

An excerpt from Hidden Loyalty:

HIDDEN LOYALTY

Bella was a pro at hiding her emotions, which was absolutely crucial given her current assignment. Her job this weekend? Be the knockout arm candy to the man in the driver's seat next to her. A man who wore sexy and remote as smoothly as James Bond.

Chief Deputy US Marshal Seth Jameson, her boss, her current partner, the man who equally intrigued and infuriated her, had his gaze focused on the road winding ahead of them. Which she knew was misleading. While he *appeared* to be thinking only of mastering the two-tone red and black Bugatti Chiron, she was one hundred percent positive his brain was reviewing and re-reviewing their plan to take into custody the elusive and dangerous fugitive they were tracking.

Their mission was dangerous. Maybe the most dangerous of her career, and she needed to emulate Seth's monumental focus to make sure she acted exactly as she'd been coached.

Tonight's task was to gain access to and arrest the incredibly wealthy, eccentric, and heavily guarded fugitive, Hugo Montenegro. The first step had been achieved. Seth had constructed a fictitious background as a fabulously wealthy antiques trader, one who didn't mind skirting the boundaries of what was legal to commandeer items particularly desired by his clients.

Montenegro's interest was in instruments of death, especially those used in ceremonial deaths or notorious killings. Seth had learned of Montenegro's obsession with one item and had been able to use that as leverage to obtain an invitation to his home.

Bella's job was to appear decorative. Normally when working she maintained a professional demeanor, as dictated by the policy directives of her employer. That meant wearing clothing that projected a positive image of the Marshals Service to the public and that didn't draw attention to herself.

For this assignment, however, lowkey and staid had been thrown out the window. She'd prepared carefully, using the stipend allotted to her to purchase attire that would highlight her assets. She had the makeup and accessories to help create the look she'd wear for their overnight stay.

The kickoff was a formal dinner party, and she thought she'd hit the mark for that event. Her hair was pinned at the back of her head in a sophisticated upsweep that showed off her neck. She'd left a few stray curls artfully arranged for interest. She'd used copious amounts of mascara and eye shadow to accentuate the shape and the color of her eyes, making them appear more exotic and a deeper blue, and she'd selected crimson red lipstick to draw attention to her mouth.

Her long dress gleamed an iridescent blue that reminded her of peacock feathers and showcased her curves, emphasizing the narrowness of her waist before flaring up, and with the help of an amazing bra, lifting her breasts like a sacrificial offering.

When she'd opened the door of her hotel room to Seth's knock, there'd been a moment when she thought he'd been caught off guard. For a span of time that'd been mere seconds, his slate gray eyes had flashed, generating a blistering heat as they'd swept her body from head to toe. By the time that gaze had met hers, any reaction to her appearance was walled off.

The ice man had returned.

His appearance had hit her equally as hard. Lust zapped her with a white-hot jolt when she'd opened her door to find him standing tall and impossibly handsome in black tie. The formalwear should have tamed him, made him look refined and polished, but somehow the smooth black jacket and the stiff white cuffs only served to provide a thin veneer of civilization.

Surreptitiously, she studied his profile which seemed to have been carved of the same granite as the home they were nearing. If she was a pro at hiding her emotions, Seth Jameson was a master. Which made her wonder if she was the only one to sense the strong emotions kept locked behind a fortress wall.

She gave an involuntary start when he reached out to grip her hand.

He raised his arched brow. "You're messing with the ring. It looks like you're not used to it. Montenegro will notice that. He'll notice everything about you."

"That's the point, isn't it? He's hypersexual, and we're counting on him noticing me. I can distract him, and he might say things to me he wouldn't say to you."

"Right." He returned his hand to the steering wheel. A muscle worked his jaw. "You nervous?"

"A little, but you'll be there." His gaze flicked over her and she shrugged. "I'll do my job."

"No doubt."

They followed the curve of the driveway to the front of the house. Big men in dark blazers and sunglasses with mirrored lenses stood at strategic spots—an upstairs balcony, the front entrance, and a walkway that rounded the corner of the house. Hugo Montenegro was taking no chances with his safety. He was a high-value fugitive shining a spotlight on himself this evening.

Seth pulled to a stop behind a high-end Benz. A valet elbowed a colleague to the side for the chance to drive the Bugatti. The young man stepped forward but Seth held him off with a raised hand. Instead of reaching for the door handle, he turned to face her. "We'll be sharing a bedroom."

"We've talked about this, sir. I know what to expect."

"Call me Stephen, even if you think we can't be overheard. You never know where there might be listening devices. We're Stephen Braddock and Anna Novak." Dark brows lowered over his stone-gray eyes. "It's more than the bedroom. We have to display a believable level of intimacy. As you said, Montenegro is hypersexual and he'll be aware of a beautiful

woman. You're supposed to distract him, but that's as far as it goes. The best way to keep him from attempting anything more is for you to stay close to me and make sure he knows you're mine. The story of our recent engagement will support that."

"I'll play my part, *Stephen*. You play yours. If you can convince him that you have what he wants, we'll be able to complete this assignment and go home."

He glanced out the window. "The valet is watching. We start now." He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to hers. The shock made her rigid, then heat flashed and her lips moved under his. The hair at the back of his head, the deliciously thick hair she'd had secret fantasies about, slid through her fingers.

He broke the kiss and moved back, a look crossing his face that was gone in a heartbeat. If she didn't know better, she'd say it was stark hunger. But, as he'd said, acting their parts was critical, and he'd already started.

She gathered her composure, nonchalantly rubbing her thumb across the skin at the corner of his mouth. "Can't have you going to a dinner party with lipstick smeared on your mouth, darling."

"Right. Let's go."