

LOCK 'N' LOAD

Chapter One

Trista dug into her bag for her ID and pushed through the heavy glass door of the George Bush Center for Intelligence, aka CIA headquarters.

Though it was early September, summer was still in full swing, and the building's cool interior was a welcoming, icy whisper over her face. Of course, on a day like today, she probably shouldn't have worn her long gray pencil skirt with its matching long-sleeved knit blouse. But the outfit was comfy and covered nearly every square inch of her, which was precisely why she'd chosen it. Baring a lot of skin had never been her thing.

Voices echoed in the cavernous lobby as she walked briskly across the sixteen-foot-wide circular floor seal bearing the well-known eagle-and-shield symbol of the CIA. Trista groaned inwardly. She hated Mondays. Not because she hated work. Hardly. She absolutely *loved* her job and had ever since she'd interned with the CIA during college.

With majors in math and computer engineering, she'd been recruited by the agency only days after graduating from Columbia University. Having interned for several summers in St. Petersburg, she was also fluent in Russian and naturally gravitated to the agency's Directorate of Analysis, focusing on Russian politics. But her true love was computer cryptography, part of the Directorate of Science and Technology. There, she'd quickly discovered she possessed that ultra-rare talent for seeing things in codes and ciphers that no one else could see, and finding patterns and associations hidden beneath layers of jumbled data. At thirty-three, she was one of the youngest—and the *only* CIA employee—to work on projects simultaneously for both directorates. Including her current assignment: surveil the cultural attaché to the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Washington, D.C. On the internet, that was. And she was eager to log in and get back on

his digital trail.

I really, really do hate Mondays.

Mondays were reserved for tours, and sure enough, an early morning student tour of the building was already clogging the lobby, partially blocking the two employee lines to the security checkpoints. Even those lines were unusually long this morning. The magnetometer occasionally beeped from someone who failed to remove keys from their pocket, and the X-ray machine's conveyor belt rattled and thumped as visitors placed their bags and briefcases down for inspection. Until recently, Langley didn't allow public tours, but now that they did, they weren't taking any chances with shoddy security.

She got into one of the two employee lines and began tapping her ID card against her thigh. Her latest assignment was the first one in months that had really gotten her juices flowing, and she was eager to dig in. With her analytical aptitude for anything requiring a computer and all things coded, she was a whiz at her job. Hence, the additional security clearances that came with the embedded circuitry in her ID card.

"C'mon, c'mon." She tapped the card harder against her thigh. It was just before seven a.m., an atypically early time for a student tour. Due to the seven-hour time difference between Virginia and Russia, she'd altered her shift to start an hour earlier, and the delay at getting upstairs to her computer was irritating. Eavesdropping on someone eight time zones away was a royal pain in the *zadnitsa*.

To keep herself occupied, she turned her attention to several boys who were part of the tour. She'd learned early on as a child that she was a people watcher, and she was good at it. Ironic, since she considered herself socially inept. Her three gifts in life were her analytical mind, her ability to read people, and, of course, her fluency in Russian. *Beyond that, I got nothin'*. With her, social skills and good looks must have skipped a generation.

The boys had caught her attention partly because they were big, seventeen she'd guess, and partly because they were standing close to

each other, leaning in and whispering. A *clandestine huddle*. She wasn't an operative—a CIA agent—but she loved the lingo.

In unison, the boys craned their necks, eyeing the employee checkpoints. One of them grinned slyly, nodding his head. She'd bet he was the leader of the pack and was trying to act cool in front of his friends by doing something totally brainless.

She snorted. *Don't do it*. He wouldn't be the first idiot to try to blow past the visitors' screening checkpoint, and he probably wouldn't be the last.

“Hey, Tris!” a bubbly voice called from somewhere behind her.

She looked over her shoulder to see her friends, Bonnie and Kevin, at the back of the employee line. She waved back, grinning at Bonnie's attire. Her friend was everything Trista was not—gorgeous and a social butterfly extraordinaire.

Bonnie Mistrano was tall, about five foot eight, voluptuous, and wore skintight clothes. She had that whole Italian beauty queen thing going, and it worked for her. Men loved Bonnie, and she loved men. Ironically, Bonnie had it bad for Trista's teammate, Kevin Lowell. But Kevin was so blockheaded and job-obsessed that he appreciated RAM, memory space, and a super high-speed internet connection more than a beautiful woman's attention.

Kevin was a classic, pocket protector-wearing computer geek who had eyes only for his computer screen. The man was totally oblivious to how much Bonnie lusted after him, and Trista had been sworn via pinkie oath never to reveal how much Bonnie loved the guy.

The familiar *whooshing* from the glass shield entry panels opening and closing meant she was closer to the checkpoint scanner, with only a half dozen people in front of her. That's when she noticed the new cop standing in front of the scanner visually checking IDs before people swiped in. *Holy moly*. It would have been impossible *not* to notice him. He was tall. *Really* tall. By her estimation, several inches over six feet. In her sensible, boring, flat shoes, he would easily tower

over her measly five foot one. Perhaps he was new to the CIA's Security Protective Service, because she didn't think she recognized him. Then again, she probably needed new glasses.

Pushing her thick trifocals up higher on the bridge of her nose, she peered around the man in front of her to get a better look.

Wide shoulders and an impossibly broad chest filled out the cop's navy-blue uniform shirt. His short sleeves were filled with thick, bunching biceps. Her gaze traveled down his torso to his trim hips and from there to a pair of long, muscled legs flexing beneath his uniform pants, then back up to his duty belt loaded with, among other things, a large holstered gun.

With the line shortening, there were only three people ahead of her now, giving her an even better view. Pathetic though it was, she couldn't stop herself from cataloging more of the cop's assets.

Short, dark-brown hair curled boyishly around his ears, as if his cop haircut was on the verge of needing a trim. Deep, chocolate-brown eyes. *Like Ghirardelli. No, Lindt. My favorite.* With his straight, patrician nose, high cheekbones, and chiseled square jaw, he was *GQ*-handsome, in a rugged kind of way.

The vigilant way he scanned the visitor line reminded her of a panther surveying the forest from the treetops, ready to strike its prey at any time. But what he did next was totally juxtaposed from the wild image she'd just created in her mind. Alvin Sykes was the CIA's oldest living employee, and Alvin refused to use a walker, instead preferring to lean heavily on his cane. As he hooked the cane over his forearm to swipe in, he tottered, and the officer shot out a hand, steadying Alvin and allowing him to use his arm for added balance.

Unable to tear her gaze away, she continued watching the cop, alternately fascinated by both the infinite gentleness he showed to Alvin and the rippling play of thick muscles in his forearms. She'd definitely never seen him before. His was a face she could *never* have forgotten. He was unbelievably gorgeous. The man was like a living, breathing Greek statue cut from marble by the most gifted stonecutter

in history.

Her perusal momentarily paused at the gold, rectangular name tag on that incredible chest. *Sgt. M. Connors*. When she looked up at his face, he was staring at her intently, almost...thoughtfully. She froze, her throat clogging. *Oh, pooh*. Her face heated with embarrassment.

Why can't I be as fluent around men as I am with computers?

Yet another major flaw in her social abilities, or lack thereof. Getting outcast as a brainiac early on in school had led to social awkwardness—the source of her hot-guy anxiety. The minute she found a man even remotely attractive, she got flustered, and her ability to converse like a normal *Homo sapien* went totally out the window, as if someone had switched off the power button to her brain. Sadly, that had only worsened over the years.

She quickly averted her eyes from his and moved up in line until there was only one person standing between her and the scanner. She couldn't wait to get upstairs and escape to the comfort of her office—the one place in her world where she felt truly competent.

Dark brows drew together as Sgt. Connors stepped aside for her to access the scanner. That's when she noticed it. A tan-and-black dog sitting obediently at his side. She'd seen the other CIA K-9s before but never so close that she'd have to pass within inches of the animal in order to move through the checkpoint.

Unable to move, she froze. Dogs were definitely not her thing. Ever since a horrifying encounter with a dog when she was a little girl, she went out of her way to avoid them entirely. The fact that this one was a badge-carrying K-9 didn't alter her perspective on the animal in the slightest, and she intended to give it a wide berth.

“Good morning, Miss Gold.”

Sgt. Connors's smooth, rich voice was so in sync with her whole melty chocolate analogy it wasn't funny, and Trista could swear she felt the reverberation of his words like a warm caress on her skin. Sure

enough, goose bumps zinged up her back to her neck, and *wow* did it feel good.

How does he know my name? Duh. Cops know everything.

“M-morning,” she mumbled, averting her gaze as she sidestepped both man and dog. In reality, she was more flustered by the man than the dog. She swallowed hard, gripping the ID card tighter in her hand. Her nervousness around Sgt. Connors was ten times worse than it had been around any other man.

No, make that a hundred times. A thousand. For crying out loud, what is it about this guy?

Trying not to appear flustered—*yeah, good luck with that*—she raised her now-trembling arm to insert her ID card into the scanner when she was shoved roughly aside and found herself falling ass-first to the floor.

When she landed on her butt, the abrupt jarring knocked her glasses off and sent her tight hair bun flying apart in disarray. Everything went blurry. Something big and dark blue dove past her, followed by something tan and black.

A dog barked, followed by a loud grunt as something—or *someone*—hit the floor. People shouted, and heavy boots pounded past her.

Trista got to her knees, skimming her hands along the floor’s cool surface, searching for her glasses. Her hair had come undone, and her blurry vision was that much more obscured by her own hair, making efforts at finding her glasses completely futile.

“Tris! You okay?” Bonnie shouted from beside her. “Here.” She shoved Trista’s glasses into her hand.

Her fingers closed around the plastic frames, and with shaky fingers, she pushed them on. Despite the audible chaos seconds earlier, the scene she focused on now was unexpectedly controlled.

Face down on the floor, not five feet in front of where she kneeled, was the same kid she'd rightly surmised would stupidly try to bolt through the employee entrance.

Bonnie sighed. "Will they ever learn?" "No," they both said in unison, then laughed. It had become trendy to try to blow through Langley's security, then post the video on social media. The doofus was lying on his belly, his face plastered to the floor. The K-9 had its jaws clamped around the kid's forearm while Sgt. Connors had his knee planted solidly in the boy's back.

"Ouch. That's gotta hurt," Bonnie said, grimacing. "Although I don't see any blood."

"Sheba, *pust*," Sgt. Connors ordered.

The dog immediately released its jaws from the boy's arm, backing off and lying down, but still uttering an occasional growl. Even lying down, the dog's body quivered with obvious readiness to re-engage if necessary. The thought of all those sharp teeth clamped around her own soft flesh made Trista shudder.

In a matter of seconds, Sgt. Connors expertly and efficiently handcuffed the kid and hauled him to his feet. She noted that the boy's sleeve didn't appear to be torn by the dog's teeth. *Amazing*.

"Did you see that?" One of the other boys in line laughed and pointed to his friend.

"That was *so* cool," another said, laughing with his buddy.

"Young man"—one of the building's assigned tour guides shook her finger—"needless to say, your participation in this tour is over. Permanently."

Trista gave a snort as Sgt. Connors handed the kid over to two other uniformed officers. That must have been the pounding of booted feet she'd heard—the cavalry had arrived. Granted, she'd been almost blind at the time, but she'd been impressed by the speed and efficiency with which Sgt. Connors and his dog had taken down the

punk.

With a satisfied smirk, she watched the other officers walk the kid away. To where, she wasn't sure, since he looked to be under eighteen and, as such, a minor. Still, he *had* tried to breach a federal facility.

“Are you all right?”

Trista jerked her head around to find Sgt. Connors crouching on the floor beside her, his face only inches from hers, his incredibly broad shoulders blocking out all else. Big brown eyes pinned her, and she couldn't tear her gaze away. No, his eyes were more like cocoa, coffee, and caramel all rolled into one. *Yummy*.

The look he continued to give her was intense. His dark brows drew together as he searched her face, as if looking for injuries.

“Are you all right?” he repeated, frowning. Actually, it was more of a scowl.

Yes, she wanted to say. But her throat was clogged again, and no matter how much she tried, her lips wouldn't move.

She took a deep breath, praying it would kick her brain into gear. It didn't. The only thing it did was send his sexy, way-too-appealing aftershave directly to her lungs and her brain.

Say something, stupid.

“I—” She swallowed. Lord, she'd thought he was good looking before, but this close...*OMG*. She might not be able to speak to certain men, but that didn't mean her libido was dead. For a man, he was utterly stunning.

“Tris?” Kevin asked. “You okay?” Only then did she realize he'd come to her aid as well and was now crouching next to Bonnie.

“Do you think you can get up?” Sgt. Connors held out an enormously large, incredibly strong-looking hand. “Let me help you.”

Now staring stupidly into his eyes, she placed her hand in his, noting several thick scars on his hands and forearms. As he began pulling her to her feet, an inhuman snort ruffled her hair.

A large brown-and-black muzzle thrust its way into her peripheral vision. Trista gasped and scrambled in the opposite direction—straight into Sgt. Connors’s hard chest.

Her pulse pounded. Her body trembled as she took in quick breaths. The dog stared at her steadily from amber-gold eyes, a shade lighter than Sgt. Connors’s.

She tried pushing herself farther from the dog, but not only weren’t her sensible shoes gaining traction on the shiny granite floor, Sgt. Connors’s body was an immovable mountain of muscle.

Still holding her hand, he hugged her tighter against his body, wrapping his other arm around her waist. “It’s okay…” His deep voice rumbled in her ear. “*Sedni.*” In response to his command, the dog sat. “Sheba won’t hurt you. She’s here to protect you.”

“I d-doubt that.” Cynophobia—fear of dogs—was something she’d lived with since she was six years old.

He gave a slight tug and pulled her to her feet. Blood rushed to her head, and she wavered, instinctively putting out a hand for balance. Her fingers contacted the center of his chest. His shirt felt odd, and it occurred to her that he was wearing a protective vest under his uniform. That, and he smelled really, really good. Like cedar, leather, and dark rum all rolled into one intoxicating scent.

Concern etched his chiseled features. “Do you need to lie down?” He released her hand, clasping her shoulders gently.

One of her hands still remained on his chest. Worse, her other hand was now gripping his forearm.

When did that happen?

She looked up. And up, until she could meet his gaze. As

predicted, he did indeed tower over her by more than twelve inches.

The arm beneath her fingers was warm and thickly muscled, with a light scattering of coarse hair covering rough, slightly raised skin. Scars aside, strength and confidence emanated from the man like a halo of raw power.

She shook her head, snatching her hand back. “I’m f-fine. Thank you.”

Jeez Louise, I’m babbling like an infant.

Avoiding Sgt. Connors’s intense gaze, she stepped to the ID scanner, feeling his—and everyone else’s—eyes boring into her back. Her hands went clammy as she shoved in her ID card. Somehow she managed to punch in her code and make it through the checkpoint. When the glass panels *whooshed* open, she bolted through and speed-walked to the elevator bank. After wiping the sweat from her brow, she pounded on the *up* arrow, willing an elevator to arrive before anyone else could join her. A bell sounded and the doors opened.

“Hold the doors!” Bonnie shouted as she and Kevin bounded in next to her.

Trista pounded again, this time on the button that would close the doors before anyone else could intrude on her ultimate embarrassment. When the elevator began to rise, she let out a groan.

“That was an exciting way to start the morning, huh, Tris?” Bonnie giggled. “And holy shit, that new K-9 guy is h-o-t *hot!*”

Trista opened her eyes in time to see Kevin roll his.

“Do you ever think about anything else besides hot guys and sex?” He arched a brow.

“Well...” Bonnie stuck her finger in her mouth, momentarily looking up at the ceiling while she pretended to think. “No. I don’t.”

Trista laughed. Bonnie did think about sex constantly, but only

with Kevin. He just didn't know it. Yet.

The doors opened, and they made their way into their of office.

“And he was awesome,” Bonnie continued as she settled behind her desk. “The way he took that kid to the ground, he was like a giant panther.” She placed her hand over her heart and let out an exaggerated breath. “Be still my heart. I think I'm in serious lust.”

Trista dropped her bag onto the floor, amused that Bonnie had also likened Sgt. Connors to a panther. As she powered up her computer, she noted Kevin was frowning. *Could it be he's a tad jealous? 'Bout time.*

“You're pathetic.” He shook his head in obvious disgust, turning on his own computer. “All it takes is a few muscles and you go weak at the knees. Trista doesn't need muscles on a guy. A guy's gotta have a brain. Isn't that right, Tris?”

“Huh?” She looked up from the log-in screen, already focused on her new assignment. “Right,” she answered and caught the wistful look of longing on Bonnie's face as she watched Kevin from across the room.

As she logged in, she couldn't stop shuddering at how close that dog—Sheba—had been to her. True, the animal had seemed well behaved and responsive to commands, but she hadn't been that close to a canine since she was six, and she'd hoped to keep it that way. Besides, she had Poofy. She glanced at the glossy photo on her desk of her beautiful, pure-white male Angora cat with enormous blue eyes. She and Poofy could do without dogs, thank you very much. And they could do just as well without gorgeous, muscle-bound cops with melty chocolate-brown eyes. She and Poofy had each other, and that's all that mattered. Most of the time, anyway.

After inserting her ID card, she tapped her fingers on her desk, waiting for the password prompt. Sgt. Connors certainly did have a lot of muscles. She'd felt them beneath her fingers as she'd leaned on his forearm for balance. While he'd been wearing a vest, it didn't take a

genius to figure out that, had he not been wearing one, her other hand would most certainly have come in contact with two of the hardest pectorals on the planet.

Get real.

Not that she was thinking about him or anything. Guys like him didn't notice women like her. She knew what everyone thought of her. Mousy. Dowdy. Plain. Blending into the woodwork, so much so that at some point in her life, she'd actually begun *trying* to disappear. Hence the gray clothes. People didn't notice gray so much, and she liked it better that way.

She typed in her password and clicked the enter button. While she waited for the various search programs to boot up, she realized her social clumsiness and humiliation weren't the only things bugging her about what had happened in the lobby. She realized she was envious of Sgt. Connors. He was so confident and self-assured. Unlike her.

When the boot-up finished, she clicked on the Dark Curtain icon on her screen, then opened an internet search engine. A slew of news stories populated the screen, all concerning the U.S. presidential election in just over two months. Typing in the address for one of the many secret chat rooms on her list for the morning, Trista dug in.

Her short nails clicked on the keypad's buttons so quickly it sounded like the *pitter-patter* of rain on a metal roof. The target—Alexy Nikolaevich Lukashin—was out there somewhere in cyberspace, and it was Trista's new assignment to track his diplomatically protected butt down and uncover what he was up to. Unofficially, of course.

Alexy Nikolaevich Lukashin's official cover was as cultural attaché to the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Washington, D.C. The CIA, however, knew him to be the *rezidentura*—a legal resident spy. Lukashin was an older man in his sixties, a product of the Cold War. Surprisingly, he was techno-savvy with a preference for utilizing social media. His favorite method to hold long-distance meetings with colleagues was hidden in black net chat rooms.

Glancing at the task bar, she verified Dark Curtain was running then proceeded to enter one chat room after the next, searching but not finding whom she was looking for. “Where are you, Lukashin?”

As her fingers flew across the keyboard, the clicking grew louder. Faster. Her heart rate kicked up, and her breathing went shallow. Darting her eyes from one quadrant of the screen to the next, she scanned the many pop-up windows for signs of the elusive *rezidentura*. This was her forte, an incomparable technical expertise few in the world possessed besides her. She might be a total dork where men were concerned, but there wasn't a code she couldn't decipher or a computer network anywhere in the world she couldn't hack into.

During the next twenty minutes, she lost count of how many chat rooms she entered and exited using the Dark Curtain program she'd developed several years ago. Dark Curtain ran in the background, allowing her to penetrate any chat room, bypassing the standard username and password requirement. Once inside, it was like hiding behind a thick, dark curtain and listening to everything being said in a room without other participants ever knowing she was there.

The program was incredibly powerful, allowing her to get around military-class encryption and secret, complex passwords. She'd even added an enhanced feature that allowed her to capture plain-text conversation in a folder on her computer before a secret chat room's auto-delete function kicked in, permanently deleting plain text after a preset amount of time had elapsed.

“There you are.” She smiled as Lukashin's code name—Karakurt—popped up in a Russian-language chat room.

Months ago, she'd discovered that code name, musing over the symbolism. The Russian Karakurt spider was one of the ten most dangerous spiders on Earth. Poison from a single bite caused intense pain that would quickly spread throughout every muscle in the body.

Focusing on the conversation already in progress, she again verified Dark Curtain was still running on the task bar. The chat was in Russian, but with her fluency, it was no obstacle.

Karakurt: *He is not who he says he is.*

White: *If this comes out, it will ruin everything. Who made the discovery?*

Banks: *A reporter. Thomas George.*

White: *Does anyone else know?*

Karakurt: *Aside from our own people, none.*

White: *He must be stopped before this information is released to the public.*

Banks: *Understood. Although, other matters are moving forward. I leave for Iqaluit in an hour.*

Karakurt: *I'll take care of it.*

Iqaluit? Trista strummed her fingers on the desk. *Where have I heard that name before?*

The images on her screen flickered, and she froze, staring at the now-black screen. “What the—” Her screen came back online and she relaxed.

White: *Good. Report in when—*

Trista waited impatiently for White to finish his sentence, but he didn't. “When what?” she said out loud.

A red pop-up window—a warning window—appeared in the upper portion of her screen, and she darted her gaze to the task bar.

Dark Curtain was no longer running.

Bolting upright, she grabbed the mouse and clicked the Dark Curtain icon, but it refused to engage. “No, no, no!”

Wide-eyed, she clicked the icon again and again, already knowing the program—and everything else on her computer—was frozen. Worse...if Dark Curtain wasn't engaged, that meant...they could

see her. Well, not literally see her, or her actual identity. But when the program froze, it was the equivalent of someone ripping the curtain off the wall, revealing her standing there in the room, listening.

She didn't understand what had just happened or, more importantly, *how* it had happened. She'd designed Dark Curtain with three times the number of safeguards that CIA protocol required. *This should never have happened.*

The chat screen went dark. Conversation was over. Resting her elbows on the desk, she dragged her hands down her face, considering the likely cause of the program's failure. The flicker of her monitor could have been a power surge, but all classified systems at Langley were on a backup generator.

"Tris?" Kevin looked at her, brows raised. Bonnie also eyed her from across the room. "Did your monitors just flicker?" Trista asked. "Yup," Bonnie said.

Kevin nodded. "For a second, yeah. It happened to me yesterday after you'd left for the day. I reported it to facilities, and they said they'd look into it."

"Apparently, they didn't fix it." Leaning back, she crossed her arms. One would think the CIA, of all agencies, would have quicker network repair response. Now she'd have to start over with Karakurt. He might even change his code name, but she'd find him, wherever he was. She just wished she'd heard the entire conversation before the system had glitched out on her.

She had no idea what Karakurt and the others were discussing, and she'd been excited to hear more. For that matter, she didn't have a clue who Banks and White were, although White seemed higher in the food chain than Karakurt, and Karakurt was pretty high as it was.

Opening up her chat folder, she clicked *print*. Whatever they'd been discussing, at least she had a transcript. Maybe the spooks could make something out of this. She grabbed the single sheet from the printer and slipped it into a large envelope with the appropriate security

restrictions stamped on the outside, then headed for her boss's office to drop it off.

Trista's stomach let out a growl as she parked in the side lot of the Mellow Moose Tavern. The Moose was just about every Langley employee's favorite place to eat. Unexpectedly, there were quite a few cars in the main lot. Then again, the Moose was one of the only restaurants around that served decent food this late at night. Or morning, really.

It had been nearly midnight when she'd turned off her computer and headed home. Despite missing lunch *and* dinner, all her successive efforts to find Karakurt again had proved fruitless. She yawned, looking forward to grabbing some takeout, then falling into bed. She'd been at it for nearly seventeen hours, and she was exhausted. Tomorrow, or rather later today, she'd get back on her board and surf the chat rooms. Sooner or later, Karakurt would show himself again.

Another gurgling growl low in her belly had her reaching for the door handle, but it was jerked from her grasp as the door opened. A hand gripped her wrist, twisting her arm as she was yanked up and out of the car.

A hand clamped over her mouth. She tried to scream, but the sound came out in a muted squeal. Her attacker spun her around and shoved her against the side of the car. Rearing back with her elbow, she tried jabbing him in the ribs, but all she connected with was air.

Something sharp bit into her neck. *A knife*. And with every quick inhale, the knife pressed deeper into her flesh.

Her heart pounded, terror twisting in her belly as her attacker dragged her across the pavement toward the tree line. She twisted in his grip, swinging her arms out, trying to hit him.

But she was no match for his size and strength.

A moment of horrific clarity hit her. *I'm going to die*.

