

NORA
ROBERTS

SECRET
GETAWAY

Includes *Captive Star* & *Secret Star*



Silhouette Books

Chapter 1

He'd have killed for a beer. A big, frosty mug filled with some dark import that would go down smoother than a woman's first kiss. A beer in some nice, dim, cool bar, with a ball game on the tube and a few other stool-sitters who had an interest in the game gathered around.

While he staked out the woman's apartment, Jack Dakota passed the time fantasizing about it.

The foamy head, the yeasty smell, the first gulping swallow to beat the heat and slake the thirst. Then the slow savoring, sip by sip, that assured a man all would be right with the world if only politicians and lawyers would debate the inevitable conflicts over a cold one at a local pub while a batter faced a count of three and two.

It was a bit early for drinking, at just past one in the

afternoon, but the heat was so huge, so intense and the cooler full of canned sodas just didn't have quite the same punch as a cold, foamy beer.

His ancient Oldsmobile didn't run to amenities like air-conditioning. In fact, its amenities were pathetically few, except for the pricey, earsplitting stereo he'd installed in the peeling faux-leather dash. The stereo was worth about double the blue book on the car, but a man had to have music. When he was on the road, he enjoyed turning it up to scream and belting them out with the Beatles or the Stones.

The muscle-flexing V-8 engine under the dented gutter-gray hood was tuned as meticulously as a Swiss watch, and got Jack where he wanted to go, fast. Just now the engine was at rest, and as a concession to the quiet neighborhood in northwest Washington, D.C., he had the CD player on murmur while he hummed along with Bonnie Raitt.

She was one of his rare bows to music after 1975.

Jack often thought he'd been born out of his own time. He figured he'd have made a pretty good knight. A black one. He liked the straightforward philosophy of might for right. He'd have stood with Arthur, he mused, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. But he'd have handled Camelot's business his own way. Rules complicated things.

He'd have enjoyed riding the West, too. Hunting down desperadoes without all the nonsense of paperwork. Just track 'em down and bring 'em in.

Dead or alive.

These days, the bad guys hired a lawyer, or the state gave them one, and the courts ended up apologizing to them for the inconvenience.

We're terribly sorry, sir. Just because you raped, robbed and murdered is no excuse for infringing on your time and civil rights.

It was a sad state of affairs.

And it was one of the reasons Jack Dakota hadn't gone into police work, though he'd toyed with the idea during his early twenties. Justice meant something to him, always had. But he didn't see much justice in rules and regulations.

Which was why, at thirty, Jack Dakota was a bounty hunter.

You still hunted down the bad guys, but you worked your own hours and got paid for a job and didn't answer to a lot of bureaucratic garbage.

There were still rules, but a smart man knew how to work around them. Jack had always been smart.

He had the papers on his current quarry in his pocket. Ralph Finkleman had called him at eight that morning with the tag. Now, Ralph was a worrier and an optimist—a combination, Jack thought, that must be a job requirement for a bail bondsman. Personally, Jack could never understand the concept of lending money to complete strangers—strangers who, since they needed bond, had already proved themselves unreliable.

But there was money in it, and money was enough motivation for most anything, he supposed.

Jack had just come back from tracing a skip to North Carolina, and had made Ralph pitifully grateful when he hauled in the dumb-as-a-post country boy who'd tried to make his fortune robbing convenience stores. Ralph had put up the bond—claimed he'd figured the kid was too stupid to run.

Jack could have told him, straight off, that the kid was too stupid *not* to run.

But he wasn't being paid to offer advice.

Jack had planned to relax for a few days, maybe take in a few games at Camden Yards, pick one of his female acquaintances to help him enjoy spending his fee. He'd nearly turned Ralph down, but the guy had been so whiny, so full of pleas, he didn't have the heart.

So he'd gone into First Stop Bail Bonds and picked up the paperwork on one M. J. O'Leary, who'd apparently decided against having her day in court to explain why she shot her married boyfriend.

Jack figured she was dumb as a post, as well. A good-looking woman—and from her photo and description, she qualified—with a few working brain cells could manipulate a judge and jury over something as minor as plugging an adulterous accountant.

It wasn't like she'd killed the poor bastard.

It was a cream-puff job, which didn't explain why Ralph had been so jumpy. He'd stuttered more than usual, and his eyes had danced all over the cramped, dusty office.

But Jack wasn't interested in analyzing Ralph. He wanted to wrap up the job quickly, get that beer and start enjoying his fee.

The extra money from this quick one meant he could snatch up that first edition of *Don Quixote* he'd been coveting, so he'd tolerate sweating in the car for a few hours.

He didn't look like a man who hunted up rare books or enjoyed philosophical debates on the nature of man. He wore his sun-streaked brown hair pulled back in a stubby ponytail—which was more a testament to his

distrust of barbers than a fashion statement, though the sleek look enhanced his long, narrow face, with its slashing cheekbones and hollows. Over the shallow dent in his chin, his mouth was full and firm, and looked poetic when it wasn't curled in a sneer.

His eyes were razor-edged gray that could soften to smoke at the sight of the yellowing pages of a first-edition Dante, or darken with pleasure at a glimpse of a pretty woman in a thin summer dress. His brows were arched, with a faintly demonic touch accented by the white scar that ran diagonally through the left and was the result of a tangle with a jackknife wielded by a murderer in the second who hadn't wanted Jack to collect his fee.

Jack had collected the fee, and the skip had sported a broken arm and a nose that would never be the same unless the state sprang for rhinoplasty.

Which wouldn't have surprised Jack a bit.

There were other scars. His long, rangy body had the marks of a warrior, and there were women who liked to coo over them.

Jack didn't mind.

He stretched out his yard-long legs, cracked the tightness out of his shoulders and debated popping the top on another soft drink and pretending it was a beer.

When the MG zipped by, top down, radio blasting, he shook his head. Dumb as a post, he thought—though he admired her taste in music. The car jibed with his paperwork, and the quick glimpse of the woman as she'd flown by confirmed it. The short red hair that had been blowing in the breeze was a dead giveaway.

It was ironic, he thought as he watched her unfold herself out of the little car she'd parked in front of him,

that a woman who looked like that should be so pathetically stupid.

He wouldn't have called her easy on the eyes. There didn't look to be anything easy about her. She was a tall one—and he did have a weakness for long-legged, dangerous women. Her narrow teenage-boy hips were hugged by a pair of faded jeans that were white at the stress points and ripped at the knee. The T-shirt tucked into the jeans was plain white cotton, and her small, unhampered breasts pressed nicely against the soft fabric.

She hauled a bag out of the car, and Jack received an interesting view of a firm female bottom in tight denim. Grinning to himself, he patted a hand on his heart. Small wonder some slob had cheated on his wife for this one.

She had a face as angular as her body. Though it was milkmaid-pale, to go with the flaming cap of hair, there was nothing of the maid about it. Pointed chin and pointed cheekbones combined to create a tough, sexy face tilted off center by a lush, sensual mouth.

She was wearing dark wraparound shades, but he knew her eyes were green from the paperwork. He wondered if they'd be like moss or emeralds.

With an enormous shoulder bag hitched on one shoulder, a grocery bag cocked on her hip, she started toward him and the apartment building. He let himself sigh once over her loose-limbed, ground-eating stride.

He sure did go for leggy women.

He got out of the car and strolled after her. He didn't figure she'd be much trouble. She might scratch and bite a bit, but she didn't look like the kind who'd dissolve into pleading tears.

He really hated when that happened.

His game plan was simple. He could have taken her outside, but he hated public displays when there were other choices. So he'd push himself into her apartment, explain the situation, then take her in.

She didn't look like she had a care in the world, Jack noted as he stepped into the building behind her. Did she really figure the cops wouldn't check out the homes of her friends and associates? And driving her own car to shop for groceries. It was amazing she hadn't already been picked up.

But then, the cops had enough to do without scrambling after a woman who'd had a spat with her lover.

He hoped her pal who lived in the apartment wasn't home. He'd kept the windows under surveillance for the best part of an hour, and he'd seen no movement. He'd heard no sound when he took a lazy walk under the open third-floor windows, and he'd wandered inside to listen at the door.

But you could never be too sure.

Since she turned away from the elevator, toward the stairs, so did he. She never glanced back, making him figure she was either supremely confident or had a lot on her mind.

He closed the distance between them, flashed a smile at her. "Want a hand with that?"

The dark glasses turned, leveled on his face. Her lips didn't curve in the slightest. "No. I've got it."

"Okay, but I'm going a couple flights up. Visiting my aunt. Haven't seen her in—damn—two years. Just blew into town this morning. Forgot how hot it got in D.C."

The glasses turned away again. "It's not the heat," she said, her voice dry as dust, "it's the humidity."

He chuckled at that, recognizing sarcasm and annoyance. “Yeah, that’s what they say. I’ve been in Wisconsin the past few years. Grew up here, though, but I’d forgotten... Here let me give you a hand.”

It was a smooth move, easing in as she shifted the bag to slip her key into the lock of the apartment door. Equally smooth, she blocked with her shoulder, pushed the door open. “I’ve got it,” she repeated, and started to kick the door shut in his face.

He slid in like a snake, took a firm hold on her arm. “Ms. O’Leary—” It was all he got out before her elbow cracked into his chin. He swore, blinked his vision clear and dodged the kick to the groin. But it had been close enough to have him swiftly changing his approach.

Explanations could damn well wait.

He grabbed her, and she turned in his arms, stomped down hard enough on his foot to have stars springing into his head. And that was before she backfisted him in the face.

Her bag of groceries had gone flying, and she delivered each blow with a quick expulsion of breath. Initially he blocked her blows, which wasn’t an easy matter. She was obviously trained for combat—a little detail Ralph had omitted.

When she went into a fighting crouch, so did he.

“This isn’t going to do you any good.” He hated thinking he was going to have to deck her—maybe on that sexy pointed chin. “I’m going to take you in, and I’d rather do it without messing you up.”

Her answer was a swift flying kick to his midsection he wished he’d been able to admire from a distance. But he was too busy crashing into a table.

Damn, she was good.