

DEADLY DECEPTION

CHAPTER ONE

The stately Tudor-style home looked much like the others we'd visited, though *visit* might be a stretch. For Sebastian Kirk, *B&Es* and *visits* were synonymous—a quiet evening's entertainment. Come to think of it, *Sebastian Kirk* and *distasteful* were also synonymous. That I was here with him in First Shaughnessy, one of Vancouver's wealthiest neighbourhoods, was temporarily unavoidable.

Homes here started in the three-million-dollar range. Security-company stickers mounted on lawn stakes and ground-floor windows advertised the best targets, and they were abundant.

The entry point I'd chosen was a second-storey dormer. The window's curtains had been left open, and from my vantage point in the maple tree fifteen feet away, the small room beyond appeared unoccupied. That it was nighttime and dark as pitch didn't matter to the likes of us; our night vision was better than a cat's.

Sebastian focused his close-set eyes and adjusted his watch. "I'll give you five minutes."

“This is the last one,” I said. The chill in my voice matched that of the April night, which had already painted a coat of dew on the slate roof. A maple catkin tickled my face as I checked my footing on the tree’s branch.

Sebastian had chosen a sturdy limb on the other side of the big maple’s trunk. Higher up, of course. He pulled his cuff down over his watch. “If you can locate it in five minutes, we’ll move on. Otherwise . . .” He shook his head and turned the corners of his mouth down in a frown worthy of a schoolmaster addressing an errant student. My two-week commitment to his mentorship had dragged on for more than a month. Sebastian had proven harder to get rid of than a cold sore on prom night, and his B&E lessons left me wanting a bath in a vat of antibiotic ointment.

Each home we broke into was a classroom. Over the past few weeks, I’d followed him and his laser pen in silence as he pointed out motion detectors, tripwire laser beams, trigger plates and infrared sensors, most of which were nearly impossible to spot—but Sebastian had the knack. Years of practice, no doubt. I pulled out my phone and set the stopwatch.

“After you,” he said. He’d decided that tonight I would demonstrate how clever a teacher he was, and to spice up the challenge, he’d made sure the owners were home, a detail he knew made me uncomfortable.

Once again, I dissolved my corporeal body into a fine mist and then pushed through the tiny cracks surrounding the dormer window. I sensed Sebastian’s ghosted presence close behind me as I passed through the small room and into the hall beyond. The scent of grilled lamb lingered. I made a mental note of the motion sensor mounted in the corner of the ceiling and drifted toward the only room with double doors. I paused to steady my nerves. Violating the private spaces of strangers didn’t get easier with repetition. I sucked in a breath and wafted through the doors. The king-sized bed’s occupants lay back to back. Soft snores reverberated in

my chest like jackhammers. I looked away from their peaceful faces and made a careful circuit of the room and adjacent ensuite. The closets and artwork concealed nothing.

A home office was the next most likely room for a safe. I slipped back into the hall, relieved to leave the slumbering homeowners behind, and dove headlong down the staircase. Sebastian followed me into the office. A sweep of the room ruled out all likely locations except the desk. Drifting close to the floor, I circled the pedestals. Decorative brass locks protected the drawers on the business side of the desk, but it was the magnetic contact sensor on the opposite side that gave away the safe. It had been cleverly hidden behind a false panel.

“Found it,” I whispered. I solidified the molecules of my ghosted arm to check my time: four minutes and thirty-seven seconds. At four minutes and thirty-eight seconds, my near celebration ended with the jarring blare of an alarm. “Damn it!”

“Shh,” Sebastian hissed. He plucked a pen from the desk and dropped it to the floor.

How could I be so careless? Sebastian would use this to glom on to me for another week. I flung my ghosted form at the office window and hauled my wispy butt to the backyard. A neighbour’s dog had taken up an incessant bark to match the alarm’s shriek. Behind me, one by one, the home’s windows lit up. I drifted across the neighbour’s backyard and over their rooftop to the next street, where we’d parked, and re-formed inside Sebastian’s SUV.

He’d beaten me there. “That was an amateur mistake. I would have expected more of you by now.” The wind had tousled his dark hair. He smoothed it forward with his palm.

I’d been so anxious to beat his time that I’d re-formed my hand and most of my arm to get at my phone. Ghosts could do many things, but in ghosted form, we existed as

molecules, vapour, and neither molecules nor vapour could pick up a phone to check the time. Re-forming had triggered the motion sensor. Sebastian would dangle my error in front of my face for weeks.

“Yes, well, what can I say? B&Es don’t come naturally to me.”

“Your snide remarks are uncalled for. You were sloppy.”

I tugged at the fingertips of my gloves, hating that he was right. He’d demonstrated half a dozen times how little it took to get caught. Not that we’d actually *get* caught; we were Ghosts, after all. But still, the alarm’s abrupt blare had left my heart racing. “I’m sorry. I’ll do better.”

“I hope so. ICO may not know the extent of your *gift*, but they expect an operative who can get them what no one else can. That’s the deal they made. We’re all counting on it.” International Covert Operations was a clandestine government-sanctioned organization that held the secret of our gift hostage. The government, I’d come to learn, took a conveniently tolerant view of blackmail when they were the ones benefiting from it.

“You don’t need to remind me.” I’d been the one who’d exposed the gift. The fact that I’d done it to save a man’s life hadn’t garnered me any leniency. Working for ICO was my penance. I stared through the darkened side window. Early April promised warmer nights. This wasn’t one of them. “Can we go now?”

“You in a hurry?”

“It’s two in the morning. I’m tired, I’m cold and I just ruined the night for a lovely couple who did absolutely nothing to deserve it. So yes, please, I’d like to go home.”

Sebastian exhaled a heavy sigh. “Your performance tonight proves you’re not ready to move on, but I’m willing to negotiate.” Leather creaked as he turned in his seat.

I narrowed my eyes. “Negotiate what?”

“You’ve just set up the perfect scenario for your next lesson, but it has to be tonight.”

“What do you mean?”

“In about an hour, that *lovely couple* back there will be done with the security company and the police. With no sign of an intruder, they’ll assume the pen they find on the office floor inexplicably rolled off the desk and triggered the alarm. After they go back to bed, I’ll show you how to get a combination for a safe without even asking.”

“You want to wake them again?”

He forced a placating smile. “It’s for a good cause.”

I looked away. The man had no conscience. I hoped I’d never turn out like him.

He continued. “Some of these home safes are fireproof, which means they’re airtight. You can’t just ghost an arm, reach in and take what you want.”

I hated when he talked down to me. As if I didn’t know that airtightness was the only thing that stopped us. I stuffed my tongue in my cheek.

“But with a little manipulation, owners generally oblige and open them. I’m prepared to demonstrate tonight.” He checked his watch. “Unless you’d rather repeat this exercise some other time?”

When it came to manipulation, Sebastian was a master.

Two hours passed before the lights in the couple’s bedroom suite went out again, and we waited another hour to be sure they’d settled. Daylight threatened in the eastern sky as we broke in again, this time through the office window.

I drifted to the ceiling to observe, as Sebastian had asked. The moment he re-formed, the alarm wailed in protest. Knowing it was coming didn’t stop me from cringing. Sebastian knelt down and casually cracked open the false panel on the desk. He then ghosted and joined me at the ceiling.

Within moments, a red-faced man with a hairy baby bump burst into the room and flipped on the light. Thank god he'd put some pants on. He rushed past the desk to the windows. After a careful examination of the window sensors, he punched a code into his phone. The alarm cut out. Seconds later, the phone rang. "I'm in the office now. The windows are fine. Must be something wrong with one of the motion sensors." He dragged his hand through dishevelled hair. "No, we've had enough for one night. I'll leave it off. Send someone over to have a look in the morning."

The man hung up and swept a scrutinizing gaze around the room. His wife appeared in the doorway clutching at the lapels of her robe. "What happened?"

The man walked around the desk, toward her. "It's got to be a malfunction. They'll send someone around to fix it."

The woman settled a hand on her husband's chest. Soft pillows cradled her eyes. "I'll never get back to sleep, now," she said. "Would you like me to make a pot of coffee?"

The man's shoulders sagged. "Sure. Might as well."

She turned to leave. He reached for the light switch and, before turning it off, took another look around the room. As his gaze passed over the desk, he hesitated. "Honey," he said, stopping her. "Did you notice the desk panel open on the safe earlier? After the first alarm?"

She stepped back into the room and looked at the offending panel. "No. I thought you checked it."

"So did I." The man returned to the desk. He crouched before the panel and opened it to expose the safe. I sensed Sebastian leave my side. Then the man punched in the code and opened the safe. He flipped through the papers on each shelf and ended with a satisfied *barrumph*. Finished his inspection, he closed the safe's door then straightened, hiking his pants. "It's in order. I mustn't have latched it properly." He draped an arm around his wife's shoulder and

flipped off the light before closing the door. Their footsteps echoed down the hall.

Sebastian and his self-congratulatory smile accompanied me on the drive back to my car, which I'd left at our rendezvous point hours ago. We'd pulled another all-nighter. The sun was up and my bed called.

"Good night," I said, opening the door.

"I'll phone you tonight with a new address."

"I can't tonight. I have a dinner date."

"Oh? Is James in town?"

Sebastian could be so bloody nosy. "No," I said. He raised a questioning eyebrow I didn't dare walk away from. "If you must know, Avery's invited me over." Avery Coulter headed up the local covey. I hated bringing up his name. I owed Avery my life and didn't want Sebastian's focus on him. I jumped out of the SUV.

Sebastian leaned over. "Covey business?"

"No. Just dinner." Sebastian was now a bona fide member of the Vancouver covey. Avery had had little choice but to admit him when Sebastian moved into the jurisdiction, but I didn't like it. The small group of Fliers was my family. We protected the secret of the gift, and one another, and I didn't trust Sebastian. It irritated me that he'd bought his way into my circle of friends.

"Fine. Take the night off. I'll be in touch."

"Thank you," I said, barely keeping the snark out of my voice. He waited until I'd started my old Volvo then pulled out and passed me.

Relief washed over me, as it always did, when I was sure he'd gone. I pulled out my phone and checked for messages. There were none. James didn't usually leave me hanging for this long, but when he was working a case, he cut off communication. I didn't think his being a private investigator, no matter how dedicated he was, justified his no-contact rule, but he disagreed. He insisted it was for the safety of us both and wouldn't budge despite my pleas.

Our relationship didn't spend a lot of time in neutral—we either raced with the needle in the red zone or we idled. We'd been idling for too long. I missed him. Maybe that was his goal. He'd left me with a decision to make: he'd proposed. But his proposal glossed over a shitload of potholes. Living and working in different countries would cause a few flat tires, but the family he wanted to start threatened to break the undercarriage. And his habit of disappearing for weeks on end was a washout big enough to stop a transport.

Working with Sebastian, as disagreeable as the man could be, helped me keep my mind off James and his proposal. There was no denying Sebastian's skills. He'd been born into one of the nine founding coveys, which had ruled our kind through their Tribunal for hundreds of years. He'd been an enforcer for them during his younger years, and a political player ever since. He could deliver a painful *spark* or a deadly *jolt* with no more effort than it took to flick a speck of lint from his sleeve. As off-putting as his lessons were, he'd taught me things I'd never pick up in grad school.

But I needed a night off, and I was looking forward to seeing Avery. I'd only visited with him a few times since Carson Manse and his Redeemers torched my cottage and attacked the Tribunal at Cairabrae. The surviving Redeemers had scattered after the attack. We didn't know their identities, but they knew mine. Association with me had proven dangerous, so when Avery insisted I join him for dinner tonight, I knew it was important to him. After I'd rested, I'd put Sebastian's lessons in motion and make absolutely certain no one tailed me to Avery's place.

Traffic at dawn was light, and I soon pulled into my building's underground parking garage and took the elevator to the top floor. My condo occupied the southwest corner. I closed the door behind me and set the perimeter

alarm. In the bedroom, I pulled on an eye mask to block out the sun and crawled into bed.

When I woke, the eye mask was lost in the sheets and late-afternoon sunlight streamed across the room. With a feline stretch, I turned my face into the warm rays. I couldn't go to Avery's until dark but hated to waste the end of such a beautiful day. I decided to go for a run. But first, a cup of tea. I hopped out of bed and padded to the kitchen.

Molly's baby shower invitation lay on the kitchen counter. She'd taken Cheney's last name, Meyer. It still looked strange to me. She was due the month after next. I'd met Molly in kindergarten. We were best buds until seventh grade, when my father died and my mother moved us to Toronto.

Last year, I'd returned to Summerset, and Molly and I had reconnected. The reunion had been a blast but all too brief. She knew nothing about the gift, or about the Redeemers who targeted Fliers, especially those like me, who were Ghosts; she just knew that one of the men responsible for terrorizing me was still at large. Until that threat was gone, the best thing I could do for her as a friend was to not expose her connection to me. It was the story of my life these days, and it was wearing thin.

I smoothed my hand over the invitation, picked up my tea and wandered to the bank of windows in the living room. Outside, in the planters on the balcony, a tall dandelion bloomed brilliant yellow, hiding among the daffodils. A weed camouflaged—just like the Redeemers. The Tribunal was focused on removing the Redeemer threat, but it seemed to be taking forever. I'd already had to bow out of Molly's wedding, and when she and Cheney bought a sweet little storybook bungalow in Summerset, I'd had to decline their housewarming party invitation. Molly was my little corner of normal, and I wanted her back.

Sadly, that wouldn't happen today. I finished the tea and a cup of yogourt and got ready for my run.

After a warm-up in the fading light on the West Mall, I wound my way east. My goal was eight kilometres. Every laneway and dumpster was familiar to me. I'd used them to practice what James and then Sebastian had taught me. The Redeemers might know my name, but they'd never again get my address. And they'd be snowboarding in hell before I'd ever let myself be taken by them again.

When I reached Sixteenth Avenue, my reversible jacket was pink instead of navy, my leggings were hiked up to my knees, I'd donned a Toronto Blue Jays baseball cap and my white sneakers were camouflaged with black nylon. There were days I actually wished someone would tail me just so I could evade them.

I continued east toward Point Grey and decided to swing past Sebastian's place before turning for home. I'd never been invited inside, but I knew where he and his wife, Kimberley, lived. They'd chosen an expansive glass-and-concrete home that looked like something Arthur Erickson had designed, which was entirely possible considering the neighbourhood.

Mature plantings obscured the home from the road. As I approached their driveway, I spotted a man getting into a sports car at the top of Sebastian's circular drive. My curiosity got the best of me. I passed the driveway and stooped to tie my shoelaces. From under my cap, I watched the nose of the man's black BMW approach the sidewalk. He stroked his goatee as he looked both ways, and then drove off. I didn't know him.

I continued on my run as twilight settled in and all the way home wondered what business the man had with the Kirks.