



INTIMATE MOMENTS®

1016

Silhouette®

July

Partners in
passion...

*a year of
Loving Dangerously*

Sharon Sala

MISSION: IRRESISTIBLE

**When a deadly traitor threatens to dishonor a top secret agency, A YEAR OF LOVING
DANGEROUSLY begins....**

Easton “East” Kirby

Strong and powerfully built—and guaranteed to melt hearts with his mesmerizing brown eyes.

SPEAR’s head honcho wasn’t playing fair when he assigned enticing Agent Alicia Corbin to bring East Kirby back to the field. Now, a diabolical maneuver by the traitor has raised the stakes for East—making his partnership with Alicia imperative!

Alicia Corbin

A green-eyed beauty with a body sure to bring even the strongest man to his knees.

Her loyalty to SPEAR knew no bounds. But would she gain the upper hand in this seductive stalemate with formidable legend Easton Kirby?

Jonah

Though his identity is top secret, this mystery man has enough presence and authority to keep his agents on the alert.

As the shadowed entity at the helm of SPEAR, Jonah has a fierce code of honor. He’s not about to let anything—or anyone—bring SPEAR down....

Join twelve top agents in their search to safeguard the country—and lose their hearts to love—in twelve novels guaranteed to provide you with A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY.

Dear Reader,

As you have no doubt noticed, this year marks Silhouette Books' 20th anniversary, and for the next three months the spotlight shines on Intimate Moments, so we've packed our schedule with irresistible temptations.

First off, I'm proud to announce that this month marks the beginning of A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY, a twelve-book continuity series written by eleven of your favorite authors. Sharon Sala, a bestselling, award-winning, absolutely incredible writer, launches things with *Mission: Irresistible*, and next year she will also write the final book in the continuity. Picture a top secret agency, headed by a man no one sees. Now picture a traitor infiltrating security, chased by a dozen (or more!) of the agency's best operatives. The trail crisscrosses the globe, and passion is a big part of the picture, until the final scene is played out and the final romance reaches its happy conclusion. Every book in A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY features a self-contained romance, along with a piece of the ongoing puzzle, and enough excitement and suspense to fuel your imagination for the entire year. Don't miss a single monthly installment!

This month also features new books from top authors such as Beverly Barton, who continues THE PROTECTORS, and Marie Ferrarella, who revisits THE BABY OF THE MONTH CLUB. And in future months look for *New York Times* bestselling author Linda Howard, with *A Game of Chance* (yes, it's Chance Mackenzie's story at long last), and a special in-line two-in-one collection by Maggie Shayne and Marilyn Pappano, called *Who Do You Love?* All that and more of A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY, as well as new books from the authors who've made Intimate Moments the place to come for a mix of excitement and romance no reader can resist. Enjoy!

Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Senior Editor

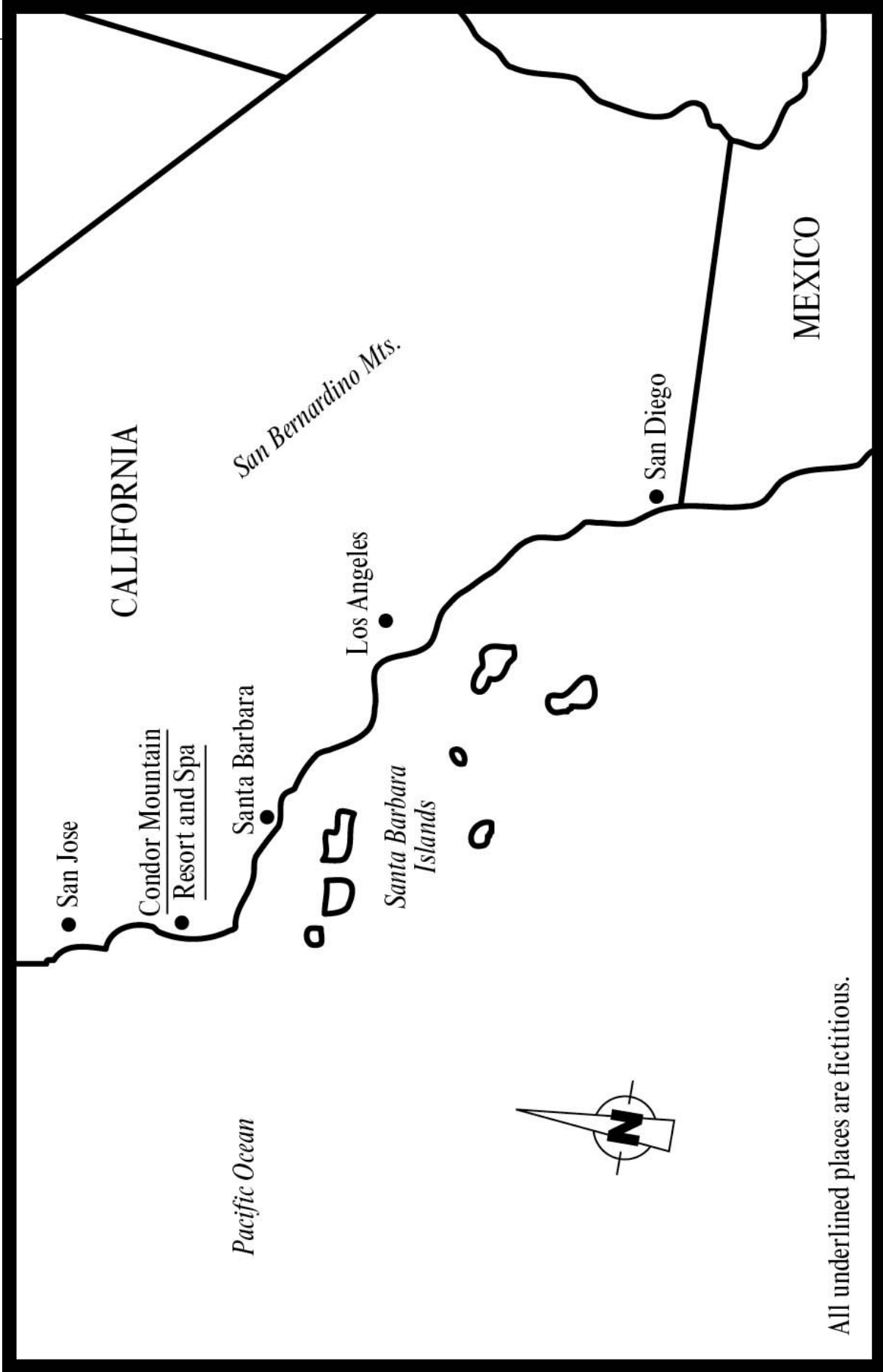
Sharon Sala

MISSION: IRRESISTIBLE



This book is written in honor of the nameless people who have dedicated their lives to making my
country safe and secure.

Your identities may be unknown, but the sacrifices you have made have not gone unappreciated. I
dedicate this story to you with the hope that if the favor had to be returned, we would be strong enough
to withstand and endure.



• San Jose

• Condor Mountain
Resort and Spa

• Santa Barbara

• Los Angeles

• San Diego

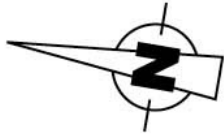
CALIFORNIA

San Bernardino Mts.

MEXICO

Pacific Ocean

*Santa Barbara
Islands*



All underlined places are fictitious.

Dear Reader,

Being asked to launch the first book of A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY was an honor, as well as an exciting venture for me. The twelve-book series is a romance-filled, adventure-packed journey through the lives of some very extraordinary people—people who are willing to sacrifice their lives and personal happiness for their country and its safety.

The characters are strong and heroic, often drawn into situations that are out of their control, and yet they manage not only to survive, but triumph.

Mission: Irresistible, the first book in the series, is a testament to the strength of family ties and to the power of love. The story line is an all-too-familiar echo of today's headlines and will draw you quickly and deeply into the unfolding drama of innocents caught up in a situation not of their making.

I hope you like my story, as well as the stories to come. I enjoy hearing from my readers and can be reached at P.O. Box 127, Henryetta, OK 74437, or online c/o www.eHarlequin.com.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sharon Sala". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the page.

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Prologue

Washington, D.C.—July 4th, 2000

The American flags above the tall man's head popped smartly as the hot July breeze whipped them into a frenzy; colorful reminders of a nation's gratitude for the dedication and sacrifices of countless soldiers over the centuries who had kept the country free.

But gratitude was the last thing on the man's mind as he stood before the black, polished surface of the Vietnam War Memorial. The petals of the rose that he carried were beginning to droop, but it hardly mattered. The man for whom it was meant had long ceased to care for anything of this earth.

It wasn't the first time he'd been here on the nation's birthday, so the unusual number of visitors did not surprise him. Yet as he moved through the people, he was struck by the silence of so large a crowd.

The memorial in itself was an emotionally moving sight. A seemingly endless stretch of gleaming black marble with nothing but names etched upon its surface. Names of fathers and of sons of brothers and of uncles, of friends and neighbors who'd given their lives because their country had asked it of them.

His heart swelled painfully as he began to scan the surface. It was here—somewhere near the center and about a third of the way down. He stepped around a small, stoop-shouldered woman, then in front of a young couple with two small children, his gaze centering on the names. The farther he walked, the harder his heart began to pound. And then suddenly he stiffened.

There it was: Frank Wilson.

He traced the letters of the name with his forefinger. By the time he got to the last letter he was looking at the world through a blur and all he could think was, *Damn you.*

His jaw clenched and a muscle jerked at the side of his temple as he dropped the rose at the base of the wall and turned to walk away. As he did, the wind gusted, causing the flags to flutter, and ruffling the streaks of gray at the temples of his short, dark hair. He squinted against the sunlight and dropped a pair of sunglasses in place as he moved toward the grassy area beyond. But the sound of the blowing flag became mixed with the memories in his mind, turning from wind and heat to the rapid fire of machine guns, the unforgettable thunder of landing helicopters and the nightmare that was Vietnam.

Saigon 1974

It had been raining off and on all day and the clothes the girl on the street corner wore were plastered to her skin until it looked as if she was wearing nothing at all. She put her hands under her breasts and lifted them toward the trio of American soldiers coming down the street.

"Hey G.I., wanna party? Good sex...hot sex...five dolla'."

Private Joseph Barone of Brooklyn, New York whistled beneath his breath and elbowed his buddy.

"Oowee, Davie boy, would you look at her. You want to get yourself a little of that?"

The thought of a physical release within the warmth of a woman's arms was strong, but David Wilson had seen past her painted face and skimpy clothes to the child beneath and cringed. He wasn't the only one out of his element. She was doing all she knew, trying to survive in a world gone mad and

adding to her hell seemed impossible to consider. Instead of telling the truth, that having sex with a fourteen-year-old whore turned his stomach, he used sarcasm instead.

“Do I want a little of what? The clap?” David drawled.

Joe Barone laughed and slapped his buddy on the back. “It might be worth it, kid.”

David gave her one last glance and then shook his head. “You and Pete go on, though. I’ll meet you back at the barracks.”

They laughed at his reticence and pivoted sharply, heading back to the woman before another one of their compatriots beat them to the offer.

David shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders as he moved along the crowded sidewalk. An old man sat cross-legged on the ground, hawking his wares in a sing-song litany while dangling a plucked fowl above his head in an effort to catch a buyer’s eye. David’s nose wrinkled in protest to the smell as he passed and wondered how long the man had been trying to sell that particular bird.

He turned the corner, fully intent upon heading for the barracks, when he heard a familiar laugh. He turned, a look of expectancy on his face. He’d know that laugh anywhere. It was his brother, Frank.

He pivoted sharply, searching the constantly moving masses for sight of his brother’s face. If he could hook up with Frank, it would be a good way to pass the afternoon. His eyes were alight as he began to scan the crowd.

Frank was his elder by four years and the single reason David was in Vietnam. Lying about his age to sign up had been simple. It was the fact that he and his brother had wound up in the same company that was amazing. But David was glad. Frank had always been more than just a big brother. He’d been a substitute father—a playmate—and when he wasn’t thumping on David’s head himself, a bodyguard in the rough neighborhood in which they’d grown up.

The crowd in front of David parted suddenly to let a man with a pushcart pass by and as it did, he saw his brother in the distance. At that same moment, he realized Frank wasn’t alone. He paused, staring curiously at the pair with whom Frank was conversing. Their heads were close together, as if they didn’t want to be overheard. And when one of them straightened and turned, staring directly toward David, he found himself ducking into a doorway instead of hailing them as he’d intended. There was something about the men that he didn’t trust. He watched a bit longer, trying to remember where he’d seen them, and as he did, it suddenly hit him. A few months back, one of his buddies had pointed them out in a nightclub as being Dutch. When David had asked why two men from Holland would be here in the middle of such hell, his buddy had laughed and said, commerce, Davie-boy, commerce. It had taken a while before David realized they were suspected gunrunners.

Now, as he watched, Frank grinned and slapped one of the men on the back, then shook his hand. When he did, David’s gut began to knot. Why would Frank be talking to men like that? Like everyone else, he knew it was men like that who were responsible for selling American-made weapons to the Vietcong. Men from other countries who were in this strictly for the money, who had no allegiance to their nation, not even their own. Immediately he thought of the money Frank had been flashing during the past two months. Money he claimed he had won playing cards. But Frank was a lousy card player. Always had been. When the men began to move, David followed at a distance, desperate to assure himself that what he was thinking couldn’t be true.

It started to rain again, and as it did, the streets began to clear as people took shelter inside the shops or made their way home. In an effort to remain unobserved, David had to stay far behind and twice he thought he’d lost them, only to turn a corner and see the back of Frank’s head in the distance.

By the time they reached the outskirts of the city, David’s gut was in knots. He’d long ago given up on this being an innocent meeting, and when they slipped into an isolated hut, David groaned inwardly. By the time he reached the hut, the rain had turned to a downpour, smothering all sound

save that of the hammer of his own heartbeat and the sound of rain on the wet thatched roof.

~~He moved closer to the door, then shifted so that he could see inside. The interior was small and gloomy, yet light enough for David to see an envelope pass between Frank and the men.~~

No, David thought, and held his breath, watching as Frank counted the money then slipped it inside his shirt before handing over a small slip of paper. Without thinking of the consequences, he stalked into the hut.

To say Frank Wilson was stunned, would have been an understatement, but his shock quickly turned to anger when he realized his little brother had seen it all. To make it worse, the other men were already drawing their weapons.

“Don’t!” he yelled. “He’s my brother.” Then he turned to David, fear mixing with guilt. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

David quickly moved, putting himself between Frank and the men and yanking the money out of Frank’s shirt and throwing it on the ground.

“Saving your stupid ass,” he said. “Now let’s get out of here.”

“What the hell’s going on?” one of the men muttered, and waved his gun in Frank Wilson’s face.

“Leave this to me,” Frank said, and shoved David aside as he began to pick up the money.

David stepped on a wad of money just as Frank reached for it, and in doing so, stepped on Frank’s fingers instead. Pain fueled Frank’s rage as he bolted to his feet, slamming David against the wall of the hut. Both of the gunrunners aimed their weapons as they realized their assignation was no as secretive as they’d wished.

Frank knew that now both he and David were in trouble. He pulled his own weapon, aiming it at the shorter one’s head.

“Don’t do it!” he yelled, and then fired off two shots before the men could answer.

Through the roar of the rain, the sounds were little more than muffled thumps. David was shaking, stunned by his brother’s lack of emotion, only to find that Frank had a gun aimed at his face.

“What the hell are you doing?” David whispered.

“The question should be, what are you going to do about what you just saw?” Frank countered.

David swallowed. He’d seen that look on his brother’s face before.

“What did I see?” David asked. “What did you sell them?”

Frank grinned. “A little steel. A little wood. A little lead. Just natural resources.”

David’s skin crawled. “Guns? You’re selling our own guns to the enemy? How can you do that? How can you be a traitor to your own country?”

Frank sneered. “My own country, as you so fondly call it, sent me over here to die. And I’m not even sure I believe in what I’m fighting for. Why shouldn’t I get something out of it besides a coffin?”

David held out his hand. “Please Frank. Let’s just go. No one has to know we were even here. They’ll find the bodies and the money, and assume the men killed each other.”

Frank’s smile hardened as he dug through one of the dead men’s pockets for the slip of paper with the information he’d just sold. When he found it, he wadded it into a very small ball, then popped it in his mouth like candy, chewed it and swallowed while David looked on in horror.

“I’m not leaving the money,” Frank growled. “It’s mine. Now the problem remains, are you gonna snitch?”

“Why? Are you going to kill me, too?”

In Frank’s defense, it had to be said that he hesitated, but there was a dark gleam in his eyes when he answered.

“If I have to.”

David stared into the barrel of the gun, unable to believe that his fate in life was to come all this way across the world only to be killed by his brother’s hand.

“You’ve gone crazy,” David pleaded. “Is this what you really want?”

“What I want, is to be rich,” Frank said, and took aim.

Everything afterward seemed to happen in slow motion. Frank’s shot searing the back of David’s shoulder as he dove for a dead man’s gun. Pulling the trigger as he rolled. The water leaking through the roof and falling on his left cheek at the same moment that Frank staggered and fell. The smell of gunpowder and mud as David crawled to his feet. Standing motionless beneath the leak in the roof while the raindrops mixed with tears, then throwing his head back and letting out a gut-wrenching roar of anguish.

Time passed. The rain had stopped. People were moving about and it was only a matter of time before someone found them, and yet David couldn’t bring himself to move. It was the sound of a Huey flying overhead that brought him out of his trance.

He staggered to an alcove at the back of the room, dragged out a can of gasoline and began scattering it all over the walls and then the floor, making sure that the men and the money were saturated as well. Then he moved to the doorway, cautiously peering out. No one was in sight. Unable to look at his dead brother’s face, he struck a match and gave it a toss, slipped out of the hut and ran. He never looked back.

“Here you go Mister.”

Startled by the sound of an unfamiliar voice, David Wilson jerked, and the memories sank back into the hell that was his past. He looked down at the young man before him, and at the handful of miniature American flags he was carrying.

“You’re a vet, aren’t you?” the kid asked.

David hesitated, then shrugged. Admitting that much posed no threat. He nodded.

The kid beamed. “I knew it! I can tell. My dad’s a vet. He fought in Desert Storm.” Then he pulled a flag from the bunch in his hand and thrust it into the man’s palm. “Take it, Mister. You earned it.”

David’s fingers curled around the small, wooden staff as the kid disappeared. He stared at the colors so long that they began to run together in his mind. When he finally looked up, the glitter in his eyes was no longer moisture and the cut of his jaw was set and firm.

Earned it? He hadn’t earned anything but a heartache and a tombstone in Arlington Cemetery. To become the man he was now, he’d had to die, presumably in the line of duty. But nevertheless, David Wilson was dead. The man he’d become was a solitary man. He had no one he could call friend, no identity that mattered, no ties to a community or church. A faceless man who, some years back had sworn, once again, to give his life for his country.

Now, they called him Jonah and only two people on the face of the earth knew his real identity. As the anonymous director of SPEAR, the most elite counterespionage team ever to be assembled on behalf of the United States of America, Jonah lived life in the shadows, communicating with his operatives when necessary by coded messages, a cassette delivered with an order of pizza, cryptic telegrams, and occasionally, nothing more than a voice on the phone.

SPEAR, first founded by Abraham Lincoln himself during the Civil War, was an acronym for Stealth, Perseverance, Endeavor, Attack and Rescue. It was an organization that existed in the shadow of society, and its existence, the best kept secret in the free world. Headed throughout the years by mysterious men known only as Jonah, the succession of Jonahs who had given their lives to their country were the unrecognized heroes of the past. To the world, they were dead. If they lived long enough to retire, they were given an entirely new identity and left to face their twilight years alone, without benefit of old friends or family.

In a few years, he, too, would retire and another Jonah would step into his shoes. *Dying* for his country had seemed an odd sort of justice, considering the fact that he'd taken his only brother's life.

He watched the kid running across the greens, trying to remember if he'd ever been that innocent. He then snorted beneath his breath and shoved the flag into his pocket and started toward his car. There was no place in his life for sentiment or regret.

Those years of retirement were, however, looming closer than he might have liked. Someone was trying to ruin him. Someone wanted him branded a traitor in the very worst way, and despite his access to even the most classified of records, he had been unable to find even a trace of a guilty party. It was, without doubt, the worst thing that had happened to him since Vietnam. It could be anyone, even a disgruntled operative at SPEAR who, by some stroke of fate, had discovered his identity. He was at the point of admitting he needed help, that doing this alone was no longer an option. But there was a problem. He didn't know who to trust.

One week later: The Northern California coast.

A pair of seagulls perched on the railing surrounding the large, flagstone terrace of the Condor Mountain Resort and Spa. The view, like the resort, was a magnificent complement to the area overlooking the Pacific. The gulls gave an occasional flap of their wings as they squawked between themselves in bird speak while keeping watch for a dropped bit of someone's breakfast pastry. Waiters moved among the tables serving coffee and juice, while others carried freshly made foods to the hot-and-cold buffet that was set up near the door. The idle chatter of the guests as they breakfasted was diluted by the soft breeze and the wide open spaces.

It was an idyllic scene, typical for the resort, but there was nothing typical about Easton Kirby, the man who ran it. Tall and powerfully built, he looked more like a professional athlete than a business man. His shoulders strained against the soft knit texture of his white Polo shirt while navy slacks accentuated the length of leg and muscle. His hair was a shade lighter than his tan, and more than one female guest at the hotel had commented about his resemblance to the actor, Kevin Costner, although his nose had more of a Roman shape to it after having twice been broken. He often smiled, but there were shadows within the glitter of his eyes that congeniality could not disguise. He was a man who lived with secrets he would never be able to share and being a former operative for SPEAR was secondary to the fact that he considered himself a murderer.

That it had happened in the line of duty during a high-speed chase had not cleared his conscience. The teenager who'd come out of nowhere on a bicycle and right into the path of East's oncoming car had been a boy in his prime, having just won a four-year scholarship to a prestigious college, and an honor student throughout his high school years. The headphones he'd been wearing had blocked out the sound of the oncoming cars, and according to the police who'd investigated the accident, he had also bicycled across the highway from the hill above without even trying to stop, obviously trying to beat the traffic. Despite East having been cleared of wrongdoing, the guilt of the act was a hair shirt on his soul. What was done, was done. The kid was dead. End of story.

Afterward, it had been all East could do not to put a gun to his own head. Night after night he kept reliving the sight of the young man's face spotlighted in his headlights, then the impact of flesh against metal and the scent of burning rubber as he'd tried to stop.

SPEAR had sent him through counseling, then to Condor Mountain to rehabilitate. But it didn't take. For three months he had lived in the room that they'd given him, refusing to interact with anyone except on a need-to basis, hiking the mountains at night and trying to purge his soul. And then one dark night during one of his nightly forays, he met Jeff. Fourteen years old and a professional runaway from the welfare system, the kid was as hard and wild as they came. East was drawn to the youth in spite of himself, recognizing the boy's sullen anger as a result of fear rather than meanness. The bond they formed was slow, but it surprised them both. Within a year, Easton Kirby had a whole new role in life. At the age of twenty-five, he became a father to a fourteen-year-old boy, and Jeff was no longer homeless.

A short while later, SPEAR named East manager of the hotel where he'd been sent to recuperate. His file at SPEAR was purged and his days as a counterespionage agent were over. But that hadn't ended his ties with the organization. Condor Mountain Resort and Spa was a part of the Monarch Hotel Chain—a legitimate corporation owned and operated by SPEAR, and available to agents on the

verge of burnout.

Occasionally East saw acquaintances from his days of active duty, but only if they were sent to the Condor Resort for some R and R after the close of a particularly grueling case. Yet the tie that had bound them together before had been severed by time and distance. That part of his life was over. He existed in a come-and-go world with his adopted son as his only family and it was just the way he liked it. Only now and then was he haunted by nightmares, and when he was, he focused instead on the doctor Jeff was studying to become, rather than the horrors of his own past. It should have been enough, but the absence of a woman in his life often left him with a rootless, empty feeling. Yet how could he live his own life to the fullest when he'd taken the life of an innocent man?

The two seagulls which had been sitting on the railing took flight as a waiter walked past. A few moments later, Easton Kirby walked out on the patio, causing more than a few female hearts to flutter as well. He nodded and smiled as he moved through the area, but his focus was on the couple at the far table. They'd checked in last night after he'd gone to bed, but his staff had informed him they were here. He made it a habit to personally greet all honeymooners, and from the way the pair was cuddling through their morning meal, their stay at Condor Mountain was off to a good start. He couldn't help thinking how blessed they were. Their whole lives were ahead of them, while his was stalled in a guilt-ridden limbo.

Before he reached their table, his cell phone rang. He moved to a guest-free area of the patio to take the call.

"Hello."

"Kirby."

It had been years since East had heard that voice, but there was no mistaking it. Instinctively, he moved off the terrace and down the steps toward the beach, putting distance between himself and the rest of the world.

"Jonah?"

"Yes."

East reached the first landing, and sat. Something told him he needed to be immobile when he took this call.

"How have you been?" Jonah asked.

East's belly knotted. "Fine, but I'm assuming you know that, sir, or you wouldn't be calling."

A slow intake of breath was all East heard. He waited for Jonah to continue. Chit-chat was not something one did with this man. Finally, Jonah spoke.

"I need to ask a favor of you,"

East's eyes widened. Favor? Jonah didn't ask favors, he gave orders.

"Sir?"

"I have a problem—a big problem," Jonah said. "Someone is trying to destroy me."

East's heart skipped a beat and he stood abruptly, as if bracing himself for an unspeakable blow.

"Destroy you?"

"It's complicated," Jonah said. "Suffice it to say that things are surfacing within high places that make it look as if I'm a war criminal, as well as a traitor to my country." There was a moment of hesitation before he continued. "It's not true."

East's eyes narrowed. "Telling me that was unnecessary. That much I know."

Again, there was a hesitation, then Jonah spoke. "I thank you for that. But the problem still exists and despite my unlimited...uh, shall we say access...to confidential material, I have been unable to trace the source. For all I know, it could be within SPEAR itself."

East was incredulous. "No sir! I don't believe that's possible."

"I would like to think so, too," Jonah said. "But at this point, nothing or no one can be ruled out."

East frowned. "If that's so, then why call me?"

~~"Because, technically, you are inactive. It's been ten years since you've been in the field. We have no axes to grind and no issues that could be a possible basis for these actions. I have to trust someone. You're it."~~

East's gut knotted tighter. "Sir...don't ask this of me."

Jonah's sigh whispered through East's conscience like a knife.

"It's been ten years since that incident with the kid," Jonah said.

East swallowed harshly, then closed his eyes against the glare of sunlight upon the water.

"Tell that to my psyche," he growled. "Besides, I have a family to consider."

"Yes...Jeff, isn't it? Studying to be a doctor?"

"Yes, sir. He's interning now in L.A."

"He's a man, Kirby, not a kid."

A noise on the beach below caught Kirby's attention, he opened his eyes and turned. It was a pair of sea lions sunning themselves on an outcropping of rock. For a moment, he lost himself in the spray of surf hammering against the rocks and the seabirds doing a little two-step upon the sand. The urge to take the phone and toss it into the water, disconnecting himself from both Jonah and the world was overwhelming, but it was a futile thought. He'd learned long ago that no matter how hard he'd tried, he had not been able to get away from his past.

"Kirby...are you there?"

East sighed. "Yes, sir. I was just thinking."

There was a note of eagerness in Jonah's voice. "And?"

"I have to ask you a question," East said.

"Ask."

"Is this an order?"

This time, there was no mistaking the sigh in Jonah's voice. "I can't order you to do a personal favor for me."

"I'm not the man I used to be. I've been out of the business too long. I've lost the edge needed to survive."

There was a long moment of silence, then Jonah spoke. "So...you're turning me down."

"Yes."

Again Jonah hesitated, but this time his voice was void of emotion.

"I understand. Oh, and Kirby, this call never happened."

"What call, sir?"

The line went dead and Kirby knew there would never be a traceable record of the call ever happening. A fresh wave of guilt hit him head-on.

"Damn it to hell."

He spun on his heels and headed back to the hotel.

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