



EXCERPT



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### **Pentagon City Fashion Center – Present Day**

“Dad, that’s so not cool.” With a frown, Katelyn Matheson shook her head.

It was bad enough that Chris Matheson had decided to turn a drop off in the city into a date night with Helen Clarke. What made it worse was that he had also insisted on hanging around to wait for Madison, her best friend from her old school and, heaven forbid! speak to her mother.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Katelyn discovered that it was a real possibility that they would eat dinner in the very same shopping center where Madison might see them.

“He’s pulling your leg, Katelyn,” Helen said when it looked as if the thirteen-year-old’s head might explode from the trauma. “We’re going to have dinner at an Italian bistro within walking distance of the Kennedy Center. Your father promised that it would be romantic.” She grinned at how his gray eyes twinkled.

## LAUREN CARR

“You two can be so sickening sometimes.” Katelyn fought the grin fighting to cross her lips at how Helen gazed up at her father.

Her dark eyes and hair gave Helen an exotic appearance. Also, she had a cool teenaged daughter, Sierra, who offered Katelyn fashion tips. Even though they lived in their own home, Helen and Sierra were almost like an extended family.

Chris checked the time on his phone. “We may have to find a romantic hot dog vendor if Ripley and Madison don’t hurry up. The curtain goes up on the play in two hours.”

Katelyn wrapped her arms around him. “Hug me now so we don’t have to when Madison gets here.”

“Katelyn!” A teenaged squeal erupted from the parking garage’s entrance.

Katelyn pushed him away and the two girls embraced. In high pitched voices, they talked over each other while firing off compliments on hairstyles, clothes, and make-up. While the adults couldn’t follow the simultaneous conversations, the teenagers could.

When they stopped to take a breath, Madison turned to her mother, a slender woman dressed in a dark trench coat over slacks. She wore her service weapon holstered on her hip next to her federal agent’s shield. “I want to show Katelyn the shoes I’m saving up for. I suppose you want to talk business with her dad.” She rolled her eyes.

Katelyn did likewise.

Her mother took out her cell phone and swiped her thumb across the screen. “We’ll meet up here in one hour.”

Katelyn shot Chris a warning glance when he moved in to hug her one last time. Adopting an exaggerated business-like expression, he shook her hand. “May the force be with you, Ms. Matheson.”

Katelyn rolled her eyes again while Madison giggled. The two girls took off at a run toward the escalators leading to the

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upper levels of the fashion center. Quickly, they disappeared into the crowd of shoppers.

Chris introduced Helen to Ripley Vaccaro. "Helen is in charge of homicide with the West Virginia state police in the eastern panhandle."

"I hope Chris isn't using you to stick his nose into your cases?" Ripley said while shaking her hand.

With a toss of her head, Helen laughed. "Sometimes I wonder if he does." She shot him a grin. "Doesn't really matter. He's just so gosh darn cute when he gets nosy."

"I told him when he retired that he wouldn't be able to hang up his badge for good." With a wicked grin, Ripley admired his athletic build.

Taking care of his mother's horse farm kept Chris fit. He looked several years younger than his forty-seven years. A clue to his true age was his salt and pepper hair that reached the top of his collar. His gray double-breasted suit matched his eyes. The long red wool scarf added a dapper tone to his appearance for the evening out.

"I thought you'd turn into a hayseed when you told me that you were moving back to the farm. I must admit, you're looking good, Matheson."

"I clean up good."

"You clean up so well that one would think you were civilized. I know the truth." Ripley turned serious. "How are things going?" She told Helen, "I was with Chris when he got the news about Blair."

With a shrug of his shoulders, Chris wrapped his arm around Helen and pulled her close. "Things are definitely looking up. Retirement is treating me good. You?"

"Since my divorce?" Ripley laughed. "I've devoted myself to my career, which was what basically led to my marriage breaking up. Occasionally, I've been loaned out to other

agencies in the community to work on special investigations. That keeps things exciting.”

“Well, don’t let things get too exciting while you have my daughter.”

“Of course not. I’m assuming you two are going to take advantage of his freedom this weekend, or did you fail to unload the other two?”

“We managed to unload all three of them,” Helen said. “My daughter Sierra is spending the night at a slumber party.”

“And both Emma and Nikki scored sleepovers tonight,” Chris said.

“What about with your mother?” Ripley asked.

“Which is why Helen invited me to her place for our own private party,” Chris said with a grin.

“Leaving that helpless elderly woman all alone?” Ripley said.

“My mother is as helpless as a rattlesnake,” Chris said. “She’s invited a friend of hers over. The truth is, I got kicked out. I’m not allowed to go home until noon Sunday.”

“Gives me hope that when I’m sixty-five I’ll have a friend to invite over for sleepovers,” Ripley said.

Before leaving for the Kennedy Center, Helen opted to visit the ladies’ restroom. Since it was still the height of Friday night rush hour, Ripley decided to go as well to play it safe before getting into traffic.

Curious about the chit-chat the new acquaintances would share once he was out of earshot, Chris sat on a bench next to the escalators leading down to the Pentagon City metro stop. He imagined the secrets that they might be sharing in the mirror while washing their hands or checking their make-up.

*Whatever. I just hope they don’t decide to share too much.* He checked the time on his cell phone. Time was getting short. He looked in the direction of the hallway in time to see a

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woman with blond hair pass him and stop at the news stand next to him.

A Washington Redskins ball cap covered the top of her head. She wore the thick plaid jacket. A slender woman, her long blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail that spilled down her back.

He instantly recognized her face and her build, which was significantly leaner than the last time he had seen her. The tilt of her head. The way her hips swayed as she moved past him was unmistakable.

Upon reaching the news stand, she picked up a newspaper and slipped it under her arm.

He was so certain it was her, that he almost dropped his cell phone to the floor. His knees felt numb when he stood.

Like prey sensing movement nearby, she jumped and spun around.

His eyes locked with her blue orbs. For an instant, the world seemed to stand still in silence.

*No, it can't be. Blair? Blair.*

Chris's mind raced to re-examine everything from the past—Blair's decision to leave him and their family to take advantage of the opportunity with the state department in Switzerland. Her departure. Their separation. His decision to not take their daughters to Switzerland that summer because Blair had said she would be too busy working on a project. She claimed she couldn't take any time off. Then, the worst day of his life—the day his supervisor had called him into his office to tell him about Blair's death on Bastille Day in Nice, France, while apparently traveling with an intelligence officer from Australia.

She had claimed she was too busy to take time off to visit with her family. Obviously, she had enough time to travel to France to meet another man.

LAUREN CARR

Three years after receiving the cremated remains of his wife and the mother of his children, how could she be standing before him?

Should he feel happy to see that she was alive, saddened by her betrayal, or angry that she had put his daughters through such grief. Every one of those emotions swirled inside him like a cyclone.

“Blair.” He took a step toward her only to have her spin around and run down the escalator.

He gave chase. He forgot about Helen and Ripley. All he could think about was that Blair was alive.

*Why did they tell me that she was dead?*

He weaved through people on the escalator—fighting to keep Blair in his sight.

*Was it a mistake or a lie? Why didn't she tell us that she was alive? Where has she been all this time?*

At the bottom of the escalator leading to the ticket area, he stopped. One needed a metro ticket to get through the turnstiles leading to the tracks below.

Peering into each dark corner, Chris turned around in a circle. A steady stream of commuters squirming around him to reach their individual destinations made it a difficult task.

Among the constant activity, one lone unmoving figure leaning against the ticket machines stood out. Clad in worn jeans and a hoodie pulled up over his head, he pretended to focus on his cell phone. While he held his cell phone in his hand, he was watching everyone.

Chris spotted him as being some part of law enforcement. Either a plain clothes security with the metro or a member of a federal agency keeping watch for a possible terrorist attack. Whichever it was didn't matter to Chris. All he cared about was which direction Blair had gone.

“Excuse me, did you see a blond woman in a plaid jacket, very pretty, go by?”

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The man in the hoodie froze at his direct approach. He looked Chris up and down.

Up close, Chris saw that under the laid back, casual, even street-wise attire, he was an attractive, athletic man with striking blue eyes and dimples. *Yep, he's undercover. Vice maybe?*

"Sorry, bud, I've seen lots of pretty blond women go by." He glanced around Chris to continue his surveillance.

Dismissing him to return to whatever case he was working on, Chris rushed to the first ticket machine, stuck a five-dollar bill in, purchased a ticket, and hurried down the escalator. He spotted her on the train platform.

She was not alone.

A man wearing a red baseball cap was walking close to her—ushering her along the ramp toward the tunnel where the first car of the next train would stop.

Chris was so intent on catching her that he bumped into a man in a black coat at the bottom of the escalator—knocking him into the handrail. The man's black hat fell to the ground. Apologizing, Chris picked up the hat and stuffed it into his hands.

When the man responded in an Asian language, Chris turned to him to catch a fiery glare. While he didn't know exactly what the Asian man had said, Chris had no doubt but that it was a curse.

"I'm very sorry," he said before continuing his pursuit.

As he drew closer to Blair, he saw that her companion had his arm around her waist.

Blair stumbled—managing to pull away just a second—long enough for Chris to spot the muzzle of a gun aimed at her side.

With a glance over his shoulder, the man pulled her back to him. Under the ball cap, Chris saw the man's enormous Roman nose and weak chin.

LAUREN CARR

Chris's heart sank to the pit of his stomach. He broke out in a cold sweat. He had seen that face before. It was hard to forget. Chris had seen it on more one most-wanted poster issued by the FBI—one of their ten most wanted.

Leonardo Mancini was as evil as he was ugly. International assassin. Willing to kill anyone for the right amount of money.

The lights along the train ramp blinked to signal that the next train was arriving.

Passengers rushed to the ramp—jostling for easy access onto the train. Abruptly, there was a human barricade erected between Chris and Blair.

Minutes later, they would be gone. Blair would be really dead this time. Judging by the fear in her eyes, she knew it. Mancini would be on an airplane flying off to his next hit before they found her body.

*End of Excerpt*