

# A MATTER OF TRUST

*by*

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## CHAPTER ONE

J. T. Sloan tucked in her borrowed white T-shirt and was about to close the buttons on her fly when warm lips caressed the back of her neck. All too aware that the woman pressed against her was naked, she murmured, “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself,” a low sultry voice replied. Deft fingers lifted the T-shirt and slid underneath to play over Sloan’s abdomen in slow, suggestive circles. “What are you doing? I thought you didn’t have anywhere to be this morning.”

“I didn’t.” Sloan stiffened as the questing hand moved lower, dipping beneath the waistband of her jeans. “Until fifteen minutes ago when I checked my messages.”

“Can’t whatever you have to do wait a little longer? If I’d known we wouldn’t have the morning, I would’ve kept you up all night. I’m not *nearly* done yet.”

Sloan turned and stepped back from the embrace, catching the other woman’s hands in hers. She wasn’t in the mood, but if those fingers strayed much lower, she would be. “Sorry, I’d stay if I could. Emergency meeting—it sounded too important to ignore.”

“I’ll take a rain check, then.” Dark eyes searched Sloan’s face. “Until next time?”

“I’ll call you.” Sloan wondered if she would, but she didn’t have time to ponder that one way or the other at the moment. “Thanks for the clean shirt, by the way.”

The brunette leaned naked against the bathroom door, watching Sloan gather her jacket and briefcase from the bureau in the bedroom. With a slow smile, she said, “It’s the least I could do after practically

holding you hostage last night.”

Sloan grinned. “Believe me, it was no hardship.” She crossed the room and kissed her with practiced deliberation, only drawing back when she began to feel the sharp edge of arousal. She had work to do, and she couldn’t afford to be distracted, even by something as pleasant as this. “Thanks again, Claudia,” she whispered and walked quickly from the room.

Within minutes, she was on the expressway and punching in the number to her office on her cell phone.

“Sloan Security,” a familiar male voice answered.

“I’m running late,” Sloan said sharply by way of greeting.

“Good morning to you, too. What’s your ETA?”

“I don’t know. I’m sitting in a two-mile jam-up on I-76. Is the client there yet?”

Hearing the edge of annoyance in Sloan’s voice despite the telltale crackle of the cellular connection, Jason McBride glanced across the room at the glacially cool countenance of the 9:00 a.m. appointment. “Uh-huh.”

What he thought was *uh-oh*. His associate did not like surprises, and it was his job to prevent them. He seemed to have dropped the ball, and his timing couldn’t have been worse. There was something about the expression on their prospective client’s face that suggested the upcoming meeting would be anything but routine. “Look—”

“Damn it,” Sloan snapped, slowing for yet another bottleneck on an expressway that hadn’t been express for twenty years. “There’s not much I can do about it. Get him a donut or something.” With that, she disengaged the cell phone, tossed it next to her battered leather briefcase on the passenger seat of her Porsche Carrera, and tried for an end run around the long line of traffic in front of her. *Just what I get for not driving home last night.*

But the dinner meeting had run late, her companion had been charming, and the invitation to stay the night had been *so* eloquently phrased. Plus, the physical enticements had been too hard to ignore. With the project nearly completed, all systems up and operational, she saw no reason not to mix a little pleasure with her business. Not exactly routine, but hardly out of the ordinary either.

*And, she thought with a grin, I could hardly complain about the hospitality.*

Unfortunately, she hadn't planned on an early-morning appointment, expecting instead to drive home, shower, and change before going in to her office. Being her own boss had many advantages, not the least of which was setting her own hours. However, when, out of habit, she'd checked her messages from Claudia's bedroom phone upon awakening, Jason's cheerful tenor informed her that he had scheduled an appointment for her first thing that morning.

So, instead of a leisurely breakfast and another few hours of very enjoyable sex, she'd settled for a hasty shower and rush-hour traffic. And now, here she sat, breathing exhaust and getting hotter by the second.

"Son of a bitch," she growled. With a quick turn of the wrist, she angled out and around a stalled SEPTA bus, riding the shoulder until she passed most of the congestion. Being late was not acceptable. This client had requested an urgent consultation, and even though it usually took Jason weeks to find an opening in her schedule for a new project, he'd made an exception for once. He hadn't even had time to send a fax to her laptop with the usual summary he prepared before an interview.

"High-profile corporation, big-time connections, and money is *not* an issue," was precisely how he had phrased it in his *do not argue with me* voice when he'd informed her of the meeting.

Sloan trusted his judgment completely, which was why she let him manage everything about her business except the work she actually did. He handled the details behind the scenes and occasionally assisted her with larger projects on site. He was an able technician himself, and they didn't need a large staff. *She* was the talent they brokered, and any additional help she needed was subcontracted out.

"You'll want this one," was the final part of his message.

She couldn't help but wonder what made him so sure.



Michael Lassiter looked up from the *New York Times* business section as the office door banged open and a black-haired woman in a well-cut leather blazer, snowy white T-shirt, and blue jeans hurried in, halting in front of the reception desk on the other side of the room. In one appraising glance, Michael took stock. *Well built, five-ten, one forty or so—probably a couple of years younger than me. Twenty-nine,*

*maybe?*

The slender blond man behind the wide walnut desk swiveled away from his monitor toward the commotion, a mixture of faint disapproval and reluctant fondness playing over his face.

“Sorry,” the woman called to him before turning to Michael. An instant’s confusion skimmed over the surface of her sculpted features, then she stepped forward, her right hand extended. “Ms. Lassiter? Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m J. T. Sloan.”

The unexpectedly low melodious voice, the piercing deep violet eyes, the strong clear planes of her striking face startled Michael for a second. Just as quickly, she recovered. She stood, automatically smoothing the slight creases in her navy silk skirt. “No trouble, Ms. Sloan.”

“Just Sloan,” Sloan replied with the devil-may-care grin, deep dimples and all, that had melted many a heart. It didn’t seem to have this effect on Michael Lassiter, however. Her ice blue eyes and perfect features showed not the slightest hint of warming as she returned the handshake.

“Why don’t we get comfortable in my office?” Sloan indicated the double doors at the far side of the reception area. Glancing at Jason, who was watching them with the attention of a Phillies fan at the World Series, she queried, “Coffee?”

It wasn’t a request. Jason knew she was aggravated because she wasn’t prepared for the meeting...or the client. With a sigh, he rose to brew a fresh pot. How was he supposed to know that Michael wasn’t a Michael? All he’d had time to do was check the corporate profile—that was more than enough incentive to schedule the damn appointment. Hell, he didn’t even have time for the usual deep background searches.

In the private office beyond the reception area, Sloan settled behind the antique oak desk that she’d painstakingly moved from her parents’ home almost a decade previously. It had gone with her first to Washington, D.C., then into storage while she’d dropped out of sight for several months, and finally to her company’s office in the section of Philadelphia traditionally known as Old City.

The district had once been dominated by factories but had recently become the focus of highly publicized renovations. Now there were trendy restaurants and much-sought-after loft apartments interspersed with warehouses and historic landmarks. Her building was a four-story converted warehouse, part of the second and third floors serving as

office and work space, the top floor as her living area. “Please, have a seat. I just need a minute before we begin.”

“Fine.”

Michael Lassiter chose a leather swivel armchair facing Sloan. Large floor-to-ceiling windows to her left gave a panoramic view across the Delaware River into the state beyond. The office was comfortably functional, a deep blue carpet warming the high-ceilinged space, but Michael didn’t get the feeling that the dark-haired woman seated behind the desk spent much time in the room. The desktop was unadorned by any personal mementos, its surface free of clutter, and the off-white walls were decorated with stylish yet oddly impersonal-seeming black-and-white photographs. There was nothing to give her a sense of the woman who headed Sloan Security, other than she seemed all business. *Which is just exactly why I’m here. If she can do what her reputation says she can, I don’t need to know who she is.*

Sloan glanced at the open file folder on her desk. It contained the data intake sheet for new clients—basic information such as name, company address, reason for initial interview, and a box for notations at the bottom of the first page where any unusual or particularly salient information could be added for quick review. She noted that the company name was Innova Designs. In the notation box Jason had typed “CEO, Michael Lassiter.”

Nowhere on the page did she see any indication that Michael Lassiter was a woman. Not that that fact mattered per se, but she liked to have as much background as possible when she was interviewing a prospective client. Information was power, and she was the one deciding if the client was worthy of her attentions—not the other way around. Another advantage of working for herself—she could choose her projects, and answered to no one but the clients she accepted.

When she looked up from the paperwork, she found the woman in the impeccably tailored suit observing her with unapologetic frankness. Deliberately, Sloan stared back. The double-breasted jacket was open to reveal a silk shell that was fashionable without being flashy. She checked Michael Lassiter’s hands, which were folded loosely in her lap. No wedding ring. In fact, no rings of any kind. What jewelry she did wear was understated and tastefully elegant. A small gold hoop in each earlobe reflected the highlights in her naturally golden, exquisitely styled collar-length hair, and gray pearls accentuated the smooth pale skin of her neck.

Sloan's gaze moved upward until their eyes met. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," she heard herself repeating, wondering what it was about this woman that had put her off her stride.

She was used to corporate types, although usually they were men. Aggressive, arrogant, habitually engaged in one-upmanship. She wasn't easily impressed and was even less easily intimidated. And she was neither at the moment, but neither was she completely comfortable. Michael Lassiter was beautiful, like a precious *objet d'art* sequestered in a museum—separated from the observer by velvet ropes, bulletproof glass, and discreet but formal signs reading "Hands Off" posted nearby.

"That's quite all right. These things happen," Michael conceded with a small shrug.

*But not to you, I'll bet.* To break the silence that felt strangely hypnotic, Sloan pulled a lined yellow legal tablet from a stack near her right hand and picked up her fountain pen. "Tell me, what is it, precisely, that you need?"

Michael Lassiter smiled, a small tight smile that did not reach her eyes. "I believe that's what *you'll* need to tell me."

"Fair enough. Why don't we start with a little bit of background? This involves your company, I presume?"

For the first time, her client appeared uncertain. A brief flicker of something that might have been pain rose in her eyes and then was quickly extinguished. She straightened slightly and met Sloan's eyes.

"Six years ago, my husband and I founded Innova Designs. We were fortunate to have a number of our early pilot projects picked up by several international corporations, and the collaborations turned out to be gratifyingly successful. The company has...grown, shall we say, rapidly over the past three years. We now employ several hundred people and have satellite offices in New York, Chicago, and Washington."

*And you're threatening to break into the Fortune 500 if you keep escalating at your present rate of growth.* While Michael Lassiter was talking, Sloan had skimmed a recent prospectus Jason had managed to find on short notice, along with synopses of public financial reports for the firm. Innova Designs was a think tank—an array of the brightest and the best minds from industry, technology, the arts, and many other areas. The purpose of such companies was to analyze market trends, predict potential growth, and assist—or convince—others to finance and build new products. Success for a firm like Innova depended on

the accuracy and ingenuity of the designers' vision. They didn't make products themselves; they created futures.

A knock on the door interrupted Michael's explanation, and both women waited in silence as Jason served their coffee.

"Go on," Sloan prompted after he'd left. "What kind of problem are you having?"

"May I assume this meeting is confidential?"

Sloan raised her head slowly, noting for the first time the subtle signs of strain—the too-rigid posture, the slight clenching of a very lovely jaw, the faint lines of fatigue around searching blue eyes. "I'm not an attorney, Ms. Lassiter, or a priest. But client confidentiality is my business. If, at the end of our discussion, we decide our needs are not compatible, whatever you've told me will be forgotten."

It was Michael's turn to scrutinize. She knew of Sloan Security by reputation, of course, which was why she had chosen the firm. Endorsements from previous clients and various official institutions had all been favorable. Now she studied the woman behind the desk, noting her imperturbable expression, her inquiring eyes. Sloan herself was known to be extremely efficient, resourceful, and highly capable. There were also those who suggested she was competitive and ruthless, but that did not concern Michael.

Personal information regarding the head of Sloan Security was more difficult to ascertain. Sloan's past was a cipher, and even those who purported to know her well had no knowledge of her history prior to her first appearance in the city several years ago. Rumors abounded, with speculation that she had been everything from a CIA agent deep undercover to a criminal engaged in nefarious underworld dealings.

Although young for her position, she was reputed to be at the top of her field. And Michael had a feeling she would need the best. She had no doubt that the woman watching her with faintly hooded eyes was capable of providing the service she required. The question was whether she could be trusted with the confidences.

The silence lengthened, each watching the other carefully. Violet and blue, fire and ice—they each sought something in the other's gaze. Finally, Michael spoke.

"This is not yet general knowledge, but in the very near future, I intend to divorce my husband and dissolve our business association."

It was not at all what Sloan had anticipated. Corporate cases like this were almost always about low-level security breaches—Web site

defacements, denial-of-service attacks, or internal glitches. But the urgency of the appointment and this unexpected introduction warned her that this was not going to be an ordinary case.

“Does he know?”

“Not yet.” Michael kept her eyes on Sloan’s face, waiting for some reaction. All she saw was attention. “Innova is currently in the midst of negotiating several new long-range contracts with businesses in both the public and private sectors. Because of that, the next few months are a critical time for us. Obviously, I am concerned that Innova continue to be perceived as a stable enterprise. No one wants to invest in a company that is in flux, and if information such as this were made public before the company has been restructured, we could lose important clients. Businesses have gone under for less reason.”

“I can see why you’re worried about a leak.”

Sloan was beginning to understand the reason for the emergency consultation as well as the signs of stress in the woman seated across from her. Even the rumor of destabilization of a fast-growing company such as Innova would have a major negative impact on Lassiter’s ability to secure new market acquisitions. What Sloan had just been told did not require further comment. The significance of the revelation spoke for itself. Nevertheless, she had a feeling this was only part of the issue.

“I understand that you need to accomplish this transition with as little fanfare as possible,” she said, and waiting a beat, added, “What else do you need?”

“You mean, why am I really here?” Michael asked with a slight smile, very aware that Sloan was waiting for her to reveal the true cause of her concern. *Most people would have taken my explanation at face value. Certainly most men would have. But she knows there’s something else. I’ll have to be very careful with her or I’ll have no secrets left.*

“The reasons for confidentiality are obvious. However,” she continued smoothly, “the reason that I need to engage your services is that I expect my husband will attempt to take control of the company—by any means available to him.”

“Physical means?” Sloan asked quickly, her eyes narrowing. “That’s not the kind of security I provide.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Michael replied just as quickly. “I don’t even think in those terms. I am...” She hesitated, trying to describe what she

very rarely thought about—herself. “I am a theoretician, Ms. Sloan. I deal in ideas, concepts. I need to ensure that my current projects and future proposals are protected. Without them, I have no value and Nicholas, my...husband, may very well be able to convince the board of directors that I’m replaceable.”

*No value beyond your ideas. Odd way of describing yourself.* Sloan dropped her fountain pen on the legal pad and leaned back in her leather swivel chair. She steepled her fingers in front of her chest and thought for a moment before saying quietly, “Let me see if I understand this. You’re presently CEO of one of the country’s most rapidly growing design technology firms. Your husband, Nicholas...Lassiter?”

“Burke.”

“He’s...what? Chief operating officer?”

At Michael’s affirming nod, Sloan continued. “You intend to divorce him and keep the company on an even keel in the process... until you replace him with someone you trust, I presume.” She raised an eyebrow, and again, Michael nodded. “You need *me* to ensure that your internal systems are secure and that your operations are tamperproof. And you expect me to do this without rousing suspicion while you execute this coup?”

Michael smiled thinly, her blue eyes troubled. “I’m not sure I’d call this a *coup*, Ms. Sloan,” she said somewhat testily. “This company was my conception and was primarily funded from my personal resources. It’s just that I’ve always been much better at theory than management. The vision, I suppose you could say, has been mine. My husband’s natural talents have been in recruitment and marketing. I can assure you, I’m planning nothing illegal or even particularly underhanded. I intend only to protect my work from assault, which is exactly what I anticipate will happen as soon as my attorneys contact my husband.”

Sloan leaned forward, picking up her pen. “What’s the timetable?”

“I believe that may very well be up to you,” Michael replied. “I don’t want to proceed until I’m certain that ongoing projects and the blueprints for future growth cannot be pirated or compromised in some way. Until that time, I intend to continue with the status quo.”

At that, Sloan looked up in surprise, studying the cool, composed blond across from her. Despite the small signs of tension, Michael Lassiter was remarkably controlled. What she had so calmly outlined

amounted to nothing short of war within the arena of the financial world. It was the kind of confrontation that could lead to personal ruin and, indeed, had in many instances. The fact that she was married to the man she was about to engage in an all-out conflict did not appear to trouble her. Sloan wondered briefly if Michael would also continue the personal relationship with her husband as if nothing were amiss. “Are you still...living with him?”

When Michael hesitated, color rising in her face, Sloan added quickly, “I’m sorry. I only ask because I’m trying to get a sense of the playing field here. Hostile takeovers can get messy, and—”

“No, that’s quite all right,” Michael interjected, her mask of imperturbability firmly in place. “We are still together, yes.”

“Thank you.” Sloan was oddly disturbed by the information. It gave her pause to think of anyone compromising herself privately for the sake of eventual financial supremacy. It also struck her as merely a form of prostitution and somehow much too demeaning for this obviously accomplished woman. *I’d better just stick to business. And what Michael Lassiter does in her private life is most definitely not part of my business.*

Closing the file folder, Sloan added, “You’ll need a cover story as to why I’m spending so much time in your corporate headquarters. I’ll also need to visit each of your branch divisions, and I’ll have to meet with your present systems operators. Also, I’ll need unrestricted access to all levels of program applications and data acquisition.”

“Am I to take it that you accept the assignment?” Michael Lassiter seemed to relax infinitesimally, letting a small sigh escape.

Sloan shrugged. “We haven’t talked about the contract conditions or costs yet. Depending on the current state of your system, the software and consultant fees could run into six figures.”

“Those details are inconsequential to me.” Michael stood and stretched out a slim elegant hand. When Sloan rose, taking it wordlessly, she added, “What I require is your discretion and your talent.”

“Of that I can assure you,” Sloan responded.

The hand in hers was remarkably warm, and she felt a slight reluctance to relinquish it. When she did, Michael Lassiter turned and left the room without another word.



An hour later, a knock drew her attention away from the reports she'd been rather unsuccessfully reviewing. Her mind kept returning to the meeting she'd had with Michael Lassiter—bits of conversation and fleeting images kept obscuring the data she was trying to absorb. Something about the woman affected her so strongly that it interfered with her concentration as nothing ever did. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was.

*Maybe it's the mixture of determination and discomfort in her eyes. She's going to do what she needs to do, but it's hurting her just the same. Jesus, why do I care? It's all just part of the game.*

"Permission to enter?" a lightly mocking voice requested, accompanied by another knock.

"What?" Sloan responded irritably.

Jason stood in the open doorway, leaning one slim hip against the doorjamb, his arms crossed over his chest. His tailored trousers, monochromatic shirt and tie, and glossy European loafers screamed aspiring businessman-on-the-rise. His model-perfect, blond good looks verged on being too pretty for a man, but his intense blue eyes and tightly muscled physique added just the right amount of masculinity. "Time to compare notes."

"Come on in," Sloan replied in a tone that suggested she knew she had no choice in the matter.

"Sorry about the unexpected meeting."

"No problem."

He regarded her with one eyebrow cocked. "And should I even ask where you spent last evening?"

Sloan fixed him with a stony glare as she tossed the report aside. "No, I don't think so."

"Talkative, aren't we? Testy, too." He walked farther into the room. "Must be sleep deprivation."

He tried unsuccessfully to hide a frown, because he hadn't really intended to browbeat her about her private life. It was just that he'd hoped by now she'd show signs of settling down, but she never did. With each new woman in her life she seemed even less interested in anything serious. It wouldn't have bothered him so much if it weren't for the shadows in her eyes that had nothing to do with fatigue. He managed to hold his tongue, reminding himself that he wasn't doing much better in that department himself.

“Can we save the lecture for another time?” Sloan rubbed her face with both hands, aware for the first time that she *was* tired. It wasn’t just the lack of sleep. If anything, sex usually relaxed her. Unfortunately, she’d learned through bitter experience that such pleasures often came at a price. Claudia Carson had made it very clear that she wanted to see more of her. That idea wasn’t an altogether unpleasant one by any means, but the intensity in Claudia’s voice had set off alarms.

*I will have to be very certain that the ground rules are clear before things become unnecessarily complicated. Sex is one thing, but—*

“What about the client this morning? Did we at least get the new contract?”

“Yes, we got it,” Sloan answered somewhat churlishly and then immediately regretted her tone. She saw the hurt in his eyes and reminded herself that they were friends. “I’m sorry,” she sighed. “You’re right. I really *didn’t* get much sleep.”

“And I suppose that’s *my* fault?” Jason flopped down in the chair Michael Lassiter had occupied earlier that day, deciding from the homicidal look on his associate’s face that it would be safer to change the subject. “So tell me about the Ice Queen.”

Sloan skewered him with another stare meant to do damage. When he squirmed a bit and mouthed a silent *Please*, hands clutched to his heart, she finally laughed.

“She’s a client, Jason, not a date.”

“Oh please. Like there’s a big difference,” Jason retorted, but this time his tone was uncritical.

Sloan shook her head, still smiling. “So now and then I see one of our clients...ah...socially, shall we say? It’s never interfered with business. And besides, I can assure you that won’t be happening with this one.”

Jason wondered if he didn’t detect a slight hint of regret in Sloan’s voice, but he wisely chose not to comment upon it. Instead, he asked playfully, “And why exactly is that?”

“First and very foremost, she’s straight,” Sloan said with finality. Although she probably deserved her reputation as someone who never lacked for female companionship and never made a long-term commitment, she did have some limits. Dating straight women was definitely one of them.

“Things can always change,” Jason commented.

“Not this time.”

It was clear that for the moment at least, the matter was closed. Jason knew that if he continued to push the issue, Sloan was likely to lose her famous temper. He’d been on the other end of that enough times not to want to provoke her.

“Okay, I yield,” he said. “No more business talk. Are you coming to the show tomorrow night?”

“Of course I’m coming. You know I love to watch Jasmine perform.”

After almost five years, Sloan still found it hard to believe that the buttoned-up, straightlaced man she had first met in the esteemed halls of Justice in D.C. was actually the sultry, sexy siren he became onstage. His transition was so complete that she sometimes wondered how he managed to keep Jasmine under wraps as successfully as he did. She was one of the few people who knew them both, and, secretly, she had to admit to a slight bit of sexual titillation when Jasmine flirted with her. It was bad enough that Jason was a guy; the fact that he was straight made it even more confusing.

She grinned. By now she should know better than to try to sort out her own conflicting reactions. “Besides, I haven’t seen Jasmine in weeks.”

“Good”—he rose and carefully shook out the perfect creases in his trousers—“because she just bought a new dress.” He winked and for a second, Jasmine’s beautiful face flickered beneath the surface of his good-looking male countenance. “And I just *know* you’ll like it.”

Sloan laughed again. “Why don’t you go pretend to work for a while and give me a break? Don’t we have something—a background check on someone, a network to hack into—*something* that needs your attention?”

“I suppose I could start the file on Lassiter,” he admitted, and finally left her in peace.

She sat staring after him, her mind returning once again to the interview with Michael Lassiter. It wasn’t the most difficult job she had ever undertaken. With all the major corporations and most small businesses dependent on computers, calls concerning hacking, software piracy, and network disruptions were daily occurrences. Corporate espionage was one of the largest financial drains on most international organizations, mostly because it went unreported for fear

of undermining public confidence in the company.

It never ceased to amaze Sloan that most people who were critically dependent upon computer networks knew almost nothing about them, and even those who did rarely took the time to ensure that they were totally tamperproof. She had recognized the need for Internet security services well ahead of the pack. Now that there were almost daily news reports detailing the ease with which systems could be entered and altered, computer security was a hot area. She had foreseen the need, and her previous experience made her perfect for the work.

What she found both intriguing and troubling about this particular assignment was her employer. Michael Lassiter struck her as a woman who was completely capable of living with the consequences of her decisions. But once or twice, Sloan thought she had seen a flicker of fear in the other woman's eyes. For no reason she cared to explore, that bothered her.