

SHADOW GAME

CHRISTINE FEEHAN



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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DARK SYMPHONY
SHADOW GAME

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Be sure to write to Christine at christine@christinefeeahan.com to get a FREE exclusive Christine Feehan animated screensaver and sign up for her PRIVATE book announcement list. She would love to hear from you!

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CAPTAIN Ryland Miller leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes in utter weariness. He could ignore the pain in his head, the knives shredding his skull. He could ignore the cage he was in. He could even ignore the fact that sooner or later, he was going to slip up and his enemies would kill him. But he could not ignore the guilt and anger and frustration rising like a tidal wave in him as his men suffered the consequences of his decisions.

Kaden, I can't reach Russell Cowlings. Can you?

He had talked his men into the experiment that had landed them all in the laboratory cages which they now resided. Good men. Loyal men. Men who had wanted to serve their country and their people.

We all made the decision. Kaden responded to his emotions, the words buzzing inside Ryland's mind. *No one has managed to raise Russell.*

Ryland swore softly aloud as he swept a hand over his face, trying to wipe away the pain. Speaking telepathically with his men cost him. The telepathic link between them had grown stronger as they all worked to build it, but only a few of them could sustain it for any length of time. Ryland had to supply the bridge, and his brain, over time, balked at the enormity of such a burden.

Don't touch the sleeping pills they gave you. Suspect any medication. He glanced at the small white pill lying in plain sight on his end table. He'd like a lab analysis of the contents. Why hadn't Cowlings listened to him? Had Cowlings accepted the sleeping pill in the hopes of a brief respite? He had to get the men out. *We have no choice, we must treat this situation as if we were behind enemy lines.* Ryland took a deep breath, let it out slowly. He no longer felt he had a choice. He had already lost too many men. His decision would brand them as traitors, deserters, but it was the only way to save their lives. He had to find a way for his men to break out of the laboratory.

The colonel has betrayed us. We have no other choice but to escape. Gather information and support one another as best you can. Wait for my word.

He became aware of the disturbance around him, the dark waves of intense dislike bordering on hatred preceding the group nearing the cage where he was kept.

Someone is approaching.... Ryland abruptly cut off telepathic communication to those of his men he could reach. He remained motionless in the center of his cell, his every sense flaring out to identify the approaching individuals.

It was a small group this time: Dr. Peter Whitney, Colonel Higgens, and a security guard. It amused Ryland that Whitney and Higgens insisted on an armed guard accompanying them despite the fact that he was locked behind both bars and a thick glass barrier. He was careful to keep his features expressionless as they neared his cage.

Ryland lifted his head, his steel gray eyes as cold as ice. Menacing. He didn't try to hide the danger he represented. They had created him, they had betrayed him, and he wanted them to be afraid.

There was tremendous satisfaction in knowing they were...and that they had reason to be.

~~Dr. Peter Whitney led the small group. Whitney, liar, deceiver, monster maker. He was the~~ creator of the GhostWalkers. Creator of what Captain Ryland Miller and his men had become. Ryland stood up slowly, a deliberate ripple of muscle—a lethal jungle cat stretching lazily, unsheathing claws as he waited inside his cage.

His icy gaze touched on their faces, lingered, made them uncomfortable. Graveyard eyes. Eyes of death. He projected the image deliberately, wanting, even needing them to fear for their lives. Colonel Higgs looked away, studied the cameras, the security, watched with evident apprehension as the thick barrier of glass slid away. Although Ryland remained caged behind heavy bars, Higgs was obviously uneasy without the barrier, uncertain just how powerful Ryland had become.

Ryland steeled himself for the assault on his hearing, his emotions. The flood of unwanted information he couldn't control. The bombardment of thoughts and emotions. The disgusting depravity and avarice that lay behind the masks of those facing him. He kept his features carefully blank, giving nothing away, not wanting them to know what it cost him to shield his wide-open mind.

“Good morning, Captain Miller,” Peter Whitney said pleasantly. “How are things this morning with you? Did you sleep at all?”

Ryland watched him without blinking, tempted to try to push through Whitney's barriers to discover the true character guarded behind the wall Whitney had in his mind. What secrets were hidden there? The one person Ryland needed to understand, to read, was protected by some natural or man-made barrier. None of the other men, not even Kaden, had managed to penetrate the scientist's mind. They couldn't get any pertinent data, shielded as Whitney was, but the heavy swamping waves of guilt were always broadcast loudly.

“No, I didn't sleep but I suspect you already know that.”

Dr. Whitney nodded. “None of your men are taking their sleeping meds. I noticed you didn't either. Is there a reason for that, Captain Miller?”

The chaotic emotions of the group hit Ryland hard, as it always did. In the beginning, it used to drive him to his knees, the noise in his head so loud and aggravating his brain would rebel, punishing him for his unnatural abilities. Now he was much more disciplined. Oh, the pain was still there, like a thousand knives driving into his head at the first breach of his brain, but he hid the agony behind the façade of icy, menacing calm. And he was, after all, well trained. His people never revealed weakness to the enemy.

“Self-preservation is always a good reason,” he answered, fighting down the waves of weakness and pain from the battering of emotions. He kept his features totally expressionless, refusing to allow them to see the cost.

“What the hell does that mean?” Higgs demanded. “What are you accusing us of now, Miller?”

The door to the laboratory had been left standing open, unusual for the security-conscious company, and a woman hurried through. “I'm sorry I'm late; the meeting went longer than expected!”

At once the painful assault of thoughts and emotions lessened, muted, leaving Ryland able to breathe normally. To think without pain. The relief was instant and unexpected. Ryland focused on her immediately, realizing she was somehow trapping the more acute emotions and holding them at bay almost as if she were a magnet for them. And she wasn't just any woman. She was so beautiful, she took his breath away. Ryland could have sworn, when he looked at her, the ground shifted and moved under his feet. He glanced at Peter Whitney, caught the man observing his reactions to the woman's presence very closely.

At first Ryland was embarrassed that he had been caught staring at her. Then he realized Whitney knew the woman had some kind of psychic ability. She enhanced Ryland's abilities and cleared out the garbage of stray thoughts and emotions. Did Whitney know exactly what she did? The doctor w

waiting for a reaction so Ryland refused to give him the satisfaction, keeping his expression total blank.

“Captain Miller, I’d like to present my daughter, Lily Whitney. Dr. Lily Whitney.” Peter’s gaze never left Ryland’s face. “I’ve asked her to join us; I hope you don’t mind.”

The shock couldn’t have been more complete. Peter Whitney’s daughter? Ryland let out his breath slowly, shrugged his broad shoulders casually, another ripple of menace. He didn’t feel casual. Everything inside of him stilled. Calmed. Reached. He studied the woman. Her eyes were incredible but wary. Intelligent. Knowledgeable. As if she recognized him, too, in some elemental way. Her eyes were a deep startling blue, like the middle of a clear, fresh pool. A man could lose his mind, his freedom in eyes like hers. She was average height—not tall, but not exceedingly short. She had a woman’s figure encased in a gray-green suit of some kind that managed to draw attention to every lush curve. She had walked with a decided limp, but when he looked her over for damage, he could see nothing to indicate injury. More than all of that, the moment he saw her face, the moment she entered the room, his soul seemed to reach for hers. To recognize hers. His breath stilled in his body and he could only stare at her.

She was looking back at him and he knew the sight wasn’t very reassuring. At his best, he looked a warrior—at his worst, he looked a savage fighter. There was no way to soften his expression or lessen the scars on his face or shave off the dark stubble marring his stubborn jawline. He was stocky with a fighter’s compact build, carrying most of his weight in his upper body, his chest and arms, his broad shoulders. His hair was thick and black, and it curled when it wasn’t kept tight against his skull.

“Captain Miller.” Her voice was soothing, gentle, pleasant. Sexy. A blend of smoke and heat that seared him right through his belly. “How nice to meet you. My father thought I might be of some use in the research. I haven’t had much time to go over the data, but I’ll be happy to try to help.”

He had never reacted so forcefully to a voice before. The sound seemed to wrap him up in satin sheets, rubbing and caressing his skin until he felt himself break out in a sweat. The image was so vivid that for a moment he could only stare at her, imagining her naked body writhing with pleasure beneath his. In the midst of his struggle to survive, his physical reaction to her was shocking.

Color crept up her neck, delicately tinged her cheeks. Her long lashes fluttered, drifted down, and she looked away from him to her father. “This room is very exposed. Who came up with the design? I would think it would be a difficult way to live, even for a short period.”

“You mean like a lab rat?” Ryland asked softly, deliberately, not wanting any of them to think they were fooling him by bringing in the woman. “Because that’s what I am. Dr. Whitney has his own human rats to play with.”

Lily’s dark gaze jumped to his face. One eyebrow shot up. “I’m sorry, Captain Miller, was I misinformed, or did you agree to volunteer for this assignment?” There was a small challenge in her voice.

“Captain Miller volunteered, Lily,” Peter Whitney said. “He was unprepared for the brutal results, as was I. I’ve been searching for a way to reverse the process but so far, everything I’ve tried has failed.”

“I don’t believe that’s the proper way to handle this,” Colonel Higgins snapped. He glared at Peter Whitney, his bushy brows drawing together in a frown of disapproval. “Captain Miller is a soldier. He volunteered for this mission and I must insist he carry it out to its conclusion. We don’t need the process reversed, we need it perfected.”

Ryland had no trouble reading the colonel’s emotions. The man didn’t want Lily Whitney anywhere near Ryland or his men. He wanted Ryland taken out behind the laboratories and shot. Better yet, dissected so they could all see what was going on in his brain. Colonel Higgins was afraid of Ryland Miller and the other men in the paranormal unit. Anything he feared, Higgins destroyed.

“Colonel Higgins, I don’t think you fully understand what these men are going through, what’s happening to their brains.” Dr. Whitney was pursuing what was obviously a long-standing argument between them. “We’ve already lost several men....”

“They knew the risks,” Higgins retorted, glowering at Miller. “This is an important experiment. We need these men to perform. The loss of a few men, while tragic, is an acceptable loss considering the importance of what these men can do.”

Ryland didn’t look at Higgins. He kept his glittering gaze fixed on Lily Whitney. But his entire mind reached out. Took hold. Closed like a vise.

Lily’s head snapped up. She gasped out a soft protest. Her gaze dropped to Ryland’s hands. She watched his fingers slowly begin to curl as if around a thick throat. She shook her head, a slight protest.

Higgins coughed. A barking grunt. His mouth hung open as he gasped for air. Peter Whitney and the young guard both reached for the colonel, trying to open his stiff shirt collar, trying to help him breathe. The colonel staggered, was caught and lowered to the floor by the scientist.

Stop it. The voice in Ryland’s mind was soft.

Ryland’s dark brow shot up and his gleaming gaze met Lily’s. The doctor’s daughter was definitely telepathic. She was calm about it, her gaze steady on his, not in the least intimidated by the danger emanating from him. She appeared as cool as ice.

He’s willing to sacrifice every one of my men. They aren’t expendable. He was just as calm, not for a moment relenting.

He’s a moron. No one is willing to sacrifice the men; no one considers them expendable; and he isn’t worth branding yourself a murderer.

Ryland allowed his breath to escape in a soft, controlled stream, clearing his lungs, clearing his mind. Deliberately he turned his back on the writhing man and paced across the cell, his fingers slowly uncurling.

Higgins went into a fit of coughing, tears swimming in his eyes. He pointed a shaky finger toward Ryland. “He tried to kill me, you all saw it.”

Peter Whitney sighed and walked with heavy footsteps across the room to stare at the computer. “I’m tired of the melodrama, Colonel. There is always a jump on the sensors in the computers when there is a surge of power. There’s nothing here at all. Miller is safely locked in a cage; he didn’t do anything at all. Either you’re trying to sabotage my project or you have a personal vendetta against Captain Miller. In any case, I’m going to write to the general and insist they send another liaison.”

Colonel Higgins swore again. “I’ll have no more talk about reversing the process, Whitney, and you know what I think about bringing your daughter on board. We don’t need another damn bleeding heart on this project—we need results.”

“My security clearance, Colonel Higgins, is of the highest level and so is my commitment to this project. I don’t have the necessary data at this time, but I can assure you I’ll put in whatever time necessary to find the answers needed.” Even as she spoke, Lily was looking at the computer screen.

Ryland could read her thoughts. Whatever was on the screen puzzled her as much as what her father was saying, but she was willing to cover for him. She was making it up as she went along. As calm and as cool as ever. He couldn’t remember the last time he had smiled, but the impulse was there. He kept his back to the group, not certain he could keep a straight face while she lied to the colonel. Lily Whitney had no idea what was going on; her father had given her very little information and she was simply winging it. Her dislike of Higgins, compounded by her father’s unusual behavior, had put her firmly in Ryland’s camp for the moment.

He had no idea what Peter Whitney’s game was, but the man was buried deep in the mire. The experiment to enhance psychic ability and bring together a fighting unit had been his project, his

brainchild. Peter Whitney had been the man who'd persuaded Ryland the experiment had merit. ~~That his men would be safe and that they would better serve their country. Ryland couldn't read the doctor as he now could most men, but whatever Whitney was up to, Ryland had become convinced it wasn't anything that would benefit him or his men. Donovans Corporation had a stench about it. If there was one thing Ryland knew for certain, Donovans was about money and personal profit, not national security.~~

"Can you read that code your father uses for his notes?" Higgins asked Lily Whitney, suddenly losing interest in Ryland. "Gibberish if you ask me. Why the hell don't you just put your work in English like a normal human being?" He snapped the question at Peter Whitney irritably.

At once Ryland swung around, his gray gaze thoughtful as it rested on the colonel. There was something there, something he couldn't get hold of. It was shifting, moving, ideas formulating and growing. Higgins's mind seemed a black ravine, twisted and curved and suddenly cunning.

Lily shrugged. "I grew up reading his codes; of course I can read it."

Ryland sensed her growing puzzlement as she stared at the combination of numbers, symbols, and letters across the computer screen.

"What the hell are you doing getting into my private computer files, Frank?" Peter Whitney demanded, glaring at the colonel. "When I want you to read a report, I'll have the data organized and the report will be finished and up-to-date, neatly typed in English. You have no business in my computer either here or at my office. My research on many projects is on my computer and you have no right to invade my privacy. If your people go anywhere near my work, I'll have you locked out of Donovans so fast you won't know what hit you."

"This isn't your personal project, Peter." Higgins glowered at all of them. "This is my project to and as the head of it, you don't keep secrets from me. You don't make any sense in your reports."

Ryland watched Lily Whitney. She remained very quiet, listening, absorbing information, gathering impressions, and soaking it all up like a sponge. She seemed relaxed, but he was very aware she had glanced toward her father, waiting for some sign, for a hint of how to handle the situation. Whitney gave her nothing, didn't even look at her. Lily hid her frustration very well. She shifted her gaze back to the computer screen, leaving the others to their argument, clearly another long-standing one.

"I want something done about Miller," Higgins said, acting as if Ryland couldn't hear him.

I'm already dead to him. Ryland whispered the words in Lily Whitney's mind.

All the better for you and your men. He's pressing my father hard about pushing this project forward, not terminating it. He isn't satisfied with the findings and doesn't agree it is dangerous to allow you to continue. Lily didn't look away from the computer or give away in any manner that she was communicating with him.

He doesn't know about you. Higgins has no idea you're telepathic. The knowledge burst over him like a light from a prism. Brilliant and colorful and full of possibilities. Dr. Whitney was hiding his daughter's abilities from the colonel. From the Donovans Corporation. Ryland knew he had ammunition. Information he could use to bargain with Dr. Whitney. Something that might be used to save his men. His flare of excitement must have been in his mind because Lily turned and regarded him with a cool, thoughtful gaze.

Peter Whitney scowled at Colonel Higgins, clearly exasperated. "You want something done? What does that mean, Frank? What do you have in mind? A lobotomy? Captain Miller has performed every test we've asked of him. Do you have personal reasons for disliking the captain?" Dr. Whitney's voice was a whip of contempt. "Captain Miller, if you were having an affair with Colonel Higgins's wife, you should have disclosed that information to me immediately."

Lily's dark eyebrows shot up. Ryland could feel the sudden amusement in her mind. Her laughter

was soft and inviting, but her features gave nothing of her inner thoughts away. *Well? Are you Romeo?*

There was something peaceful and serene about Lily, something that spilled over into the air around them. His second-in-command, Kaden, was like that, calming the terrible static and tuning the frequencies so that they were clear and sharp and able to be used by all the men regardless of talent. Surely her father hadn't experimented on his own daughter. The idea sickened him.

"Laugh all you want, Peter," the colonel sneered, "but you won't be laughing when lawsuits are filed against Donovans Corporation and the United States government is after you for botching the job."

Ryland ignored the arguing men. He had never been so drawn to a woman, to any individual, but he wanted Lily to remain in the room. He *needed* her to remain in the room. And he didn't want her to be a part of the conspiracy that was threatening his life. She seemed unaware of it, but her father was certainly one of the puppet masters.

My father is no puppet master. Her voice was indignant and faintly haughty, a princess to a inferior being.

You don't even know what the hell is going on so how do you know what he is or isn't? He was rougher than he intended but Lily took it well, not responding to him but frowning at the computer monitor.

She didn't speak to her father, but he sensed her movement toward him, a slight exchange between them. It was more felt than seen, and Ryland sensed her puzzlement deepen. Her father gave her no clue; instead, he led Colonel Higgs toward the door.

"Are you coming, Lily?" Dr. Whitney asked, pausing just inside the hall.

"I want to look things over here, sir," she said, indicating the computer, "and it will give Captain Miller a chance to fill me in on where he is in this."

Higgs swung around. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to stay alone with him. He's a dangerous man."

She looked as cool as ever, her dark brow a perfect arch. Lily stared down her aristocratic nose at the colonel. "You didn't ensure the premises were secure, Colonel?"

Colonel Higgs swore again and stomped out of the room. As Lily's father started out of the room, she cleared her throat softly. "I think it best we discuss this project in a more thorough way if you want my input, sir."

Dr. Whitney glanced at her, his features impassive. "I'll meet you at Antonio's for dinner, and we can go over everything after we eat. I want your own impressions."

"Based on..."

Ryland didn't hear a hint of sarcasm, but it was there in her mind. She was angry with her father but Ryland couldn't read why. That part of her mind was closed off to him, hidden behind a thick, high wall she had erected to keep him out.

"Go over my notes, Lily, and see what you make of the process. Maybe you'll see something I didn't. I want a fresh perspective. Colonel Higgs might be right. There may be a way to continue without reversing what we've done." Peter Whitney refused to meet his daughter's direct gaze, but he turned to Ryland and asked, "Do I need to leave an armed guard in this room with my daughter, Captain?"

Ryland studied the face of the man who had opened the floodgates of his brain to receive far too much stimuli. He could detect no evil, only a genuine concern. "I'm no threat to the innocent, Dr. Whitney."

"That's good enough for me." Still without looking at his daughter, the doctor left the room, closing the door to the laboratory firmly.

Ryland was so aware of Lily, he actually felt the breath leave her lungs in a slow exhale as the door to the laboratory closed and the lock snicked quietly into place. He waited a heartbeat. Two. “Aren’t you afraid of me?” Ryland asked, testing his voice with her. It came out more husky than he would have liked. He had never had much luck with women and Lily Whitney was out of his class.

She didn’t look at him, but continued to stare at the symbols on the screen. “Why should I be? I’m not Colonel Higgins.”

“Even the lab techs are afraid of me.”

“Because you want them to be and you’re projecting, deliberately enhancing their own fears.” Her voice indicated a mild interest in their conversation, her mind mulling over the data on the screen. “How long have you been here?”

He swung around, stalked to the bars, and gripped them. “They’re bringing you onboard and you don’t even know how long my men and I have been locked up in this hellhole?”

She turned her head abruptly. Tendrils of hair, fallen loose from the tight twist at the back of her head, swung around her face. Even in the muted blue light of the room, her hair was shiny and gleamed at him. “I don’t know anything at all about this experiment, Captain. Not one small fact. This is the highest-security compound this corporation has and, while I have clearance, this is not my field of expertise. Dr. Whitney, my father, asked me to consult and I was cleared to do so. Do you have a problem with that?”

He studied the classic beauty of her face. High cheekbones, long lashes, a lush mouth—these didn’t come like this unless they were born rich and privileged. “You probably have an underpaid maid whose name you can’t even remember, who picks up your clothes when you throw them on your bedroom floor.”

That bought him her entire attention. She crossed the distance from the computer to his cage in a slow, unhurried walk that drew his attention to her limp. Even with her limp she had a flowing grace. She made every cell in his body instantly aware he was male and she was female.

Lily tilted her chin at him. “I guess you were brought up without manners, Captain Miller. I don’t actually throw my clothes on the bedroom floor. I hang them in the closet.” Her gaze flicked past him to rest briefly on the clothes strewn on the floor.

For the first time that he could remember, Ryland was embarrassed by a woman. He was making an ass out of himself. Even her damn high heels were classy. Sexy, but classy.

A small smile curved her mouth. “You’re making a *total* ass out of yourself,” she pointed out. “but fortunately for you, I’m in a forgiving mood. We elitists learn that at an early age when they pick that silver spoon in our mouths.”

Ryland was ashamed. He might have grown up on the wrong side of the tracks in the proverbial trailer trash park, but his mother would have boxed his ears for being so rude. “I’m sorry, there’s no excuse.”

“No, there isn’t. There’s never an excuse for rudeness.” Lily paced across the distance of his cage, an unhurried examination of the length of his prison. “Who designed your quarters?”

“They constructed several cages quickly when they decided we were too powerful and posed too much danger as a group.” His men had been separated and scattered throughout the facility. He knew the isolation was telling on them. Continual poking and prodding was wearing and he worried that he could not keep them together. He had lost men already; he was not about to lose any of the others.

The cell had been specially designed out of fear of reprisal. He knew his time was limited—the fear had been growing for weeks now. They had erected the thick bulletproof barrier of glass around his cell believing that it would keep him from communicating with his men.

He had volunteered for the assignment and he had talked the other men into it. Now they were imprisoned, studied and probed and used for everything but the original premise. Several of the men

were dead and had been dissected like insects to “study and understand.” Ryland had to get the other out before anything else happened to them. He knew Higgs had termination in mind for the strong ones. Ryland was certain it would come in the form of “accidents,” but it would definitely come eventually if he didn’t find a way to free his men. Higgs had his own agenda, wanting to use the men for personal gain that had nothing whatsoever to do with the military and the country he was supposed to serve. But Higgs was afraid of what he couldn’t control. Ryland wasn’t about to lose his men to a traitor. His men were his responsibility.

He was more careful, speaking matter-of-factly this time, trying to keep the accusations, the blame he put squarely on her father’s shoulders from spilling over into his thoughts, in case she was reading him. Her eyelashes were ridiculously long, a heavy fringe he found fascinating. He caught himself staring, unable to be anything but a crass idiot. In the midst of being caught like a rat in a trap with his men in danger, he was making a fool of himself over a woman. A woman who very well might be his enemy.

“Your men are all in similar cages? I wasn’t given that information.” Her voice was strict and neutral, but she didn’t like it. He could feel the outrage she was striving to suppress.

“I haven’t seen them in weeks. They don’t allow us to communicate.” He indicated the computer screen. “That’s a constant source of irritation to Higgs. I bet his people have tried to break your father’s code, even used the computer, but they must not have been able to do it. Can you really read it?”

She hesitated briefly. It was almost unnoticeable, but he sensed the sudden stillness in her and her hawklike gaze didn’t leave her face. “My father has always written in codes. I see in mathematical patterns and it was a kind of game when I was a little girl. He changed the code often to give me something to work on. My mind...” she hesitated, as if weighing her options carefully. She was deciding how honest to be with him. He wanted the truth and silently willed her to give it to him.

Lily was quiet for a moment more, her large eyes fixed steadily on his, then her soft mouth firmed. Her chin went up a miniscule notch but he was watching her every expression, every nuance and he was aware of it, aware of what it cost her to tell him. “My mind requires continual stimulation. I don’t know how else to explain it. Without having something complex to work on, I run into problems.”

He caught the flash of pain in her eyes, fleeting but there. Dr. Peter Whitney was one of the richest men in the world. All the money might have given his daughter every confidence, but it didn’t take away the fact that she was a freak...a freak like he was. Like his men were. What her father had made them into. GhostWalkers, waiting for death to strike them down, when they should have been an elite team defending their country.

“So tell me this, Lily Whitney, if that code is real, why can’t the computer crack it?” Ryland lowered his voice so that anyone listening wouldn’t hear his question, but he kept his glittering gaze fixed on hers, refusing to allow her to look away from him.

Lily’s expression didn’t change. She looked as serene as always. She looked impossibly elegant even there in the laboratory. She looked so far out of his reach his heart hurt. “I said he always wrote in code, I didn’t say this one made any sense to me. I haven’t had a chance to work with it yet.”

Her mind was closed so completely to him that he knew she was lying. He arched a dark brow at her. “Really. Well, you’ll have to put in for overtime because no one seems to be able to read how your father managed to enhance our psychic abilities. And they sure can’t figure out how to make it go away.”

She reached out, gracefully, almost casually, naturally, to grip the edge of a desk. The knuckle on her hand turned white. “He enhanced your natural abilities?” Her mind immediately began to turn that bit of information over and over as if it were a piece of a jigsaw puzzle and she was finding the

proper fit.

~~“He really let you walk in here blind, didn't he?” Ryland challenged. “We were asked to take special tests....”~~

She held up her hand. “Who was asked and who asked you?”

“Most of my men are Special Forces. The men in the various branches were asked to be tested for psychic ability. There were certain criteria to be met along with the abilities. Age, amount and type of combat training, ability to work under pressure conditions, ability to function for long periods of time cut off from the chain of command, loyalty factors. The list was endless but surprisingly enough, we had quite a few takers. The military issued a special invite for volunteers. From what I understand law enforcement branches did the same. They were looking for an elite group.”

“And this was how long ago?”

“The first I heard of the idea was nearly four years ago. I've been here at the Donovan laboratory for a year now, but all the recruits that made it into the unit, including me, trained together at another facility. As far as I know we were always kept together. They wanted us to form a tight unit. We trained in techniques using psychic abilities in combat. The idea was a strike force that could go in and out unseen. We could be used against the drug cartels, terrorists, even an enemy army. We've been at it for over three years.”

“A wild idea. And this is whose baby?”

“Your father's. He thought it up, convinced the powers that be that it could be done, and convinced me and the rest of the men that it would make the world a better place.” There was a wealth of bitterness in Ryland Miller's voice.

“Obviously something went wrong.”

“Greed went wrong. Donovans has the government contract. Peter Whitney practically owns the company. I guess he just doesn't have enough money with the million or two in his bank account.”

She waited a long moment before responding. “I doubt my father needs any more money, Captain Miller. The amount he gives to charities each year would feed a state. You don't know anything about him so I suggest you reserve your opinion until all the facts are in. And for the record, it's a billion or two or more. This corporation could disappear tomorrow and it wouldn't change his lifestyle one bit. Her voice didn't rise in the least, but it smoldered with heat and intensity.

Ryland sighed. Her vivid gaze hadn't wavered an inch. “We have no contact with our people. All communication to the outside must go through your father or the colonel. We have no say in what's happening to us at all. One of my men died a couple of months ago and they lied about how he died. He died of a direct result from this experiment and the enhancement of his abilities—his brain couldn't handle the overload, the constant battering. They claimed it was an accident in the field. That's when we were cut off from all command and separated. We've been in isolation since that time.” Ryland regarded her with dark, angry eyes, daring her to call him a liar. “And it wasn't the first death, but by God, it's going to be the last.”

Lily pushed a hand through her perfectly smooth hair, the first real sign of agitation. The action scattered pins and left long strands falling in a cloud around her face. She was silent, allowing her brain to process the information, even as she was rejecting the accusations and implications about her father.

“Do you know precisely what killed the man in your unit? And is there the same danger to the rest of you?” She asked the question very quietly, her voice so low it was almost in his mind.

Ryland answered in the same soft voice, taking no chances the unseen guards would overhear their conversation. “His brain was wide open, assaulted by everyone and everything he came in contact with. He couldn't shut it off anymore. We can function together as a group because a couple of the men are like you. They draw the noise and raw emotion away from the rest of us. Then we'

powerful and we work. But without that magnet..." He broke off and shrugged. "It's like pieces of glass or razor blades slashing at the brain. He snapped—seizures, brain bleeds, you name it. It wasn't a pretty sight and I sure didn't like the glimpse of our future. Neither did any of the other men in the unit."

Lily pressed her fingers to her temple and for just a moment, Ryland caught the impression of throbbing pain. His face darkened, gray eyes narrowing. "Come here." He had an actual physical reaction to her being in pain. The muscles in his belly knotted, hard and aching. Everything protective and male in him rose up and flooded him with an overwhelming need to ease her discomfort.

Her enormous blue eyes instantly became wary. "I don't touch people."

"Because you don't want to know what they're really like inside, do you? You feel it too." He was horrified to think her father may have experimented on her too. *How long have you been telepathic?* More than that, he didn't want to think about never touching her. Never feeling her skin beneath his fingers, her mouth crushed to his. The image was so vivid he could almost taste her. Even her hair begged to be touched, a thick mass of shiny silk just asking for his fingers to toss away the rest of the pins and free it for his inspection.

Lily shrugged easily, but a faint blush stole along her high cheekbones. *All of my life. And yes, it can be uncomfortable knowing other people's darkest secrets. I've learned to live within certain boundaries. Maybe my father became interested in psychic phenomena because he wished to help me. For whatever reason, I can assure you, it had nothing to do with personal financial gain.* She let out a slow breath. "How terrible for you, to lose *any* of your men. You must be very close. I hope I can find a way to help all of you."

Ryland sensed her sincerity. He was suspicious of her father in spite of her protests. *Is Daddy Whitney psychic?* He knew he'd been broadcasting his sexual fantasies a little too strongly but she was unshaken, handling the intensity of the chemistry between them easily. And he knew the chemistry was on both sides. He had a sudden desire to really shake her up, get past her cool demeanor just once and see if fire burned beneath the ice. It was a hell of a thing in the middle of the mess he was in.

Lily shook her head as she answered him. *We've conducted many experiments and have connected telepathically a few times under extreme conditions, but it was sustained completely on my side. I must have inherited the talent through my mother.*

"When you touch him, can you read him?" Ryland asked curiously in a low voice. He decided the men were not all that far from the caves. His attraction to her was raw and hot and beyond any experience he'd ever had. He was unable to control his body's reaction to her. And she knew it. Unlike Ryland, she appeared to be cool and unaffected, while he was shaken to his very core. She carried on their conversation as if he weren't a firestorm burning out of control. As if his blood weren't boiling and his body hard as rock and in desperate need. As if she didn't even notice.

"Rarely. He is one of those people who has natural barriers. I think it's because he believes so strongly in psychic talent, whereas most people don't. Being aware of it all the time, he's probably built up a natural wall. I've found many people have barriers to varying degrees. Some seem impossible to get past and others are flimsy. What about you? Have you found the same thing? You're a very strong telepath."

"Come here to me."

Her cool blue gaze drifted over him. Dismissed him. "I don't think so, Captain Miller, I have far too much work to do."

"You're being a coward." He said it softly, his hungry gaze on her face.

She lifted her chin at him and gave him her haughty princess look. "I don't have time for your little games, Captain Miller. Whatever you think is going on here, is not."

His gaze dropped to her mouth. She had a perfect mouth. "Yes it is."

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