

SECRETS IN THE STONE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

A harsh glare pierced the murky depths of the tunnel, accompanied by a rumbling roar that reverberated in Adrian's bones. Frigid air carrying the scent of snow blasted her, and she flinched back, blinded by the light. Bodies pressed close around her, whispers of anticipation hammered at her eardrums, and she struggled to shut out the disorienting tumult as the northbound Acela screeched to a halt at the platform.

Gripping her briefcase, overnight bag, and a cardboard cup of take-out coffee, Adrian let herself be carried by the press of the crowd into the business-class car, where she finally dropped into a window seat with an overwhelming rush of relief. She'd never been good in crowds—too many seething emotions, too many unwanted caresses masquerading as innocent touches. Determined to dispel the lingering discomfort, she pulled several files from her briefcase and concentrated on her work, the one constant she could count on to ease her disquiet.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?"

"No. Please, sit down," Adrian said automatically. She removed her briefcase from the adjacent seat to make room for the woman standing in the aisle. The blonde reminded her of Kim Basinger in *L.A. Confidential*, voluptuous in a way that contemporary women seemed to eschew. Lustrous shoulder-length honey blond hair, full red lips, and a sensuous figure that her tailored two-piece suit did nothing to temper. The curve of her hips and tapered thighs were obvious beneath the gray silk skirt, and the deep vee of the jacket, while modest enough for business attire at first glance, nevertheless gave a titillating hint of cleavage.

Adrian's pulse kicked, and the response surprised her. She didn't

ordinarily find herself attracted to women who reminded her of the sophisticated, high-powered denizens of the world she'd grown up in. The train lurched forward and she grabbed for the coffee she'd placed on the narrow pull-down tray in front of her. She muttered an oath under her breath as a stream of scalding liquid sluiced over her hand.

"Oh, I am so sorry," the blonde said in a smooth, melodic voice that matched the honey of her hair. To Adrian's complete consternation, her wrist was grasped and the woman cradled it in her lap as she sat down, murmuring, "Here, let me see."

"It's fine, really." Adrian tried to withdraw her hand, aware of a charge of current, so cold it nearly burned, dancing up her arm.

"You're going to blister." The woman pulled a silk handkerchief from a stylish black leather purse with one hand while her slender fingers continued to clasp Adrian's wrist. She dabbed at a few drops of liquid before they could reach Adrian's white cuff, then raised green-gold eyes to Adrian's, her sensuous mouth curving into a flirtatious smile. "I don't usually inflict bodily harm before introductions. I'm Melinda Singer."

"Adrian Oakes." Adrian finally extricated her fingers, ignoring the urge to shake her hand to dispel the disquieting tingle left behind. She'd always been hypersensitive to unexpected touch, especially from strangers, but she couldn't remember the last time she'd had such a vivid reaction to anyone. Melinda Singer's touch shimmered throughout her body with the intensity of an intimate caress.

"I hope I didn't ruin your work." Melinda gestured to the yellow legal tablet covered with scrawls and dotted with coffee stains on Adrian's tray while casually surveying her traveling companion. Adrian Oakes was quite attractive in an entirely unstudied way. Her clothes, while informal, were expensive. The scuffed brown boots beneath the hem of her jeans were designer, as was the white cotton pullover. She was more deeply tanned than Melinda would have expected for late January, and the thin, pale crinkles at the corners of her sapphire eyes suggested she'd recently spent a fair amount of time squinting into the sun. Playing tennis possibly, or golf, on some Caribbean island. The smooth, unblemished surface of her fingers indicated she didn't occupy her time outside doing manual labor.

Melinda imagined her lounging poolside at a resort or country club. She indulged herself with the pleasurable vision of the striking blonde

in several even more interesting scenarios, all of which involved very little clothing, champagne and caviar, and an assortment of playthings. Melinda crossed her legs, escalating the tension between her thighs, enjoying the thrum of arousal. She'd been working too hard lately and had neglected her more personal appetites for far too long.

"I was just working on some notes," Adrian said, hastily turning the smeared pages over to a blank sheet.

"Are you a college student?"

Adrian flushed under the scrutiny. She wasn't a stranger to the attentions of women, or men, but this woman's gaze bordered on avaricious. Reflexively, she edged closer to the window side of her seat, putting a few inches between her leg and Melinda's warm thigh. Business-class train seats were hardly roomy, and even though she'd gotten used to close proximity with strangers through her constant travel, she still was never completely comfortable with anyone in her personal space. This afternoon, for some reason, she was even more sensitive. She had no idea why she sensed danger from Melinda Singer, because the woman had done nothing other than appraise her with candid interest. Adrian didn't enjoy game playing in her relationships or any other aspect of her life, so she wasn't quite sure why Melinda's direct approach should bother her.

"College was quite a while ago." Adrian smiled ruefully. She knew she looked young, especially without makeup and with her hair carelessly tethered into a loose ponytail by a plain blue scrunchie. Still, at thirty-three, she also knew when she was being flattered. She didn't want to be pleased by the attention, but her breath came a little faster nevertheless.

"Let me guess, then," Melinda mused. "Lawyer." She tapped her chin with a manicured nail. "No. Not uptight enough."

Adrian chuckled, drawn in despite herself.

"Doctor." Melinda tilted her head, her gaze drifting down Adrian's body, then back to her face. "I don't think so. Not arrogant enough." She lifted Adrian's hand again and turned it over, palm up, and stroked a single fingertip down the center. "Not a painter or sculptor."

"How can you tell?" Adrian asked, her fingers trembling. Melinda's hand was warmer than it had been a few minutes ago and her touch had changed from soothing to seductive. Adrian had discovered at a very early age that she could almost read a person's thoughts from physical

contact. She'd once heard a paranormal psychologist refer to it as touch telepathy. She wasn't certain she believed in that, but she'd learned to rely on intuition. And right now her instincts were telling her that Melinda Singer was a powerful, complex, and unpredictable woman. And a very sexual one. A heavy, engorged sensation churned in the pit of her stomach and her thighs tightened. The signs were unmistakable and completely out of character. She rarely responded so quickly even when she was a willing participant, and certainly never to a virtual stranger.

Smiling, Melinda traced her index finger the length of Adrian's. "No nicks or scars. You don't sculpt." She turned Adrian's hand over and brushed her thumb over Adrian's fingernail. "Not even the faintest hint of pigment, and I've never seen a painter without a little streak of color left behind somewhere." She placed Adrian's hand back on Adrian's thigh, pressing lightly for just a second before withdrawing her hand.

Despite her relief at being released, Adrian sensed a surge of disappointment, as if her body yearned for the return of that seductive caress. Oh yes, Melinda Singer was dangerous.

Adrian forced a light note into her voice. "You are very perceptive."

"It's an occupational habit," Melinda said. "I'm an art dealer. Perception is my business."

"Image is everything?"

"Not necessarily, but it's never wise to underestimate it." Melinda unbuttoned the top two buttons of her jacket, revealing a thin cream shell hugging the swell of her full breasts. "You write, don't you?"

Adrian caught her breath. Melinda's intense attention was almost as compelling as her touch. "Very good."

"A novelist, then."

"No. I freelance. Articles and exposés."

"Ah. An adventurous spirit."

"I suppose that's one way of looking at it," Adrian said, unable to keep the irony and bitterness from her voice.

Her parents had viewed her career choice in a somewhat less complimentary light. When she'd decided to study journalism instead of business, they'd pronounced her action adolescent rebellion. After

graduation when she'd refused to join her brother and sister in the family banking industry, her father had called it stubborn resistance while her mother merely deemed her foolish. Now, ten years later, her father made no secret that he believed she was wasting her talent, and her mother was convinced she had ruined her life. After all, Claire Oakes bemoaned, what man wanted to marry a woman who traipsed all over the world at a moment's notice, chasing some wild idea? Adrian had made it perfectly clear that marrying a man was not in her future, regardless of her career choice, but that had little impact on her mother's angst. The issue of her sexuality was quietly and unrelentingly ignored.

"And what about you?" Adrian asked, hoping to divert attention from herself and her own disquieting thoughts. "You have a gallery in the city?"

"Yes. On the Lower East Side. The Osare Gallery."

Adrian knew it. Upscale, exclusive. The place every young artist wanted to be seen. A showing at Osare was practically guaranteed to launch an artist's career. "Great name. *Daring*."

Melinda raised a brow. "You speak Italian. What else?"

"Oh, I've picked up a smattering of a few other languages in my travels."

"Beautiful *and* accomplished."

"Are you traveling on business?" Adrian asked, ignoring the compliment. She was very glad they weren't touching at the moment, because she didn't need extrasensory perception to tell her exactly what was in Melinda Singer's mind. She was no blushing virgin and no stranger to an enjoyable sexual encounter between consenting adults, but she wasn't used to her body responding completely against her will. She was used to controlling when and how she gave in to desire, and exactly how much. Now Melinda was plucking her sexual strings and she was powerless to stop her. She knew she was overreacting, but the spiraling tension between her thighs was hard to ignore.

"Hopefully," Melinda said, her tone speculative, "both business *and* pleasure. I'm on my way to a little town on the Hudson you've probably never heard of. A place called Ford's Crossing."

Adrian's throat tightened and she shivered with a quick flash of unease. "I *have* heard of it. In fact, that's where I'm headed."

“Really.” Melinda’s eyes flashed, and for a heartbeat she looked like a great hungry cat. “How very fortunate.”



“Would you like to share a cab?” Melinda asked as the train pulled into the station an hour and a half north of New York City and fifteen miles from Ford’s Crossing. Although it was only a few minutes after five p.m., the sky was completely dark with so much cloud cover even the half-moon was obscured. A heavy snow was predicted, and a few flakes floated past the windows.

“Sure,” Adrian said, seeing no reason to be unfriendly. They hadn’t talked much for the rest of the journey, each of them engrossed in work. Nevertheless, she had been hyperaware of Melinda just a few inches away for the entire trip. Her scent was unlike any perfume she’d ever encountered, a subtle, simmering blend of woody fragrances tempered by an undercurrent of burning leaves. When she drew in a breath and absorbed the heady aroma, her skin tingled with a subtle wave of excitement. Still, she was determined to ignore her inexplicable reactions.

“Wonderful,” Melinda said. “I’m staying at a hotel...the...”

“Heritage House,” Adrian finished for her. “It’s the only hotel in the village.”

“That’s the one.”

They didn’t speak for a few minutes while they gathered their luggage and made their way onto the platform with the one other departing passenger. As they approached the front of the stone station, Melinda asked, “Are you at the hotel also? Perhaps you would join me for dinner tonight.”

“Thanks,” Adrian said, “but I am actually staying at my grandmother’s. House sitting, really. She decided on New Year’s Eve that the winter had gone on quite long enough and she would flee south until it’s warmer. I volunteered to look after the place.”

“For how long?”

“Pretty much as long as I want to. My grandmother’s definition of warm weather generally means July.” Adrian waved to the single cab idling in the lot and after several seconds, it chugged toward them. “I’ve got deadlines and a few new ideas for upcoming projects I need

to pull together. But my track record for staying in one place for four or five months isn't great."

"Well, you're not far from the city." Melinda nonchalantly brushed a hand down Adrian's arm. "In case you have a yen for excitement."

"I'll keep that in mind," Adrian said. She had a condo in Chelsea that she'd owned since shortly after college, but it was really more of a place to land than home. Her parents lived on the Upper East Side and her brother and sister hadn't migrated far from them. Adrian had returned in November after having spent eight weeks with a photographer friend in the Middle East, writing copy to accompany the images of women and children displaced by the war. She hadn't been back in the country for more than two weeks and her mother was arranging her social schedule. After suffering through a dinner party seated next to the son of one of her father's business associates who apparently thought he was her date, thanks to her mother, she'd jumped at the opportunity to escape to her grandmother's.

She was actually looking forward to it. She'd always enjoyed the few weeks each summer the family had spent vacationing here when she was young. The slow, quiet pace was so different than the city; she used to spend hours on her own, wandering in the surrounding woods or traipsing along the river, exploring and daydreaming. She'd never minded that her brother and sister preferred each other's company to hers, because she'd never really had all that much in common with them. She'd been a dreamer, longing for a glimpse of something new, imagining faraway places and exotic adventures. Her older brother Todd and her younger sister Susan were much more like her parents. They enjoyed the social life of the city and the glitter and prestige that went along with belonging to one of the notable families. There'd been a time when she was young when Adrian had wondered if she hadn't been born into the wrong family. Maybe switched at birth, like a changeling.

"What about dinner?" Melinda asked, resting her hand in the center of Adrian's back. "Can I tempt you?"

Oh, you probably could, Adrian thought, because she'd been tempted for hours with absolutely no explanation for it. That was reason enough to take a pass. "Thanks, but it will take me a while to get settled and I don't want to risk the storm coming in."

"Another time, then."

“How long are you staying?”

“Just for the weekend.” Melinda smiled. “Other than the estate sale I plan to attend tomorrow, my time is my own, and I’m adaptable.”

The cab pulled to the curb on Main Street in front of a four-story square brick building with a wide front porch, tall carved double wooden doors, and a row of waist-high iron hitching posts bordering the sidewalk that made it seem as if carriages should be pulling up in front rather than mechanized vehicles.

“Well, I hope your trip is successful,” Adrian said, trying to imagine what kind of sale brought such an exclusive woman to the quaint little town.

“It already has been.” Melinda opened the door, slid out, and then leaned back inside while the driver got her luggage. “As for the rest of it, I have no idea. I’m in search of an artist whose work I saw in the estate listings.”

“Really? Anyone I might’ve heard of?”

“I have no idea. I don’t even know his name.”

Adrian smiled uncertainly. “Well, then. Good hunting.”

“Thank you.” Melinda held out her hand. “By the way, I didn’t get your number.”

Adrian hesitated for just a second, then shook Melinda’s hand and recited her cell phone number.

“Have a pleasant evening,” Melinda said, drawing back from the cab.

“Good night,” Adrian called, closing her hand tightly while trying to ignore the buzz of electricity in her palm. She settled back in the dark confines of the cab, which now seemed to echo with emptiness, as if Melinda had taken something vital with her when she left. If she believed in such things, Adrian would almost think she’d been bewitched.