

## Keys to the Castle

The man sleeping next to her turned softly, falling against her and snuggling in close. Samantha Killian sighed. She feared she was falling in love with James Schills, and that just wouldn't do. The one thing the fire-haired spy wished she could change was for him to know her real name. Well, that and eventually having to kill him. Falling in love with the man you would later have to terminate had a tendency to... complicate things, on an emotional level. Yet another drawback of her profession.

James Schills, all 6 feet and 190 pounds of gorgeous man, was her entrance into DynaCel Technologies, a Phoenix-based company that snatched up foundering communications companies to later sell for profit after a quick retrofit of personnel and equipment. The Agency decided to look closer when they realized the companies were only making enough to keep business, but were making big purchases off the books.

Her new man was an accountant at DynaCel, but if he knew what was going on he hadn't spilled it to her yet. But these things took time, and Samantha had only been with him for about a week. He was sweet, and had a wonderful sense of humor. He loved kittens. All in all, he would be a perfect person for her to marry in other circumstances. Bloody hell.

Samantha gently moved his arm off of her and slipped out of the warm, inviting bed. It was still an hour before sunrise, and she had work to do. She threw on an oversized tee shirt from his closet and padded to the bathroom. Closing and locking the door, she shivered at the touch of cold tile beneath her feet, then rummaged in her cosmetics bag and found the lipstick tube. She turned the cap around three times. An automated dialer connected with the Agency database and her voicemail box. No new messages were waiting for her.

"Rose Asp reporting status normal, 0600, October 13, '05. Schills hasn't given up anything. I am scheduled to go in for my first day of work this morning. Will attempt to hack the database and plant a feed. Signing off." The voicemail clicked at her sign-off phrase and deactivated the lipstick transponder. She replaced it in the cosmetics bag and unlocked the door.

"Jen, can I come in?" James' voice came from the bedroom.

Samantha fell into her Jennifer Worthington persona and opened the door invitingly. "Come on in, lover," she smiled provocatively. Everything in her said to distance herself from any real feelings, but the best acting is mostly truth, or so they said on Broadway. She was going to fall hard, and the landing at the end would probably hurt. Screw it, she thought, stripping off her shirt. You only live once. James' eyes widened as he slipped into the bathroom and closed the door.

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Rex Foster, handler of troublesome agents, pressed the play button for Rose Asp's voicemail box. "Rose Asp reporting status normal, 0600, October 13, '05. Schills hasn't given up anything. I am scheduled to go in for my first day of work this morning. Will attempt to hack the database and plant a feed. Signing off."

"Sounds like she has her in," he said to the man behind him, "but I'm worried. Our hidden camera has footage of her after he leaves for work every day, just sitting there looking dejected. I think she has feelings for him."

Randolph Wingate, aging founding member of the Agency, appraised him with a sideways glance from his piercing blue eyes. "How can you be sure she isn't just that good, Rex? She did have an excellent career on Broadway not long ago, where she made people believe her every day."

"Gut instinct, Mr. Wingate. I think when it comes time to do it, she won't be able to. She's relatively untested. Killing your first one, it never comes easy."

"And that, Mr. Foster, is why we need to let her do it. If she can kill someone she cares for to protect the Agency, there is no better showing of loyalty to us. It is distasteful, but she must lose part of her soul somewhere along the line, just as we all have." Wingate sighed. "There's no getting around the grisly truths in this business."

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James rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and filled his “God Loves Math” mug with coffee from the battered pot on his desk. There was something not quite right about the books lately, but he was having a hell of a time figuring out what it was. Expense reports matched the numbers in what the company was buying, but why did DynaCel need two trucks to carry four pallets of computer equipment? It just didn't make sense. And these problems weren't here or there, either. They stretched back almost three years, when DynaCel decided to forego their own in-house production and began buying competitors. Every time he tried to find out who was in charge of reports, he hit a dead end. Phone extensions that were no longer active, emails that never got answered, employees that no one remembered working with.

A knock at his office door broke his train of thought. Looking up, he saw Jen waving to him through the blinds, a coffee mug in hand. Rising, he opened the door and beckoned her in. “What the hell are you doing here?” he asked, an incredulous smile on his face. She looked amazing in 4-inch heels and a skirt. Something about skirts was just...naughty, at least in his mind.

“The temp agency sent me here, isn't it the weirdest thing? I drove in this morning and saw your car in the lot.” James stopped listening to her talking, and just concentrated on her beautiful face. He had found himself doing that more and more the last week since he met her, just zoning out. The butterflies started in his stomach.

“So anyways, hot stuff,” she continued, “I'm on break, and I've got an idea.” James snapped back from his daydreaming. An office romance would be awkward if it went badly, so he controlled himself and guessed the tamer of his two ideas.

“I know a great lunch place up the road,” he said, his face flushing at the thought of what he really wanted to do, “it's got the best gyros in town. My treat.”

Jennifer Worthington looked out the office door, then shut it and turned the blinds. “Men,” she smiled, “always thinking with their stomachs.” Then she started unbuttoning her blouse. “Should I leave the heels on?”

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While James went to the restroom to tidy himself up, Samantha hurriedly dressed and pulled the in-line transponder out of the secret compartment sewn into her bra. The dime-sized gadget piggybacked a network signal almost 200 feet through concrete, just enough to reach an unmarked van in the next building's unsecured parking lot. The agent tapped her earring and asked, "Are you getting the signal?" Two beeps said she was transmitting clearly. Her work here was done. The fiery-haired woman almost left then and there, but couldn't. Something still needed to be said. She grabbed a piece of paper from the printer and a ball-point pen.

Meanwhile, James looked at himself in the mirror, his problems with the billing the farthest thing from his mind. This girl was crazy! And beautiful. He knew what he was thinking, but he couldn't tell her this soon. His world was in a crazy spiral of emotions. He washed his face and dried his hands, then headed back to his office, whistling a jaunty tune. She was already gone, as he thought she would be. She'd have plenty of work on her first day, and people watching to see if she was dependable.

His office door yawned open. On the desk was piece of paper. He strolled over and picked it up, his spirits soaring. That all ended a moment later as the words sank in.

"I am supposed to kill you once the job is done. Get out and never come back to the U.S. I'm sorry." It was signed Jennifer. He crumbled the paper into a ball. What the hell was going on? Did it have something to do with the company problems? He closed the office door and started digging into the files.

Outside, the men in the van hacked the system. Rather, the one man hacked the system while the other stared in astonishment. "How the HELL are you doing that?" he asked, Cheetos crunching out of one side of his mouth. "No one can hack that fast." The agent known as Skynet briefly looked away from the screen, his fingers still flying over the keyboard. "Watch and learn, worm. Just stay out of my way." He turned back to the laptop, his own custom hardware and software. His baby. The only thing good about this entire operation was the paycheck that bought him his new toys.

The custom-made infiltrator virus hit a roadblock in the security system, and deftly slid around through the upkeep parameters. Another smaller one loomed in the distance. This time the virus didn't slow down, just blasted through. Integers and decimals floated in the network, looking like so much pea soup. Unless, of course, you were a prodigy. Skynet slashed through the info he didn't need, mentally calculating revised budgets in his head and discarding irrelevant information. He flew past the charities log, then digitally turned around and maneuvered closer. If he was going to hide something, who would look here first? Especially if...yep, DynaCel had contacts to the charity board in Phoenix. Enough to cover their tracks if the heat poured on. He clicked Open. "Paydirt, I've got the keys to the castle," he said to the tech worm next to him, whistling, "this is some heavy shit right here."

"What's that in your picture-in-picture?" the techie asked, focusing on the view in the top right corner of the laptop. On the screen, a once-well-dressed man and a woman with fiery red hair were going at it on the desk, doing things the techie would never know about in his virginal universe. His mouth gaped open.

"Oh, that? Found it in the security feed log. That's our agent on the inside. I'm more productive when I have some...stimulation. It's on a delay, of course." Skynet got back to work, one eye on the PIP. Suddenly his fingers slowed, then stopped.

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The techie looked up. "What's going on, `Net? You stopped. We've gotta get this shit done and get out of here before they catch on."

Absently, Skynet hit the download prompt and sent the hacked data to the Agency. "That's not what I'm worried about, worm. Someone just logged onto the security feed with a Zeta class clearance. That's not regular security."

The techie scrambled for the transmitter button and tapped in a code. Since the feed was on a delay, there might still be time. God help that agent if there wasn't.





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Samantha Killian strode down the hallway, her emotions going wild. She would never see James again, one way or another. Hopefully he would take the hint and get the hell out. He was stubborn, though, that much she knew from the short time she'd known him.

Her earring let out two beeps followed by three more. Her cover was blown. How? She had been careful, up until the last five minutes with the note. The bug? She stopped in her tracks. James would have just made it back there. The wise thing would be to go, but the hell with that. She kicked off her heels and raced back up the hallway. If there was trouble, she had to know.

An unexpected tread warned her to brace herself just as something smashed through the wall, knocking her into the other side of the hallway. She struggled to her knees. A huge walking tank of a man in black armor dusted the drywall and building studs off of himself and glared at her from a tinted half-cover helmet. Then his mouth, the only thing she could see of him inside the armor, smiled in anticipation. He backed up a couple of steps and charged again.

The lithe agent reacted, throwing herself to one side as her hand flashed out. A mini smoke bomb clouded the air as she fled. An inhuman growl escaped the man in black as he powered through the wall where she just was. In a heartbeat, Agent Rose Asp was flying down the hallway as fast as her legs could take her.

James Schills followed the digital trail, slowly piecing together what he was finding. Things were looking ominous. A sudden sound caught his attention: a snapping sound. He turned. Two men in black fatigues and ski masks finished disabling his lock and burst into the office. "What the fu --" he had time to scream. Their silenced, semi-automatic MP-5's raised up and opened fire. The accountant was struck in the chest by six well-aimed bullets from point-blank range. He was dead before the blood and gore hit the office wall behind him. One of the men kept a lookout while the other threw his machine gun over his shoulder on its combat strap and disconnected the computer. "Time to go," the lookout said. The other nodded.

As they stepped out of the office, a red-haired woman came charging up the hallway, her hair and skirt trailing in the wake of her passage. The man with the gun readied had time to get off one short burst that was high and to the right before she was among them. The bullets punched through the drywall with barely audible popping sounds. But really, how much trouble could this little filly be?

Rose Asp targeted the man with the MP-5 first. She moved in close so he couldn't get a bead on her with the submachine gun and jabbed with the left. His head snapped back as the gun clattered to the floor. Spinning, the wiry secret agent caught the other man with a rabbit punch to the throat as he dropped the computer and went for his slung weapon. Coughing, he fell back against the wall, out of action for the moment.

The other man lurched to his feet, trying to draw his commando knife. Rose Asp spun, moving up close and personal. Her fists jackhammered into his solar plexus, driving the wind out of his body. A right cross sent him into a battered slumber through James' doorway. Her eyes followed along, and finally came to rest on the mangled body of her lover. The world slowed down as a terrible howl escaped her lips.

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The second assassin finally rejoined the fight, grabbing her in a bearhug from behind. Bad move. Gritting her teeth, Rose Asp stomped his insole, then drove her heel up into his crotch. The arms fell away as he staggered, unable to cry out at the blossoming flower of pain in his jewels. The secret agent whipped around, her next two backhanded swings staggering him. Winding up for a haymaker, Samantha felt the percussion of footfalls behind her, and fell to the side through James' doorway onto the unconscious soldier.

A black blur of muscle and armor flew past the doorway, narrowly missing her and finding the injured killer instead. The tank of a man she had evaded earlier plowed into the other assassin, both of them traveling thirty feet down the hallway and through the wall at the end. She took one look at James' destroyed form and came to her senses. Someone was going to pay. Knowing the game was up, she took the MP-5 from the unconscious man beneath her and unloaded the clip into the computer lying abandoned in the hallway. No information was coming out of it again. She found a spare clip in the assassin's combat vest, then returned three of the bullets to him in a short burst that took his head apart.

A crash sounded at the end of the hall. Rose Asp readied the MP-5 as the juggernaut came roaring out of the hole and back towards her. All of a sudden the hallway felt cramped and suffocating. "Bruiser is going to tear you limb from limb, pretty lady!" the animal in armor screamed.

Rose Asp pulled the stock tight against her shoulder and emptied the clip in short, controlled bursts. The bullets struck the full armor suit of her assailant, slowing him down but not stopping him. Finally one bullet found a chink in Bruiser's leg armor and brought him crashing to the floor just as the magazine clicked empty. Down the hall, three more guards in black rounded the corner. Rose Asp discarded the MP-5 and fled.

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"What a fucking nightmare," Rex Foster muttered to himself, pushing open the door to the briefing room. Agent Rose Asp sat huddled in a chair, her eyes vacant and staring straight ahead at the front wall. She didn't even move to look at him as he closed the door. The other people in the room, consultants for the Agency, whispered quietly amongst themselves.

The red-haired, pudgy handler approached the podium set to one side, dimmed the lights, and activated the slideshow stored on his laptop. Giant surveillance images covered the wall. "May I have your attention please," he said, "let's get this over with." Silence descended on the group. Samantha Killian slowly looked up, her eyes red and dry. At least she knew mourning was for behind closed doors. Stupid bitch, he thought.

"Our operation to infiltrate DynaCel went smoothly until yesterday afternoon. We're still investigating how our agent's cover was blown, but that will be in my official report." The handler steadied himself. "The op did have some good points. We recovered enough data to realize that the Cold Zero Clan was behind the corporate takeover, and we've put a crimp in their money supply by freezing what assets we could here in Arizona. It is disturbing, however, that they have operated this enterprise for almost three years without our knowledge here on our continent." The assembly shifted uncomfortably.

Foster rubbed his temples, then continued, "One civilian was killed by Cold Zero agents, but the subject was targeted for liquidation anyways. There were --" Foster stopped in midsentence as Samantha Killian rose to her feet.

"His name was James Schills, you son of a bitch. Give him at least that much respect." She turned and stalked out of the briefing room. Stunned silence hung over the assembled men and women.

Foster cleared his throat, looking at the shadowy faces of his superiors. "I apologize for Agent Rose Asp's insolence. She's new. Moving on..."

The screen switched to a grainy view from a hallway security camera, showing Rose Asp tearing into the two men with machine guns, then diving out of the way as a massive man barreled through one of his own men and through a wall. "That's Bruiser, a thug for Cold Zero. We didn't even know he was in the country. He usually doesn't use weapons; he just beats people to death with his fists. The important thing is that he's one of Cypher's bodyguards, so Cypher must be close by. We need to send out an APB on him, though chances are slim that we'll catch him."

Outside in the hall, Samantha leaned against the wall, catching her breath. It was only her first assignment, and already she wanted to take a crack at her handler. He was such an asshole. The door opened, and she tensed, waiting to see if it was Foster. It wasn't.

"My dear," said an older man with piercing blue eyes and a flowing mustache, "are you quite all right?"

Samantha breathed deeply, then turned to face him. "I've seen you around, talking to Foster. I don't know who you are, sir, but I have nothing to say to you."

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The man smiled perceptibly. "Well, my dear, if you don't like Foster then we have at least one thing in common. The man is a worm, concerned with only his own well-being. He is a good handler as long as his own ambitions don't get in the way. Unfortunately that happens more than you will know. My name is Wingate." The man sat down, patting a chair next to him. "Do join me, I have a little story for you."

She sat and gave him her attention. "I was brought into the Agency before you were born. I know how hard it can be, and those that have to use their bodies to obtain our ends have the hardest job of all. The soldiers pull the triggers when faced with men and women that deserve it, but you don't have that luxury."

"I started as a confidence man, so I've been close to where you were. It was my job to become friends with a woman whose son was selling weapons on the black market, many years ago. I fell for her, then I had to call in the airstrike on her son's home. She was there, and I couldn't get her out. Samantha, this game is not for those with soft hearts. These people are marks, no matter how good they are. You must steel yourself to do the job, knowing that these sacrifices mean a safer world for all of us."

Samantha began to cry silently as he talked. His words made sense, and she knew she had to follow them or go crazy. But her heart would never get truly involved again. It couldn't. Wingate got up and reentered the debriefing, and after a moment she followed him. Her stride strengthened and her chin came up. She convinced herself, for the moment, that she could handle it. Ah, she thought, the glamorous life of a spy.

End