Sometime after that, I'd refused to be Magda's doormat anymore. I'd survived by living in the moment and not thinking about the twins for years. I'd told myself they were safe with family and better off without us. Only in this past month have I had the wherewithal—financially and psychologically—to dare think about looking for them.

I clattered down the final steps in my Birkenstocks with unreasonable hope choking my throat.

Mallard, Graham's butler/aide-de-camp/cook ceremoniously opened the front door as I arrived.

Mallard is barely average height, square, bald, and Irish, but that doesn't really describe his true presence. I was convinced he was former CIA, and he looked as if he were born to the tux-like outfits he chose to wear. He's one imperious penguin.

The tall young man at the door looked just like his distinguished African diplomat father. My smile widened as my hopes rocketed. With gracious proficiency, he flashed his passport at Mallard. Acknowledging the name, Mallard intoned as if in front of a ballroom, "Alexander Khosi Kruger, Miss Devlin. Shall I show him to the parlor?"

Mallard missed the good old days of Queen Victoria. There were times when I wondered if he and the house hadn't been transported forward a century. But I'd just been flung back a dozen years into a thousand both painful and wonderful memories, so I couldn't complain about Mallard's sentimentality.

Ignoring our butler's pomposity, I cried, "Zander! Is it really you?" If he hadn't looked so much like his father, a man I had adored, I would never have recognized this tall stranger.

At his bashful nod to my idiotic question, I gestured at the parlor. "How did you find us? Where's Juliana?"

His hood fell to reveal close-cropped dark curls, and he stared at me through deep dark wells of pain. His shoulders slumped.

My heart sank. Juliana was his twin sister. They'd once been inseparable.

"I was hoping you knew," he replied.