



## Chapter One

Darcy Ward was having a really bad day.

As the plane she was on plummeted toward the ground, she wondered which god she'd angered. She gripped the armrests of her seat, her knuckles turning white. She should be gliding smoothly and happily back toward Washington, DC, but no, instead she was going to die a horrible, fiery death.

This was *not* how karma was supposed to work. She scrunched up her nose. Early this morning, she'd helped rescue her good friend, Sloan, and Sloan's new, hot-guy boyfriend from some very bad people. The plane bounced, knocking Darcy against the seat.

*Fucking Silk Road.* The black-market antiquities thieves who'd gone after Sloan—the same ones that Darcy was currently setting a trap for in DC—had clearly decided to retaliate.

She looked out the window. Smoke was streaming from one of the private jet's engines. The plane dipped again and her stomach ended up in her throat. She glanced toward the cockpit.

Special Agent Alastair Burke's broad back blocked the doorway as he leaned in, barking orders at the pilots.

Okay, well, if she was going to die, looking at Agent Arrogant and Annoying's mighty fine ass in his black suit trousers wasn't the worst way to go.

Another bump and she swallowed against the rock in her throat. She didn't want to die. She loved her parents, loved her brothers and her friends. She loved the business that they ran together—Treasure Hunter Security. Sure, her job consisted of mostly herding around former Navy SEALs-turned-security-badasses, but it was her life, and she loved it.

And she still had things she wanted to do. She wanted to fall in love, and be the center of some amazing man's universe. She wanted love like the love she saw every day between her parents.

*Fucking Silk Road.* The group had been the bane of her existence for a while now—well, the second bane of her existence behind a bossy, sometimes-ally-but-always-pain-in-her-ass FBI agent.

“Burke,” she yelled. She wasn't going to sit here like a damsel in distress while they crashed into the ground.

“Quiet,” he bit back.

He'd taken his jacket off, and was just in his crisp, white shirt and shoulder holster. Damn him for looking so hot while they were in danger of dying.

“Stabilize the plane,” he growled at the pilot. “Now.”

“The explosion knocked the system offline,” one of the pilots answered. “There's power, but it's not responding.”

“Fuck,” Burke muttered.

*Screw this.* Darcy's plans did not include being smushed into a million icky pieces. She unbuckled her seatbelt and grabbed her tablet.

She kicked off her heels and staggered down the aisle. The plane was tilted at a crazy angle. The aircraft bucked like a bronco and she lost her balance, careening into the cockpit.

Strong arms caught her and she looked up. Alastair Burke wasn't handsome, but there were a bunch of other words that she could use to describe him: hard, focused, rugged, intense.

Green eyes, that looked seriously pissed off, stared down at her, and her gaze fell to the stubble on his hard jaw. He had scruff even though it was the morning.

"I told you to stay strapped in."

God, the man was bossy. "And I didn't listen to you. Again. Surprise!" She looked at the console. Yikes, it looked like something you'd find on the space shuttle. "I thought I could help."

"You know how to fly a damaged plane?" Burke drawled.

"No." She held up her tablet. "But I am a genius with all things electronic, remember? I hacked your fancy, secure system, didn't I?"

He scowled. "I hacked you back."

She barely resisted the urge to poke out her tongue. She preferred *not* to remember that. She looked at the harried pilots. "What's going on?"

The head pilot glanced at Burke before looking back at her. "There's power to the console, but the controls aren't responding."

"Reboot it," Burke said.

The copilot shook his head. "It'll take too long. We'll have crashed by the time it comes back up."

Darcy dropped to her knees between the pilots' seats. "Let me see what I can do."

She plugged in her tablet and tuned out the pilots' frantic talk with a control tower somewhere. She also blocked out the whine of the engines, the jerking of the plane, and Burke's annoying, yet delicious cologne.

She tapped on her screen and studied the scrolling text. *Aha*. There was a shortcut for rebooting. She tapped in some commands.

“Darcy, get back in your seat,” Burke ordered.

“Hang on—”

A hand gripped her arm. “I want you in the safest part of the plane.”

She looked up, her belly clenching. “I’d prefer *not* to crash at all. There!”

Lights flared all over the console and the pilots gasped.

“She did it,” one pilot cried.

The two men burst into action, working together in a flurry of movement and shouting orders at each other.

Burke yanked Darcy back to her feet and dragged her down the aisle between the wide seats.

The plane leveled out and she grinned at him. “The phrase you’re looking for is ‘thank you, Darcy. You’re amazing.’”

He stared at her, and she tilted her head back. A muscle ticked in his jaw. Something emanated off him but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

“Burke—?”

He grabbed her and yanked her forward. She collided with his hard chest—which, yes, was as hard as she’d imagined in her very-secret, late-night fantasies that she’d never admit to anyone.

Then his mouth slammed down on hers.

Oh. *Oh*.

His lips were firm, and the kiss was hard, hot, and commanding. It was exactly what she’d imagined in those fantasies she’d never admit to having.

Sensations shot straight between her legs, red-hot and insistent.

Darcy's tablet slipped from her fingers, hitting the carpeted floor with a thud. She slid her hands into Burke's hair, a hungry sound escaping her throat. He had glorious, silky, brown hair. She kissed him back with everything she had.

Before she knew it, she was half climbing him, grinding her body against his as he kissed her deeply.

Then he jerked his head back. They stared at each other for a beat.

"Thank you, Darcy. You're amazing." He nudged her into her seat.

Which was lucky, because her knees refused to hold her any longer. She dropped down, trying to catch her breath.

Burke rested his hands on the armrests, caging her in. He leaned down until his face was an inch from hers. "Now buckle in. We'll be landing soon."

She nodded.

"Guess I've found one way to get you to do what I ask."

As he walked back to the cockpit, Darcy reached up and touched her swollen lips. Wow, the day had really taken a detour into crazy land. A part of her was very satisfied to see Burke's normally neat hair was mussed.

She clipped her belt in place and pulled in a shuddering breath. She turned her head and looked out the window, extremely pleased to see that, while the ground looked much closer, they were no longer hurtling directly toward it.

Body still tingling, Darcy decided she was going to settle into Darcy Denial Land. Where there were no bad guys, no plane crashes, and no sexy, annoying FBI agents who kissed like a dream.

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Darcy sipped her vanilla latte and smiled. Coffee was the nectar of the gods, and she was pretty darn happy that she was alive to drink it.

Her heels clicked on the creamy travertine tiles as she crossed the cavernous lobby. She loved the Dashwood Museum.

With a nod at the security guards, she stepped into the main hall. Glossy, wooden walls gave the place a sense of history and warmth, and marble columns gleamed in the light. The space was, of course, packed with art. She scanned the room, taking in the magnificent paintings, sculptures, and artifacts.

And in the grand lobby, in less than a week, they were holding the opening of a priceless exhibit. The private collection of a Dashwood donor, who had an extensive assortment of amazing and ancient artifacts.

She took another sip of her coffee, savoring the hit of caffeine. Darcy had a few weaknesses: clothes, shoes, expensive computer parts, and caffeine. She made no apologies for any of them.

She remembered in excruciating detail how it felt to be shy and boring. She'd hit her teens and realized she had two amazingly talented, larger-than-life parents and two tough, athletic larger-than-life brothers. She'd been small and liked computers. Her family were a tough act to follow.

But life was too short to spend apologizing for what you loved or shortchanging yourself. She'd learned to embrace herself.

Yesterday, while her plane was hurtling toward the ground, she'd thought she'd never get another latte again. Today, she'd splurged on a huge breakfast and was on her second coffee of the day. Darcy's mindset right now was to enjoy the heck out of everything. When she got back to Denver, she was making a plan to damn well find the love of her life. Less work, more dating.

But that didn't mean she'd forgotten she had a job to do right now.

She was pretty damned motivated to ensure Silk Road went down. In fiery flames, just like they'd tried to do to her.

The big, opening-gala night would be a who's who of Washington's elite. And the jewels that would lure Silk Road and its mysterious leader, the Collector, would be on display. Energy zinged through her. They were the perfect bait.

Three cursed diamonds.

But first, she needed to finish her work.

She lifted her tablet, studying the security feed. Then she glanced up, taking in the locations of the hidden cameras on the ceiling. She needed to make a few adjustments. Glancing at the screen again, she noted all the angles and blind spots. Thankfully, at this time of the morning, there weren't too many museum-goers. Most people were rushing off to work, and the tourists were still waking up and slowly starting their day.

A deep rumble of a voice echoed from the lobby and Darcy's belly clenched. She knew that voice.

It had been in her dreams last night.

She was still trying to stay in Darcy Denial Land, but the man made it damn difficult. After the plane incident yesterday, Burke had been busy sorting things out with the powers that be. After they'd landed in DC, he'd ordered her to take the day off. Her nose wrinkled. He didn't ask or suggest, no, just a flat-out order. Sometimes she wondered if the man was half machine.

Anyway, Darcy had decided to go shopping. She'd splurged on a bunch of gorgeous lingerie she didn't need but loved. It hadn't quite been the relaxing experience she'd wanted, since she'd

been tailed the entire time by an FBI agent escort. One that she *hadn't* been informed about beforehand.

She peeked around the doorway and spotted Burke's back. Another dark suit covered that powerful, muscled body. Instantly, all she could think about was that curl-your-toes kiss.

*No.* Darcy swiveled back. She wasn't going there. Nopity-nope. The man might kiss like a sex god, but he drove her insane.

Besides, it was clear Alastair Burke lived and breathed his job. Being an FBI agent was in his veins. She'd seen his single-minded focus about taking down Silk Road. In fact, she'd never met a more intense, driven man.

He was far too controlled to fall in love, and he wasn't the kind of man who'd make a woman the center of his world.

*Get your work done, Darce.* She looked back at the cameras, trying to put firm lips and hard kisses out of her head. She felt someone watching her and looked up.

A businessman stood nearby, studying her with an appreciative look on his face. He was probably a few years younger than her, with a handsome face, blond hair, and a well-cut suit. When he noticed her looking at him, he smiled and nodded.

*Hmm, not bad.* She smiled back.

Beyond Mr. Cute was a woman with two bored-looking kids in tow. She was attempting to get them interested in a painting by Rembrandt.

Then, loud laughter echoed through the hall. She looked over and saw two young men. They were younger than the businessman—college age, good-looking, and well aware of it. They had thick, over-styled hair, and wore trendy jeans and polo shirts.

The pair were pretending not to look at a pretty sculpture resting on a pedestal. The bronze was of an elegant, naked woman with her back arched, hair flowing down. Darcy looked back at her tablet, and juggling her latte, she swiped the controls. She pulled up the correct camera feed and zoomed in on the young men.

They had trouble written all over them.

She looked up at them again and one caught her eye. A lock of sandy-brown hair fell over his blue eyes and he took his time looking Darcy up and down. He shot her a wide grin. Darcy barely managed to stop her eye roll.

The man-boy sauntered over. "Hi, there."

"Hi." He was lucky to be twenty, and looked spoiled and soft. "Enjoying the museum?"

He gave her fitted jeans and blush-pink sweater a long look, lingering on her breasts. "Oh, yeah."

*Puh-lease.* "You're an art lover, then?"

"I love beautiful things," he drawled.

God, the guy needed to put some effort into his lines. She saw Mr. Suave's friend edging closer to the sculpture.

"Did you hear about the big exhibit that's coming?" Mr. Suave asked.

"I did hear that somewhere."

He leaned closer. "I heard everyone's busy preparing for the exhibit of the cursed diamonds."

"I heard that, too." A small alert popped up on her tablet, informing her that someone had activated a jammer to block the camera feed. A bad one. She tapped the screen and deactivated it.

"Are you a student?" Mr. Suave nodded at her tablet.

“Well, I am taking notes.” She’d already taken snaps of both the man-boys’ faces and was running them through the museum’s facial recognition system. Anyone who entered the museum and purchased a ticket ended up in the system.

Suave lowered his voice. “You know you’re gorgeous?”

Now, Darcy laughed. “Do any of these lines actually work for you, sweetie?”

He blinked and then looked affronted. “All the time.”

“On pretty coeds who don’t know any better yet.”

Suave scowled. “I’m a catch, babe.”

“Uh-huh.”

That’s when his friend nabbed the sculpture off the pedestal. An alarm blared, and instantly, gates descended, shutting off the exits. Both men froze, looking shocked.

The woman cried out, pulled her kids close. The businessman watched with a frown.

“I deactivated your jammer,” Darcy told Suave. “You probably weren’t aware of all the new security upgrades we’ve installed.” She looked at the tablet and saw that she’d gotten pings on the facial recognition system. “You should have done better research, Patrick.”

Mr. Suave sucked in a breath. “How...? They said...”

“Pat!” His friend stood there, still clutching the sculpture.

“It’s best if you put that down, James.” Darcy tapped, opening the security gate leading from the lobby. “You’re about to be arrested.”

Patrick straightened, swiping a hand through his floppy hair. His chin jutted forward. “My parents’ lawyers will have me out of here in a flash. You have no idea who I am.”

Darcy shook her head and tilted her tablet. She showed them the pictures of James snatching the sculpture.

“I caught it all on camera.” She cocked her head. “This picture isn’t your best angle, Patrick, but it’ll still make an impact on Instagram.”

“Bitch!”

Patrick lunged. Darcy sidestepped him and stuck out her foot. He tripped over it and fell flat on his face. She pressed her spiked heel into his lower back.

But then James rushed at her to defend his friend. She tensed. *Shit.*

There was a blur, and Burke grabbed James, spun him, and slammed him into a column. The man-boy yelped. Burke cuffed him in about two seconds flat.

Patrick bounced back up and Darcy staggered back. She was pretty sure he had an imprint of her heel in his back now. The man-boy took a few stumbling steps backward.

But Burke was already moving. He grabbed the young man by the neck and shoved him to his knees.

“Hey,” Patrick complained.

Burke pulled out another set of cuffs and slapped them on Mr. No-Longer-So-Suave. Burke’s face was set in impassive lines and he didn’t even look like he’d worked up a sweat.

Damn Alastair Burke for looking so hot. Darcy tried to tame her haywire hormones.

“Gentlemen, this is Special Agent Burke.” She sipped her latte again. “He’s in charge of the FBI’s specialized Art Crime Team.” She leaned closer to the young men. “He *really* dislikes people who steal art and antiquities.”

Burke looked at her, and although his face was its usual mask, he gave her a little shake of his head. She was pretty sure he was amused.

“They said there’d be no security,” Patrick whispered. “That everyone was too busy with the exhibit.”

“Who?” Burke demanded, his tone hard. He dragged Patrick to his feet.

Patrick looked ready to pee his pants.

At that moment, several members of the museum security team arrived. One guard detoured to calm the other museum-goers who were still watching in shock.

“We need to question these idiots,” Burke said.

Darcy nodded. She pulled in a breath and his yummy cologne hit her. *Focus, Darcy.* “Okay. I already ran these two through facial recognition, and have images of them taking the sculpture. I’ll email them to you.”

“Darcy.” He gave her one of his intense looks. “Good work.”

She felt a little flutter in her belly. “Thanks. I have some more work to do on the cameras.” She wagged her fingers at the wannabe thieves as she turned.

“Darcy?”

She looked back over her shoulder.

“Don’t go too far,” Burke said. “Because the diamonds have arrived.”

Her pulse leaped. She couldn’t *wait* to see the diamonds. Finally, Silk Road, who’d targeted her family, her business, and her friends for years, was going down.

