

Fiction/Adventure

Randolph gets better and better! Her third novel in the Deception series, is excitingly new and historically significant. Surprise after surprise keeps the reader turning pages, striving to keep up with what is being revealed! There is NO way I'm going to even hint at what happens at the end! Randolph continues as one of my favorite and MUST-READ authors. If this book sounds interesting, trust me...get the first two books and start at the beginning of this unique family saga!

-G. A. Bixler, Bookreviewers.org

Deception's Legacy comes out a winner and proves to be quite a read with a great deal of suspense. Once again Randolph has shown herself to be quite adept at writing entertaining, fast-paced thrillers that linger long after the reading is over.

-Norm Goldman, Bookpleasures.com

What possible connection can there be between the Spanish Inquisition in the 1400s and a 1966 U.S. nuclear aircraft collision in Southern Spain?

Biracial DEA agent Skye Mathews, pilot, actress, and language mimic capable of great viciousness in pursuit of justice bounds back into action; battling an evil which ultimately proves to be devastatingly personal. Her previous exploits in the Deception series have taken her from Peru to Antarctica.

Combining three intersecting time lines from 1966 and 2030, the focus of *Deception's Legacy* is Andalucía, Spain where multiple religions lived in relative peace until the bloody Spanish Inquisition. Centuries later the United States made an impression on the region when a fully loaded B-52 bomber collided with a KC-135 Refueler. The result was the largest cleanup operation in history involving uranium and plutonium. These two historical events intersect to create a twisted web of deceit and intrigue that Skye and her family must unravel. The violent confrontation will end power behind Spanish drug trafficking, destroy centuries of torture, and redeem generations of lies steeped in the blood of the innocent.

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DECEPTION'S LEGACY * JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

DECEPTION'S LEGACY



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Jacqueline G. Randolph

Deception's Legacy



Fultus™ Books



Deception's Legacy

by

Jacqueline G. Randolph

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IN MEMORIAM 2006

SECOND LIEUTENANT EMILY J. T. PEREZ, U.S. ARMY

- First minority female Command Sergeant in the history of West Point Military Academy
- First minority female graduate of West Point Military Academy to die in Iraq

MASTER CHIEF BOATSWAIN'S MATE CARL M. BRASHEAR, U.S. NAVY, RETIRED

- First African-American and amputee U.S. Navy Diver
- January 1966, Palomares, Spain assigned as Ship's Chief Boatswain Mate: Lead Diver

Dedication

To God

The source of my
adventures, my success, and my joy

~*~*~*~

“Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding
abundantly above all that we ask or think
according to the power that worketh in us.”

(Ephesians 3:20)

Preface

Deception's Legacy is the third novel in the four-book Deception series, the writing taking place on the incredibly gorgeous Caribbean island of Cuba. New characters have entered and familiar friends have exited; all bound together in heartbreak. I'm finding out what the Deception *series* readers have been telling me for years, Skye's action-packed world is addictive!

In this installment, Skye leads us into the realms of hate: racial, gender, and religious in individuals, groups and nations. However hate is packaged, the content is vile, wretched, and sinful. In our modern world, we aren't often privileged to witness hatred's end game, but truth, justice, and love are stronger, and love always triumphs!

God tells us, "Love never fails,"¹ and He commands, "Love your neighbors as yourself. Love does no harm to its neighbor."² If anyone says, "I love God, yet hates his brother, he is a liar."³ Ultimately, "all sinners [haters] will be destroyed; the future of the wicked will be cut off," because God "delivers...from the wicked...and saves."⁴

The Spanish Inquisition in the 1400s and a U.S. nuclear accident over Southern Spain in 1966 provide the backdrop for this story. What do these two divergent events have in common?

As a history enthusiast, I've had an exquisitely wonderful time grafting fiction into past events. It has been delicious delving into a

¹ Galatians 5:19, 20

² I Corinthians 13:6

³ Romans 12:9,10

⁴ Psalms 37:38,40.

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

variety of subjects, such as the Spanish monarchy, the nobility, and the Inquisition. In addition, I've researched DNA, declassified military accident reports, microwave laser weapons, and the life of U.S. Navy first, Carl Brashear, as detailed in the movie, *Men of Honor*. I challenge you to differentiate fact from fiction. A bibliography is included for your convenience.

Finally, I had a grand time visiting southern Spain while researching this novel and vacationing in the country where I was born in 1965. I owe many thanks to my parents who shared their stories in that time and place. The Moorish architecture and Spanish culture of Andalusia are spectacular, although I could never capture the beauty in mere words. I wholeheartedly encourage you to visit Spain.

As always, my fervent prayer and wish is that you and I will forever strive for, capture, and hold enduring love and adventures unimagined.

Prologue

Nuclear B-52 Crashes over Spain

On January 17, 1966 at 10:22 a.m., 100 miles from North Africa, a B-52 bomber collided in mid-air with a KC-135 tanker while refueling over the village of Palomares, Spain on the Mediterranean coast. The tanker burst into flames, broke up, and tumbled to earth. The B-52 carried four thermonuclear B28 bombs. The bomber began the mission at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina and attempted its third refueling with the tanker after returning from a flight over the southern route of the Strategic Air Command air alert mission, code-named "Chrome Dome." The KC-135 came from Moron Air Base, Spain. The nozzle of its boom struck the bomber, ripping the B-52 open along its spine. The bomber snapped into pieces, igniting 40,000 gallons of jet fuel and killing all four crewmembers. Subsequent to initial conflicting reports, it was determined that four of the seven crewmembers of the B-52 parachuted to safety. President Lyndon Johnson, the Department of Defense, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the Spanish Government received news of the nuclear accident and the declaration of a "Broken Arrow." Nuclear safety teams, consisting of over 1,600 American and Spanish soldiers dispatched for the three-month clean-up operation. Within hours, the 16th Air Force located three B28 bombs that had landed on the shore. However, the fourth bomb remained missing for eighty days. High explosives in two of the bombs detonated on impact and plutonium dust spread over several hundred acres. This accident resulted in the largest search and recovery operation in history. Pursuant to the Hall-Otero Agreement of February 25, 1966, the U.S. Department of Energy and its predecessor agencies provided the 150 residents of Palomares with annual medical examinations. In addition, the U.S. built a \$200,000 desalinization plant, settled \$600,000 of farming claims with 536 residents, and offered environmental monitoring of plutonium and uranium, to include removal of 1,400 tons of topsoil to a nuclear cemetery in North Carolina

- United Press

Palomares, Spain —1966

JIM shivered on the cold dank ground. His body ached and his head pounded without mercy or pause. He struggled to open his eyes. An urgent terror filled him as he grasped for the meaning of the words flashing menacingly within his foggy mind: Broken Arrow, Chrome Dome, Broken Arrow, Chrome Dome... The words slowly became clear. Nuclear accidents were Broken Arrows. He was the pilot of a nuclear airlift mission—Chrome Dome—but what did he have to do with a Broken Arrow? Struggling toward consciousness, he reached out a hand to steady himself as he tried to sit up. Slick, smooth, silky. His hand slid along the ground beside his body and pain sliced up his arm; he was lying on his parachute. Exhaling a ragged groan, he snatched the ethereal threads of unreality, forcibly opened his eyes, and heaved himself into a sitting position. He clung to the stabbing pain, allowing it to help him focus his thoughts as panic surged through him. Nausea assaulted him, blurring his concentration so he gulped deep lungfuls of the musty dank air to clear his mind. He squinted at the weak shaft of sunlight spilling through a wide, rough, rocky opening. He glanced around and groped toward the shadows touching rock. He was in a cavern. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he tried to focus on his dim surroundings.

Beyond the entrance, withered brown leaves and dense gnarled branches of some kind of bush or plant partially obscured the opening. Beyond the barrier, bright daylight winked through the tangled leaves. He had to get out of there, find someone, tell them . . . warn them about the bombs . . . help them. He struggled to lift himself. His green Nomex flight suit stuck to his legs and arms and chest as he moved. Patches of cold and wet shifted and clung. His fingers searched and found blood. He gritted his teeth as pain battered him in sharp pulses.

“Por favor, descanso.” Soft hands pressed him back to the ground, the voice soothing. *“Bueno! Descanso ahora.”*

Jim fell back, the nauseating pain sucking him pulling him toward the black void. He mustered his remaining strength and opened his eyes, straining to see . . . a woman. No, she was a girl, probably not more than fourteen. Her hair and eyes were dark, her skin olive. Who was she? Where was he?

DECEPTION'S LEGACY

Refueling. The last thing he remembered was refueling over Spain. She must be Spanish. He looked up at her.

She wore a low-cut, thin sleeveless pink cotton gown rumpled and creased as though she had just got out of bed. Long unkempt and tangled black hair spilled across her lap as she intently ministered to his wounds, pressing him back to the ground whenever he tried to rise. She shifted, kneeling beside him to bunch up the parachute silk before tucking it under his head. The movement brought her face and bare arms into the wavering shafts of sunlight filtering into the cave. Jim's eyes widened as he studied the girl moving in and out of shadows.

The neckline of her gown was ragged and filthy, one side falling limply off her shoulder allowing Jim a glimpse of brutalized flesh. Shock initially paralyzed him. She was pretty, her face smooth and flawless, crowning a putrid spectrum of red, purpling and yellowish open wounds and black scabs scattered over what he could see of her chest, arm, and hands. He was too late. The bombs had detonated.

His face tightened and he cringed when she touched him. Stifling an almost insane desire to escape, as if she were a leper, he tentatively reached out and touched a fresh wound on her upper arm. Thick burgundy-colored blood dripped clotted designs from a half-inch open puncture. They both gasped when he touched her. The girl instinctively moved away and covered the wound with one thin hand as she warily studied him.

Disgust warred with pity. "I'm sorry," he whispered as his eyes lingered on her exposed injuries a few seconds longer. *I'm too late.* His soul twisted with guilt and remorse as he surrendered to unconsciousness. "I'm sorry."

ROSITA soothed the black man as he slept again. "*Descanso. Bueno.*" She scooted tentatively to his side and tenderly caressed the blood and sweat from his forehead until his breathing evened. "*Mi Dios.*" She prayed that God would heal and protect him. She touched the flag on his sleeve. *Americano.* She'd seen pictures and stories in magazines and newspapers of the war raging in Vietnam and men wearing this flag on the shoulder of their green military coveralls.

She studied the white and orange nylon parachute on which he lay. It had been the ideal method for dragging him into the cave. He

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

was a big, heavy man twice her size and she could not have carried him to the cave. He had been unconscious and unable to help.

She glanced up at the sun. Almost an hour ago she had found his crumbled and bleeding body partially wrapped in his parachute like a rag doll torn by dogs and tossed away like so much trash. The winds howled outside the cave bringing an extra chill so that she trembled from the cold despite her heavy exertions. Sweating as she struggled to hide the dark man from sight, she sucked in her breath and strained to tug the nylon a few more inches. It was just past noon when she finally dragged his dead weight within the shaded protection and relative warmth of her sanctuary. A sharp icy blast whipped through the entrance so unusual for this time of year. She quickly covered the resting man with the parachute, tucking it around him for warmth.

Bile rose in her throat. She stood up and hurried toward a trickle of stream below the cave. The hills of Almeria rose in jagged peaks. In the valley below her, the faint smell of smoke aggravated her sour stomach. The villagers ran about, shouting and pointing as they gathered around two oblong objects. She scooped a double handful of water and drank deeply, the water trickling through her fingers and down her arms. It felt good and cool against the throbbing heat of her wounds. She tentatively probed green and yellow bruises. The pain was less; she was healing.

Scooping up more water, she caught a glimpse of her face and the trail of bruises across her shoulder and down her chest reflected in the rippling stream. *"He'd never touch my face or leave any evidence of what he's done to me."* A tear trickled down one soft, plump cheek. Arms wrapped around her middle, she bent double, dry heaves wracking her empty stomach. A silver strand of saliva spun down from her lips into the water. *Dios, ayude me.* She silently pleaded for God's help as her tormentor's image forced her to remember. His sadistic smile filled her mind and she trembled. The wind howled and she flinched, looking around her. He'd found her. No, it was only the wind full of dark glee like the sound of the voice—his voice—that always preceded the pain and terror inflicted upon her more and more often. The maniacal gleam of his eyes haunted her.

DECEPTION'S LEGACY

"Querida, thank you for the privilege of killing your first two Marrano babies; shall we make it three?" His rough hands clamped around her arms as he pulled her closer, ripping at her clothes, fists pummeling her pregnant belly. She struggled with images so vivid and real, clawing at her mouth and face in an attempt to stifle her screams of protest. She raised her hands and face to the sky, praying to God to save her from the perpetual hell of her life.

The faint columns of smoke filled the air, lending a macabre realism to the hellish images of fire and brimstone plaguing her mind. Faint with fatigue and nausea, she reeled, the ground rushing up at her. Putting out a hand, she stopped her fall, her mind scrambling to cling to something hard and real, anything to remain awake. She must not faint. He would find her and she would not go back there; she could not. She must stay awake if she was to get away, to protect her child. Perhaps this time she would be safe.

Suddenly an image of the dark American infusing her with extra strength arrested her downward spiral of agony. She did not understand his words, but she felt the pity, sorrow, and kindness in his voice, "I'm sorry."

Palomares, Spain – 2030

TRISTAN surveyed the torture chamber in horror. The eerie underground catacombs were dank and eerie with a near physical aura of death, depravity, and terror. This was in stark contrast to the grounds above where acres and acres of colorful flower gardens perfumed the landscape fountains, statues and opulent displays of wealth. The three stories of the castle-like mansion dominated the village of Palomares with affluence and nobility. It revealed not a hint of the slimy walls weeping with depravity and the pungent smell of decayed humanity that oozed in the foundation enclosing perpetual night. His investigation had led him here where numerous and centuries-old contraptions used to destroy the human body, mind, and spirit in every way imaginable were housed.

A metal device shaped like a glove sat waiting for another hand to sever into four pieces with the long multiple blades positioned below it. Tristan's mouth was dry and his stomach lurched as he turned away from the blood-stained device. Dominating the main chamber

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

was a shrine to Tomas de Torquemada, the head of the Spanish Inquisition in 1483. A gilded frame encircled the portrait of the Spanish Dominican priest who was Queen Isabella's confessor, covering almost the entire length of one wall. The dark, brooding painting portrayed a small, vicious looking man standing behind a table littered with crucifixes, rosaries, scrolls, and books inscribed with references to saints. He held an open locket displaying a portrait of the first Catholic Queen, Isabella, which was no surprise.

Weary of Moorish dominance in the south, Queen Isabella obtained Pope Sixtus IV's sanction to rid her country of all non-Catholics. She appointed Torquemada to lead the cleaning crew because of his single-minded religious fervor.

Tristan shuddered at the thought of the atrocities perpetrated in this manmade hell inspired by a merciless ambition that infected an entire nation until no one was safe. Brutality, theft, torture, and murder sanctioned by their sovereign queen, sanctified by the Pope, and justified in the name of God. The insanity inflamed the people of Spain until the heavens rang with the cry for *limpienza di sangue* – pure Catholic blood, pure Spanish blood.

Jews and Muslims, *Marranos*, or pigs, ran for their lives and the lives of their families. Tristan could hear the pitiful cries for mercy from throngs of murdered Jewish and Muslim men, women, and children in the harsh clang of chains against the cold stone walls. The church bells tolled as musicians led a procession chanting masses for the souls doomed to death. They carried crosses, banners and candles in escorting penitents wearing red-cross *sanbenito* tunics. After sentencing, the church released the victims to state officials for execution; Church creed did not allow for the taking of life. He felt the heat from braziers stuck with branding irons and his lungs tightened from images of hangings and drownings and mutilations. In his mind families and friends pleaded during the Autos-da-Fé – acts of faith – afraid their compassion would mark them for the fires, confessions wrung from their mangled bodies before they faced judgment at the next bloody trial. The walls reeked of burning flesh and of the lives, hopes, and dreams of those whose only crime was faith and belief not sanctioned by the Catholic Church.

DECEPTION'S LEGACY

Tristan shook his head at the senselessness and futility. If the accused recanted of their faith and converted to Catholicism, Torquemada mercifully strangled them before the burning. "Hypocrite!" Tristan spat his curse at Torquemada's vile image. Obviously, it slipped the priest's mind that his own grandmother was a converted Jew. He was so drunk with duty to his god and Queen he probably would have stoked the fires if he'd had the opportunity to interrogate the matriarch of his family.

Tristan walked slowly along the walls studying the incredible proof of the ongoing fervor of subsequent generations clamoring for catholic purity by any means. The voices of babies, children, pregnant women, the aged, and infirm still wailed: pleading, confessing, and recanting, their eyes like brilliant lights dimming as they died. On what side of the battle had his Spanish ancestors fought? Hot fiery anger boiled up in his soul. It didn't matter which side, the atrocities continued long after the expulsion of the Jews and Muslims in 1492, long after the death of Torquemada in 1498. He looked around the chamber, his heart torn, his soul aching. The hot, bright copper scent of blood and death filled his nose. Here was the proof, the shameful truth, Torquemada's work continued to bear bloody fruit.

"Why does humanity repeat this senseless stupidity again and again?" he whispered, his voice laden with confusion and building fury. How many times had the scenes played out through the centuries? From Hitler's Nazi machine, Idi Amin's Uganda massacre, Cambodia's killing fields, and Saddam's bloody reign to Bosnia's ethnic cleansing, the Muslim extremists' Jihads, European Crusades, and the slaughter of Native Americans in the push for America's Manifest Destiny continued through history. Would it ever end?

Tristan's steps echoed in the cavernous chambers as his fingers traced dates, names, and histories carved into the walls like a tapestry of generational pride, an offering on the altar at the foot of Torquemada's portrait. He stopped and studied the writing on the nearest wall, almost obscured by streaked layers of grime and mud, dated 1495. Here, Enrique, an ancestor of the estate protecting the catacombs, wrote enthusiastically about his conquest. "The Jewess didn't die immediately after the decapitation. Amazing how she still blinked and pleaded minutes after I cleanly separated her head from her body with the sword of my father." Tristan face twisted with

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

disgust as he moved to study the drawings of a guillotine designed to sever the heads of several victims at once. Beside it, the scribbling of Enrique's grandson, Tiomas, in 1523 read, "My grandfather's methods were crude. By rigging ropes and pulley assemblies I have separated all the heads from a Muslim family at one time; there was no activity from the *Marrano* heads after they all fell into the basket."

Tristan turned away. He was sick from reading the boasts of soulless, crippled men breeding twisted generations after generations. Their deeds flourished even now in the person of the present Christy spawn, specifically Don Cristobál, the prime suspect in his investigation. He turned slowly in a circle as he silently wept and raged for the multitudes of victims and the advances in killing technologies woven throughout the grisly mural. Paintings and photographs captured the empty faces of the murdered alongside vials of deadly drugs and weaponry: biological, electronic, and lasers. With great weariness, Tristan moved past the sickening collage of man's depthless inhumanity as he made his way from the chamber. His mind swelled with the enormity of the thousands gazing at him from pictures of contraptions, names scratched in the unyielding stone, listed on bronze plaques, and their remains swimming in jars of formaldehyde. The roar of their pleas for justice rang in his mind and he could do nothing but stop and bow his head in shame, humility, resolve, and compassion, vowing to end this centuries-long reign of terror.

"I'm so sorry."

Chapter 1

Westcliffe, Colorado - 2030

Meadow lay still as the September morning air, crisp and clean with a slightly cold bite, breezed through the spectacular Colorado mountain sky. The light and dark yellow of the sun caressed the deep green of trees, leaves, and grass waving gently against the black-brown bark. Shadows crept across the gray and pink marbled stones and the dampened tan of the earth. Massive piles of cottony and linen-white clouds played across the wide-open translucent blue sky in hues and shades that are nature's own.

The girl stood still as blue jays chased one another in a fluttering symphony of movement against the soft lavender and red-orange pastels of sunrise. A doe and her gangly-legged spotted fawn foraged nearby, oblivious to a red fox scampering across their path. The fox's thick coat glinted in prismatic shades of fiery orange and red beneath the rising sun.

"Meadow, breakfast is ready." The nearly black-skinned toddler arose from her playground and waved goodbye to her floral and animal companions before running toward her grandmother's voice, her single black thick braid flying behind her on the wind. She barely reached the porch steps of the two-story cabin when an older Hispanic-looking woman caught her and whisked her into the air. The woman was fit and athletic with muscularly contoured arms and legs, a testament to her daily regime of running and swimming. Her complexion was brown with hints of a mixed Spanish and African-American heritage. Even at sixty-four, her face was smooth and unlined. Her hair, satiny black and shoulder-length, sparsely streaked with silver.

"The deer's baby is bigger today!" Meadow hugged her grandmother's neck.

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

The older woman's face burst into a smile that seemed to glow from her soul. "As you are, *querida*, my dearest. *Como estas?*"

"*Bien, gracias,*" Meadow responded.

Skye smiled with approval. "*Bueno, querida!*"

Carrying her precious load into the cabin, Skye thought about Meadow's parents – her oldest son and his wife. Of her three children, twins Jonathan Reese and Sierra and her youngest son Tristan Alaric, only Jon had seen fit to provide his parents with a grandchild. Meadow looked more like her mother, Celene, but she was the undeniable image of her great aunt Clara, Skye's longtime friend and housekeeper. These family ties made Meadow even more precious. The child's name was irritating. *But what could one expect from 'artsy' types*, Skye considered ruefully.

Jonathan Reese was a musician who played with his own band by night and taught middle school music by day. His wife was the band's lead singer and taught at an elementary school.

"Where's my Anna?" Rhys roared from the kitchen.

Skye shook her head in exasperation as Meadow wriggled from her arms and ran toward her grandfather. *That's right, Rhys, if you don't like your granddaughter's name simply give her a new one.* Following the little girl into the kitchen moments later, Skye's smile widened as she watched the affectionate breakfast scene between her husband and Meadow.

With his granddaughter on his lap, heads close together as they talked, the older Caucasian man and his young African-American granddaughter presented a stark visual contrast, Meadow was dark as Rhys was fair. He was still ridiculously handsome at sixty-nine, even with an equal measure of salt and pepper streaking his thick hair. His intense blue eyes focused on Meadow as she told him of her morning. His even white teeth gleamed between sensually smiling lips, lines etched deeply in the suntanned skin around his eyes and mouth, accentuated his features. Muscular arms embraced the child lightly as Meadow leaned against him and gazed up into his eyes.

"I'm your sweet tomato today. Tomorrow, I'll be your sweet banana."

DECEPTION'S LEGACY

Rhys shook his head, his eyes serious. "Well, now, sweetie, tomatoes aren't usually thought of as sweet. However, if you are a banana you are definitely sweet. And you always will be to me."

Skye moved to the stove and filled their plates with grits, bacon, and eggs. She glanced over at the pair. Rhys had already placed the pitcher of orange juice and full glasses on the lace-covered kitchen table.

Rhys shifted the four-year-old to her chair stacked with two thick phone books.

"Grandma, I'm hungry," Meadow announced with both hands full of a fork and knife.

"Here you go then." Skye placed the plate in front of her.

"Thank you, God, for my breakfast and for Grandma, Grandpa, Mommy, and Daddy, Amen!" Meadow blazed through the prayer and filled her mouth with eggs within a minute.

Rhys and Skye exchanged incredulous looks. "Well, it's a blessing we've never had to beg her to eat," Skye observed.

"Never," Rhys agreed with laughter in his eyes

Skye placed a full plate in front of Rhys and kissed him soundly. "Mr. Wielde, I think I'll keep you another day."

Rhys's eyes widened. "After almost thirty years, you'll have to if you want a full return on your investment."

Skye gave him a long withering look, mouth pursed and eyes narrowed while mentally running through a host of disparaging comments before opting for silence. Rhys laughed out loud knowing that for the moment he wouldn't be the target for his wife's blade sharp wit. Meadow watched their exchange while still shoveling food in her mouth. At her grandfather's booming laughter, childish giggles trickled out before scooping up another mouthful.

How little and how much his wife had changed since they met. He forked eggs and sausage into his mouth, stealing a glance at Skye. Her sassy glare reminded him of her days as a Drug Enforcement Administration, or DEA, agent.

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

"That look might have intimidated young agents back in the day, but I'm not one of your charges."

Skye ate silently, pointedly ignoring Rhys as he silently watched in admiration. No doubt about it, she still had it, but there was something else in her look, something he couldn't quite put a name to. A look, a feeling. He wasn't sure.

In the meantime, Meadow crawled to her knees on the phone books and reached across the table for the handle of the orange juice container. Her small fingers wrapped around it and she tipped it toward her. Still puzzling over Skye's expression, Rhys covered Meadow's hand and helped her fill her glass.

"Stop worrying about him, he's all right. Remember, he's your son, Gabe's protégé, and in God's care," Rhys gently admonished his wife.

Skye was worrying about Tristan. He was on his first DEA mission in Spain and she knew she should trust his training. All Gabe's agents did well. A wave of sadness rushed over her. Gabe would never train another agent; he was gone. Her friend, her mentor, her boss at the DEA, Gabriel Kinski, was gone. He'd died almost two years ago but the grief and emptiness had not lessened with the passage of time. Despite her concern for Tristan, Gabe's memory, much like he did in life, took center stage. Shielding her family from her sadness, she turned with glistening eyes toward the window gazing out at the sunrise washing over the Sangre De Cristo mountain range.

Gabe's passing had been peaceful - even celebratory - given Gabe's zest for life. During his second retirement, his first having been his U.S. Air Force retirement, Gabe had caught the sky diving bug from his beautiful wife, Sandy, a true southern belle. After a perfectly executed descent and landing, Gabe failed to emerge from beneath the canopy of his parachute. Skye raced to his side and pulled back the billowing fabric to find him smiling contentedly, eyes closed as though asleep. His heart had given out.

The Catholic Church in Cary, North Carolina where Gabe and Sandy attended religiously was incapable of accommodating the crush of mourners that descended on the little town to pay their

DECEPTION'S LEGACY

respects and celebrate Gabe's legacy. In the end, they filled the decorated cathedral lawn for the service. The congregation consisted of family, friends, neighbors, students, and dignitaries from the military, DEA, Interpol, and representatives from most of the major law enforcement agencies along the East Coast.

Seeming to pick up her thoughts, Rhys broke the silence. "Honey, I still can't get over the amount of people who attended Gabe's funeral. I've never attended a service with that many people. He was loved and greatly admired."

Skye nodded without turning to face her husband. She had long since given up on figuring out how Rhys always knew her thoughts.

Casting back in memory, Skye replayed the especially moving tribute of former Boy Scouts and military college students whom Gabe had influenced as a leader and a role model. The tribute concluded with a flyover formation consisting of his son, sons-in-law, and long retired members of flying wings, groups, and squadrons Gabe had commanded.

Skye could still hear the powerful whine of plane painting their colors against a clear blue sky bathed in a bright yellow shower of sunlight. A sea of mourning faces lifted toward the aerial tribute.

Lost in her own grief at losing a friend she could never replace, tears flowed hot and fast down her face. She pressed her lips tight to stifle the urge to howl and rail at such unfairness. As she lowered her head to dry her face, Tristan's grief-stricken face swam into view. She took a step toward her son just as she saw Rhys move to stand beside Tristan, placing his hand on his son's back. Father and son were mirror images with the same thick black shoulder length hair, facial features and height. They had always shared a strong bond.

Gabe hadn't intruded on that closeness, but he had touched something inside Tristan that resisted Skye and Rhys's attempts to dissuade their son from following in her and Gabe's footsteps. It started with stories that fired Tristan's imagination and ended with Tristan following where Gabe led and ended when her son became a DEA agent. Skye sighed. And now her son was undercover half a world away where neither she nor Rhys could watch over him.

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

Skye quickly wiped her eyes and walked over to the sink to wash the breakfast dishes. A steady drizzle of cold worry infiltrated her heart. *Not that Rhys could understand that! He just dismisses my concerns as mother-worry.* She turned to Rhys as he and Meadow stacked their dishes on the table.

"Let's go to Spain."

"The last thing Tristan needs is someone hovering over him, especially his DEA-celebrity mommy."

"I meant let's go to Spain for a vacation."

"Sure you did."

Skye winked, flashed a winning smile, and replaced the washcloth in the sink before walking to her husband. She wound her arms around his neck, sat in his lap, and nestled close, whispering, "If Anna wasn't here..." Rhys laughed and pushed his chair back from the table, pulling her closer.

"Hmmmph. You haven't changed." Rhys scrunched his brow. "Next, comes the bullying, followed by evidence justifying your worry, concluding with what you will do regardless of my 'short-sighted, narrow opinion.'"

Skye grinned. "You are wrong, delicious man. I'm going straight to pity for your gross misunderstanding and groundless assessment."

Rhys pulled her even closer and tightened his arms around her. He smoothed her hair as she leaned against him. Kissing slowly along the soft line of her jaw as he slid his arms beneath her thighs, he rose and set her firmly on the floor. "Good, that will give Anna and me a last opportunity for a walk before we head home this afternoon."

Taking the cue, Meadow cheered at the prospect of exploring the Colorado Mountains with her favorite, and only, grandfather.

"Woweee! Let's go, Granddaddy! I want to show you the baby deer and the yellow and blue bird that flew this close to me." The girl held her hands slightly apart to indicate the distance.

Skye watched them, momentarily shocked at her husband's abrupt dismissal, and then smiled at her granddaughter's infectious enthusiasm. Rhys swung Meadow up into his arms and carried her out the door.

Acknowledgments

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And success epitomized, Major General Roosevelt Mercer, Jr.

About the Author

Jacqueline G. Randolph is an Air Force officer who has served in a diversity of exciting assignments as a C-130 aircrew. Those missions include supporting the DEA, Special Forces, famed 101st and 82nd Army Airborne units, NASA space shuttle launches, and delivering United Nations supplies to war ravaged countries in the Middle East and the Balkans. She has also served as a missile launch officer, assistant professor at two Mississippi colleges, and as a GPS satellite operator. Prior to accepting a commission in the Air Force, she held positions with the Defense Contract Audit Agency, Federal Aviation Administration, and the National Transportation Safety Board. She holds an instrument-rated private pilot license, owns a property investment business, and dabbles in amateur theater. She enjoys skydiving, rafting, snorkeling, swimming, fencing, ballroom dancing, sports car racing and vacations/mission trips to Africa, Argentina, Alaska, and Mexico, Cuba, and the Arctic and Antarctic circles. Her biography is included in Marquis' *Whose Who in America* since 2003 and she holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in Accounting, Administration, and Commercial Aviation. Her future aspirations include a stint with the Peace Corps, Alaskan bush piloting, wintering over in Antarctica, and a second career as a missionary pilot. Born in Madrid, Spain, she is a world traveler and self-proclaimed adrenaline junkie.

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

The Deception Series

by

Jacqueline G. Randolph

Deception's Guard (2003)

Deception's Fury (2005)

Deception's Legacy (2007)

Deception's Bind (2008)

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"Deception's Guard has a... most interesting heroine and hero. Skye and Rhys give the reader danger and romance on a level seldom seen between the pages of a book.

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Shirley Roe, Allbooks Reviews; 2003 Editors Choice

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"Deception's Guard has a hearty portion of adventure coupled with plenty of romance. The author's vivid descriptions of the various settings of the book bring the locations and their respective culture alive. . the book is an admirable freshman effort for Randolph that is worth checking out."

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"Randolph has outdone many major writers in the creation of her two main characters and, especially, her female lead. Skye will become one of your all-time favorite characters! The tone and scenes bring readers into a distressing world and forces them to read on until the heroine allows them to leave...at the end of the book. Her writing is superb, the characters will become your heroes, and you will be searching for the next book in the series long before it is available. Trust me! This author is on the move! Watch her! She is a challenge to many other well-established writers. This is definitely a MUST-READ!"

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Dian Moore, Bookpleasures.com

Deception's Guard

by

Jacqueline G. Randolph

Book One in the Deception Series

Prologue

Rhys Wielde paced erratically in his office, strong hands tightly locked behind his broad back. His explosive rage escalating as the full impact of the wrenching betrayals just revealed to him began to resolve in his mind. Genoreach Technology, Inc. was his company, the company he had founded shortly after graduating from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. How dare they? How dare they subvert his company? The sting of the bitter betrayal by those who must be of his trusted associates was nearly incapacitating.

Turning at the end of his circuit, Rhys suddenly looked up and caught sight of a wild-eyed man staring without recognition back at him. The sight of his own reflection in the window startled him. As usual, his thick raven black hair was tousled from the repeated raking of his hands as he habitually did when upset, a sure sign of his barely repressed anger. His well-defined features, set in a deeply tanned face, matched the savagery reflected in his errant hair. His expressive blue eyes glittered with determination, his nostrils imperceptibly flared from the effort of restrained physical violence, and his lips were pursed at the mental images of betrayal that flickered through his mind at lightning speeds. In exasperation he stepped forward and extended his large hands from behind his back and, arms outstretched, he wearily pressed his palms flat against the massive windowpane above his bowed head. Momentarily he assumed a posture of raging defeat as he continued to gaze down through the wall length window at the bustling business district of Memphis, Tennessee.

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

As he continued to scrutinize the city 's massing crowds and compression of cars his eyes narrowed in fixation on the dark-suited men exiting his building and inconspicuously heading toward the parking lot within the press of the crowding humanity. They were representatives from the US Drug Enforcement Administration and the Department of Justice. He tightly clenched his hands into impenetrable fists as they exerted dangerous pressure against the glass. With closed eyes, he stood immobile while remembering their chilling detachment while relating that he had been fully investigated by the federal government. Further, he was deemed "low risk" enough to be informed of Genoreach's involvement in industrial espionage and drug trafficking. Momentarily stunned into incredulous silence, Rhys could do little but gape helplessly as the agents continued to explain the purpose of their visit in cold formalities.

According to their DEA investigation, intense research done by Genoreach had escalated the drug war by creating a genetic receptor for all known illegal drugs. The abominable creation was designed to annihilate the biological receptors in the brain responsible for addiction and necessary for withdrawal and rehabilitation. The destroyed receptors are then replaced by artificial receptors incapable of purging drugs and ultimately proving fatal with any attempts to remove the drug or gene receptor from the body, thereby assuring drug traffickers a captive market from the addict, his family, and eventually the government.

The biological development of this artificial gene, appropriately code named Omega for its ruthless capability to irreversibly end one's autonomy, had been positively traced to his company. Further, the DEA's Computer Forensic division had determined that subsequent black market and international cartel auctions and advertisements had been transacted through his company's extensive information systems.

The agents, following through with their devastating allegations, proceeded to demonstrate the methodology of how this potential carnage was accomplished. As proof, they produced confiscated demonstration disks, which had been intercepted en route to Cuba and Peru during their Foreign Cooperative Investigation. Given the

THE DECEPTION SERIES

evidence, Rhys had no doubt the research originated in his company. He unbelievably loaded the disks into his office computer, which was directly connected to the company main frame, and attempted to trace the data origin. In the short time he had with the agents and their proffered files, he could find no evidence to lead him to the formula's creator. Rhys exhausted all his systems prowess and program machinations until bitterly realizing how efficient an instructor he had been to his research team.

Finally, the impassive agents worked their way around to the main purpose of their visit subsequent to emphasizing the irrelevance of his permission or approval in continuing their investigation. They wanted his involvement and expertise in revealing and prosecuting those disreputable members of his research and development team responsible for this atrocity. Knowing he desperately needed time to absorb these devastating revelations, the agents informed him they would soon contact him for a decision. After efficiently gathering their evidence and purging his hard drive of residual files, they wordlessly departed as competently, expressionless, and slightly menacing as they had arrived.

Rhys resumed his feral pacing while recalling parts of the inconceivable discussion that had transpired.

"Total annihilation of all recuperative brain functions...cartel auctions and advertisements...espionage and trafficking...Genoreach used to create a weapon of irrevocable destruction."

His eyes became the fiery blue of angry flames as the litany in his mind reached a deafening crescendo.

Stumbling back from the window he landed heavily in his massive leather desk chair as the clenching muscular cords of his arm finally gave vent to his frustrated fury with a powerful sweep across the length of the oak desk. Vital files, the customized monitor, his full coffee cup, and all the surface contents aimlessly flew across the room on a trajectory finally broken by the smooth white surface of his inner office wall.

Surveying the jumbled carnage and visibly shocked by the audible reflection of his raging emotions, Rhys heavily collapsed back in his chair sublimating the savagery of his rage with the certain knowledge

that he would assuredly assist in bringing these traitors, these criminals, these murderers to justice; and so very much more!

Chapter One

Westcliffe, Colorado

"Finally," breathed Skye in frustration while studying the confident movements of her assignment, through the lens of her high-powered binoculars, as he emerged from his rustic cabin. Her observation point was an adjacent cabin a half-mile up a sloping hill obscured by the density of aromatic pine trees.

"So this is Rhys Wielde, child prodigy, CEO, philanthropist, dupe, and now vigilante," she cynically whispered her summation while adjusting the focus range for a closer inspection.

He was certainly handsome by the standards of most women, tall, broad shoulders, and a strong muscled chest. The biceps of his arms stood out invitingly under the sleeve of his navy blue polo shirt, as he carried a cumbersome tool kit with easy familiarity. His ebony hair was too long to be conservative. It brushed the lower part of his neck, not quite reaching shoulder length. His smooth skin was sun darkened and she knew from his dossier his eyes were blue.

He had always shunned the public interest and media pursuits, which Skye thought unfortunate as his compelling attraction could rival, if not exceed, any of the current male celebrities touted for their handsome features and appealing physique. He was wearing stonewashed jeans that molded the hard muscular contours of his thighs as his brow wrinkled in scrutinizing the condition of the cabin before settling next to the septic tank. He subconsciously ran his hands through his hair, a habitual gesture that Skye thought endearingly boyish, before confidently opening the toolbox in preparation for making repairs. Lost in concentration, she savored the experience of phonetically whispering his name again, "Reese" as she mentally recalled his innumerable accolades and humanitarian exploits.

THE DECEPTION SERIES

Genoreach Technology, Inc. was the company Rhys Wielde had built shortly after graduating from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Wielde had been identified and nurtured as an information systems prodigy by defense industries and collegiate institutes from his middle school years. His uncanny understanding and subsequent manipulation of the, then standard, computer complexities fortunately had been channeled positively after his single, astoundingly successful, foray into computer hacking at the age of 13.

The precocious teen had effectively entered several highly sensitive and top-secret military defense programs of government contractors. Neither stealing nor manipulating data, he had merely left a polite email message after each visit; "Have a great day!" After that, he constructed a complex maze of programs, passwords and subroutines calculated to lead the irate recipients of the message to "discover" him in precisely two months time.

Skye had laughed out loud when she had read that part of his dossier. She could well understand this mischievous but honest juvenile rebellion and bravado.

Far from prosecuting him to the 'full extent of the law,' the Defense Department sought to cultivate his abilities and his parents were only too willing to accept the offers of full college scholarships in exchange for his freelance consultation and software development in working with industry security teams in shoring up information systems of government contractors.

In the course of working in these industries, he discovered the scientific and technological advances in mating biology to computers. Rhys reveled in the endless possibilities of enhancing the human condition. Overwhelmingly allured, he had committed his life to creating and marketing opportunities to improve the quality of life for others.

He excelled in earning undergraduate and graduate degrees in Bioinformatics and opted to continue on at MIT for a year longer as their youngest research professor. Finally, frustrated with the proclivity of technology and medical industries to proliferate weapons of war at the expense of less lucrative humanitarian advances, he started his own company. A company with a dual

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

mission; one dedicated to research and development but also set up as a philanthropic foundation. Though the youngest staff member, he held the senior information systems position working closely with his team of renowned biologists and computer systems experts in whom he was assured shared the humanitarian visions of his company. His unwavering faith placed in his colleagues made his present situation all the more devastating. He had recently discovered that his trust had been misplaced—someone on his research and development team had betrayed him and the principles of his life's work!

“Great!” Skye thought sarcastically, “There’s nothing like the support and loyalty of one’s friends and colleagues. What a beautiful world we live in.”

His work in categorizing and isolating active brain neurons in coma, cataleptic, and autistic patients had made him a contender for the Nobel Prize several times in past years. It was widely believed his goal of translating this brain activity into interactive language through information systems and, thereby, enabling patients to communicate would finally earn him that coveted accolade. The compassion and innovations of his ongoing economic development initiatives in the Mississippi Delta and the Appalachian Mountains had consistently decreased the poverty and illiteracy statistics in those communities for going on five consecutive years.

In contrast to the high visibility of his professional life, information on his private life was sparse. He deftly evaded personal publicity, always preferring to place his company and staff in the forefront of media feeding. Hence, little was known of this mythic CEO and after 10 years at Genoreach's helm he had yet to become recognizable to the general public.

Skye tossed back the loose curls of her shoulder length black hair, annoyed with its length after wearing it secured during her undercover work in Ecuador for the last two months. Her hands absently caressed the binoculars, coaxing them to reveal secrets about the man restlessly surveying the outside condition of the rugged cabin after emerging from his initial hibernation subsequent to arriving in the early morning darkness.

She knew that prior to his establishing a temporary residence in the mountain cabin, personnel from the DEA headquarters had

THE DECEPTION SERIES

thoroughly briefed him on his role in the international operation to retrieve Omega. He had arrived unnoticed on an early morning flight aboard a DEA jet providing for efficiency, speed, and necessary expedience not afforded by commercial flights. His arrival on the sole runway of the dilapidated local airfield had been purposely planned at night, after which Rhys was provided a blue Ford pickup truck in which to drive alone to the cabin. The late arrival time and vehicle used so as not to arouse local suspicion regarding his purpose in this sparsely populated mountain community.

The cabin had been selected for its isolation in these Colorado Mountains, its rustic exterior concealing comfortably sparse furnishings, animal skin rugs, and Native American decor in keeping with the region's cultural heritage. He had arrived with a simple carry bag and briefcase and quietly slipped into the cabin, not to emerge until his late afternoon decision to improve the outer structure of his transient home.

Standing at the curtained window, wearing a faded turquoise fitted T-shirt, black jeans and worn tennis shoes—clothing selected to minimize attention, Skye suddenly realized that her careful study of this man was rapidly growing beyond what she had afforded her previous assignees. "Dad would just love this," her lips lifted in a smirk as she thought of her father's approval of his oldest daughter "ogling," no matter the professional capacity, a man.

Her father had been a US Air Force aviator—hence her name—stationed in Madrid, Spain, when her mother had captured his heart. Her elegantly petite mother was the only daughter of a noble Spanish family, which endeavored to continue that reign through her arranged marriage into one of the most prominent families in Madrid. The subsequent controversy of her marriage, never officially recognized in Spain, severed her from the rich family heritage of her native country. The loss of which, to Skye's recollection, she had never shown any regret.

Her tall dark father had unwaveringly bore the equivalent burden of cultural and societal expectations with silent dignity. As part of the heralded rare breed of African-American aviators during the raging warfare of American civil rights, his marriage embittered the majority

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

of factions in his fractured country and served only to fortify his union with his Spanish bride.

Despite their differences of language, culture, and race they had forged a marriage stronger than Skye had ever witnessed. Though she had long since resolved that such intimacy was unavailable to her, she had always been inspired by her parent's relationship. Four children and 40 years later her parents were still deeply in love and carrying on a "torrid love affair" as her mother took great pleasure in describing the affection she shared with her husband.

It was from her mother that Skye had mostly inherited her features. She'd worked hard in maintaining her voluptuous figure, which a college boy friend, whom had majored in Latin American Studies, had once compared to castanet wielding Spanish señoritas seductively beckoning the lusty blood of conquistador admirers. Back then, she had been irritated at what she thought was false flattery. Now she took pride in maintaining one of her major assets as an agent. Her physical strength, unrelenting endurance, and attractive body had often been the deciding factor in numerous escapes from potentially lethal situations.

Her piercing brown eyes framing a sharp, aristocratic nose were a definite inheritance from her Spanish mother. Her sensuously generous lips were the only hereditary concession from her African-American father.

Skye felt that it was her mother to whom she could attribute her unconventional career choice. Theatrical and daring, Rosita Mathews had ensured that her children were imbued with her native Spanish tongue and that they fearlessly embraced life with independence and determination. In admiration, Skye indulged in both her mother's love of the theatre and her father's aviation prowess.

After earning degrees in Latin American Studies, International Relations, and Commercial Aviation, she had sought a career in which to use her eclectic education and theatrical interest.

It was during her college years that a recruiter from the DEA first interested her in law enforcement. Shortly before earning her second graduate degree, she was given an interview by Gabe Kinski, chief of

THE DECEPTION SERIES

DEA Special Operations. In addition to being her boss and mentor, in many respects he was her closest friend.

He had discussed the varied missions of the administration and how her diverse education, skills, and ethnicity would serve as an asset. She had been mesmerized with the endless adventures of bringing criminals to justice. Since being hired on with the administration, her classic Latin looks coupled with her command of the Spanish language, perfect mimicry of dialects, theatrical realism, and her pilot skills had resulted in her being highly regarded as a field agent by both the DEA leadership and her colleagues, especially within the offices of Central and South America in which she was assigned.

Hence, it was a rare occurrence that Skye should find herself enmeshed in a domestic operation with not a hint of Spanish speaking peoples or the trappings of a Latin American environment.

Her current assignment of guarding Rhys Wiede, founder of Genoreach Technology Inc., had all the makings of a challenge. Protecting Rhys, who had unwittingly become enmeshed in a high stakes and deadly drug trafficking operation, provided her with the opportunity to hone her deception skills as an American, as opposed to her expertise as a Latin American.

Skye pulled a crude wooden chair to the curtained window and lowered her hips heavily into the seat. The sparsely furnished three-room cabin boasted a crudely built bed with a colorful earth toned quilt and matching shams. The windows were curtained with Native American designs and woven rugs covered the bedroom floor and adorned the walls.

An efficient bathroom with a narrow shower stall, a living room cozily furnished with a wood burning stove, animal skin rugs, and wall hangings completed the decor. A nice enough cabin, but not home. She sighed deeply while thinking of how she had looked forward to spending several recuperative weeks at her personal cabin in Wetmore, 25 miles east of Westcliffe, after having spent two months in South America.

Establishing an identity and operation base in Ecuador had been challenging. Given the continuing economic upheaval and border

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

disputes, Ecuadorian President Arcon had requested US assistance in providing contingency plans. The DEA had inserted her into the country to make the assessment of how to proceed in garnering details of drug activities associated with the Ecuador-Peru border skirmishes.

Skye had opted to establish a role in the country's entertainment society as a nightclub singer with a temperamental nature. In choosing this identity, she was made privy to information provided by her underworld and government patrons. As bartenders the world over are aware, the relaxed atmosphere of entertainment clubs often produce instant trust and camaraderie which Skye had used to her advantage. She was just beginning to make very useful contacts when Gabe had recalled her.

Alas, 'the best laid plans of mice and men...' are so easily disrupted by the administration. Gabe had met her at the airport in Miami, Florida upon her return from Ecuador. While they had waited for her luggage to appear on the baggage claim carousel, Gabe had provided a pre-briefing on her current assignment.

"Skye, I've assigned you to a quick and easy assignment in Colorado. An ideally isolated location since you've already requested time off for some rest and relaxation at your cabin and to visit your parents in Denver. As a matter of fact, I especially chose Westcliffe, Colorado for the operation base to accommodate the vacation plans of my best agent." Gabe concluded with an impressive show of sincerity accompanied by his warmest look of admiration.

She'd favored him with a withering look mindful of their crowded surroundings before informing him that his Irish gift of the blarney was well and truly transparent even as she acquiesced in undertaking the assignment and preparing for another round of her life's adventures.

"Well he looks fit enough, I wonder if he is also a runner in addition to being into weight lifting," Skye mused in attempting to fill in the knowledge blanks on Rhys that had been omitted in her perusal of his dossier and briefings from the administration headquarters.

Suddenly, Skye's shoulders stiffened as she noticed a blue sedan, from a distance of two miles winding a path on the dirt road toward

THE DECEPTION SERIES

Rhys's cabin. The front of his cabin faced the road and Rhys was just now hauling a tool kit from the septic tank at the side of the house to the back of the cabin.

"Could be anyone, maybe someone's lost," she hoped as the sedan continued toward the cabin. "Get back in the cabin!" Skye muttered the command with heightened emotions hoping Rhys would somehow receive the warning telepathically.

Incredibly, he blithely continued his ministrations to the back of the cabin's exterior oblivious to the potential danger as he deeply concentrated on his task.

"Does he think this is a Boy Scout camping trip? So much for giving him the code name cougar," she bit as her irritation mounted. Rhys's code name was an additional security measure of cloaking his identity in the event the operation's radio transmissions were intercepted.

The sedan was within firing range now and still Rhys remained absorbed in repairing the outdoor septic tank, his hair sweat dampened from his exertions.

"You idiot, get some cover!" she desperately whispered, her voice rising as she reached for the radio and called her security backup, "Tom, ID on the blue sedan?" The inquiry taking on the edge of a command as she instinctively began to reach for her weapon in preparing to join Rhys at his cabin.

"Negative on the ID. We're locked on the vehicle," was his distracted reply,

Skye knew Tom's team were expert marksmen and wouldn't hesitate to obliterate the vehicle and its occupants at the first sign of hostility.

"Why doesn't the cougar cover?" she petulantly queried, the commanding tone less evident now as she moved into the open doorway of her cabin flexing her legs for the sprint down the slope.

"Negative reply, we're still locked," Tom replied, cryptically. From his cold tone Skye could tell he didn't want to be further distracted, as he concentrated his instincts toward the highly probable attack.

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

Skye held her breath and moved quickly downward through the tight concealment of the trees as the sedan leisurely passed the house, the conversing elderly occupants filling Skye's binoculars lens never gave any indication that they had noticed Rhys and his tinkering behind the cabin as they continued down the road.

"Tom, apparently this assignment needs watching from a little closer proximity – I'll execute!" Skye informed her colleague in a tone less brusque than she intended as she retreated back to her cabin after watching the billowing dust from the retreating car's wake dissipate on to the road.

"Roger that!" Tom rejoined in a heartfelt sigh.

Rhys could be dead right now, his body riddled with bullets or gaping from a mortar silencer. Skye angrily exhaled as the mental picture assailed her senses and affirmed the potential deadliness of the administration's operations.

Though, she had every confidence in their ability to protect him, Rhys's lack of good sense and situational awareness angered her. Her irritation was compounded with the fact that her excessive reaction went beyond what she had ever felt for her past assignees. Her seething intensified at that realization.

She continued to ponder on the apparent oblivion of Rhys's actions. Didn't he realize the type of desperate personalities who dealt in the lucratively crippling business of drugs? She imagined that his anger at his colleagues only extended to the boundaries of a professional disagreement as to the direction of his company.

With certainty, she knew that the involvement of ruthless Latin American drug lords and US underworld criminal activities ensured the danger to Rhys's life. His opposition to their greed and inhumanity guaranteed that. Skye knew that the numerous agents hidden in the forested mountains were vigilant in assessing any unexpected activity as hostile. As innocuous as the elderly couple in the sedan appeared to be in their enjoyment of a mountain drive, they could have easily been assassins prepared to eradicate Rhys's life as if he had been nothing more than a bothersome insect.

She hoped that his overconfidence did not come from a belief that his time-delayed programmed message released within his company

THE DECEPTION SERIES

would not be intercepted before the following day. The odds were that the message had already been intercepted before its programmed release, setting events in motion that the administration had prepared for by way of contingency planning. Doubtless, he just couldn't imagine his "trusted colleagues" murdering him.

Sighing heavily, she retrieved her binoculars and resumed her watchfulness at the window. Skye wished she could tell him that the extent of his colleague's involvement was now negligible, as their skill and expertise had been fully exploited. They had performed their task and were expendable. Even now, his staff members could be dead, unless they had possessed enough survival savvy to ensure their indispensability until financially compensated.

As Skye intensely studied Rhys surveying the mountain range and surrounding hills, she felt sadness for him. The betrayals he had suffered at the hands of those he trusted were inconsequential in comparison to the probable menace awaiting him in the days ahead.

* * *

Impenetrable night had begun to blanket the mountain range, when Skye silently changed into black body molding clothes and secured the ebony shimmer of her shoulder length hair into a cotton head cap.

Since that episode several hours earlier she had made the decision to insert herself closer to Rhys without revealing her purpose. She no longer felt confident that guarding him from a distance was the wisest course.

While reviewing her small arsenal of weapons she briefly reviewed the plan developing in her mind to share Rhys's cabin the following evening, before focusing on her present intentions. She retrieved her 9mm pistol from her carrying case, checking the chamber and safety clip before smoothly placing the menacing steel into her shoulder holster with practiced ease. The weapon was bulkier than one she preferred to carry; however, tonight she felt a need for the comfort of the added lethal weight.

Silently she slipped lithely from the cabin and soundlessly drifted down the half-mile slope toward his cabin. She made a stealthy

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

survey around the perimeter before returning to his bedroom window in which the only illumination of the cabin showed. She adjusted the secured ear insert of a receiver tuned to a transmitter she had previously placed in the cabin. The transmitter was capable of picking up the slightest sounds within its walls. She pressed against the outer wall of his bedroom, beneath his window and waited for his lights to extinguish.

The wait gave her time to reflect on her life and, most especially, her parents' expectations. Skye suppressed a smirk with the thought that her parents would wholeheartedly approve of her current nocturnal activities. They made no secret that they had eagerly hoped at her present age of 34 she should find a husband and endeavor to provide them with those duly owed grandchildren. Her two brothers and sister had since taken that path, falling nicely into her parents' script. Apparently, her nuptials and subsequent producing of progeny was the grand finale.

Too bad they'll never understand that my life is completely unsuitable for 'home, hearth, and husband'. Sadness descended upon her as she remembered the many debilitating relationships, which had brought that fundamental truth home to her. Just as quickly, she dismissed the longing with a whispered prayer of thanksgiving for the idyllic life of adventure and travels she enjoyed and to which she was so well suited.

The sudden blackness of Rhys's bedroom brought Skye out of her reverie. She caught herself caressing the lethal weapon holstered at her breast. She rose, slowly and stealthily, in the crisp night breeze, and moved, keeping in rhythm with the swaying of aromatic pines and aspens, until she finally stood in the shadows of his window. Stealthily peeking through the exposed sliver between the curtain and window edge, she looked into the room.

"At least he had sense enough to close the curtains," she complimented backhandedly as she scanned the contents of the room and finally rested her widened eyes on the occupant as her breathing increased.

Rhys laid on his back, sprawled nakedly on the bed, his covers in disarray. She couldn't tell if he was asleep, the sparsely covered dark hair on his chiseled chest rose and fell evenly as if he had found

THE DECEPTION SERIES

temporary anchorage within the eye of a storm. The full moonlight spilled indiscriminate rays through the scant lightweight of the curtains, the spotlight revealing the disheveled condition of his hair splayed on the pillow and his eyes gazing up steadily toward the lazy oscillation of the ceiling fan. One powerfully built arm lay across his forehead. The taut cords of his forearm moving in response to his hand bunched in a fist, as if in rage or deep reflection. Seeming to sense her speculation, his hand unclenched and languidly began a soothing rub of his muscularly sculpted chest.

Skye's throat tightened. Suddenly she began to feel heated and cursed the black pants, sweater, and cap, which she was convinced were the source of her present discomfort. Skye couldn't comprehend any other explanation for the temperature change. She removed the cap and tucked it into her pants' waist and shoved the cuffs of her long sleeved sweater up to her elbows. As if experiencing the same vortex of discomfort, Rhys's apparent agitation continued as he raised both hands up and over his head to grasp the headboard.

The movements further defined the magnificent contours of his body. Skye silently cursed herself for her unprofessional attitude in being magnetically drawn to the muscular attractiveness of his body. She impatiently swiped the gathering beads of perspiration from her forehead with her sweater sleeve before continuing her scrutiny with renewed determination.

Attempting to get back on her professional footing, she assessed that his apparent good physical condition would make it easier for them to accomplish an escape, if necessary. At least she would be unhampered by his being overweight or physically unfit, as characterized by the majority of men his age.

She mentally offered kudos to Rhys Wielde for his physical fitness and health at the age of 37 years. Good – a cool, detached, professional assessment! A self-congratulatory smile tugged the corners of her mouth upward as she enjoyed the cooling pine-scented breeze lightly rifling through her hair in support of her victorious return to equanimity.

Suddenly, in one lithe movement, Rhys rose from the bed and impatiently moved toward the window. The rippling of muscles in his thighs drew her attention to the proportions of his potent

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

manhood as a few quick strides brought him to the window. Skye was instinctively driven downward from the window edge in a silently languid collapse by his sudden advance.

For long moments, she was aware of his presence at the still curtained window. Skye neither moved nor barely breathed, as she seemed to sense in him a palpable frustration and yearnings to accomplish his purpose. He stood immobile at the window scanning the horizon and pressing one open hand flat against the glass as if to communicate his feelings. Finally, he moved from the window and collapsed carelessly back onto the bed.

Irritated at her uncharacteristic reaction of sexual arousal, Skye greedily filled her lungs with the refreshing mountain air while mopping her moist face with her cap. After one last look of assurance that he was safely in bed, she slunk noiselessly toward her cabin in clothing drenched from her perspiring body as the litany, "Limpid and passionless he is not," accompanied her erratic heartbeat.

Deception's Fury

by

Jacqueline G. Randolph

Book Two in the Deception Series

Prologue

Cold. Dark. Imprisoned. Rotting stench. Screaming pain.

How long have I been here?

Her body aches. Her spirit is numb from conditions no human could long endure. Some part of her fading existence registers a gnawing sensation and terrifying sounds at her cheek. Scurrying activity of rodents surrounds her. Weakly protesting, her raised hand attempts to brush off the repulsive offender. Slicing pain rips raggedly through every nerve, shutting down all physical responses more effectively than an electrical overload. From a long distance in a far away place, the advancing sound of rats and the night eyes of slithering creatures assaults her ever-deadening senses.

She closes her eyes and concentrates on the faces eerily wafting behind her eyelids. A tall man; sun-darkened, thick black hair raked through with hands tender and familiar. Warmth. Passion. Blue eyes gaze upon her with love and grief and determination. Hers. Rhys. Two children: the same but different. A fair-skinned girl; waist-length dark brown hair and expressive brown eyes. "Mommy." Hers. Sierra. A dark-skinned, dark-haired boy. Mischievous. Adventurous. He whispers excitedly, "Mommy." Hers. Jon. Now a gruff man. Loyal. Faithful. Friend. DEA. Gabe. "You must tell him. Don't leave like this." "All right then, it's your way."

Dry bile claws up her throat. Nausea saturates her near-numb senses. She concentrates on the faces in her mind. A toddler. Her heart squeezes. Her breath catches. Her breasts ache with echoes of nourishment. A toddler. An olive-skinned miniature Rhys. Tristan

Alaric. "Wolf." Soft baby breath. Pudgy baby hugs. The anchoring images fade.

No. Don't go. How long have I been here?

Screaming pain. Rotting stench. Imprisoned. Dark. Cold.

Chapter One

Wetmore, Colorado

"Daddy, when is Mommy coming home?" Sierra asked, her voice quivering with unshed tears.

"Soon, Baby," Rhys replied as he prayed his very smart daughter would leave it at that.

"But it has been nine days and you said she would be back in one week. That's seven days. She's late!"

Of course, she wouldn't leave it at that.

Now Jonathan Reese intently looked at him for a response. Rhys resettled Wolf on his lap as he snuggled close in his soft fleece jumper. Next, he embraced Sierra dressed in her pony-print nightgown as she cuddled next to him on one side and he placed a kiss between Jon's accusingly staring eyes—*he really was the very image of his mother.*

"Okay, gang, here's the deal. We are going to finish reading about the fun of eating green eggs and ham. Then, we are going to read Mommy's last note to us. Then you three are going to bed. The sooner you do, the sooner Mommy just may come home from work with Uncle Gabe tomorrow. Jon, it's your turn to read a page."

Thankfully, the children were falling in with his plan. As eight year-old Jon read about resistance to change in the world of Dr Seuss, his twin, Sierra, followed along ready to dispute any incorrectly pronounced word. Three year-old Tristan Alaric, known as "Wolf", was sound asleep.

Where is she? "She" was Skye, his wife of nine years and a Drug Enforcement Administration consultant. Prior to their marriage, she had been an acclaimed DEA undercover agent. In fact, they had met

THE DECEPTION SERIES

when she was his undercover bodyguard during a DEA operation in Colorado, Peru, and Ecuador. Of course, given her numerous facades and disguises, he didn't know who she was until well into the most dangerous phase of the operation which included their pseudo marriage, a drug cartel, and an abundance of murderous intents. She had been willing to risk her life for his during the fury of an assassin, but he had thwarted her plans and earned a bullet wound for his trouble.

With a bit of deft computer wizardry, their pseudo marriage had become very real and she had traded her active fieldwork for the position of an "as needed" consultant upon learning of her first pregnancy.

Up until last week, she prioritized her marriage and family at their home in Greenwood, Mississippi. Her other activities included limited involvement with the DEA, her part-time professorships at the local colleges, and overseeing her local air charter business, Skyeborne.

This all changed last week while he'd been in the middle of a monthly board meeting of his company, Genoreach Technologies, dedicated to research and development of bioinformatic technologies--the mating of biology and information systems--and philanthropic endeavors. The corporate atmosphere of the room heightened with activity as dark-suited directors and department heads conducted business around the long rectangular cherry wood conference table in the midst of hovering media. There had been journalists present as Genoreach had successfully demonstrated communication with a comatose patient via information systems. The subject of donating two hundred computers to impoverished public schools in the Appalachians and the Mississippi Delta was underway when Gwen, his auburn-haired slim suited secretary, slipped him a note and crisply informed him that Skye was waiting in his office and urgently needed to speak with him. As his extremely competent wife had never visited him in a crisis, his blue eyes widened in surprise and he anxiously raked his hand through the raven thickness of his shoulder length hair. He stood and subconsciously smoothed his tailor-made dark blue suit and burgundy blue paisley tie as he quickly excused himself after placing the reins of the meeting into those of a department head.

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

He'd distractedly complimented and assured the corporate sponsors and media as he steadfastly moved through the pressing crowds toward the door.

"Mr Wielde, are there any more micro-computer developments for eliminating paralysis?"

"Mr Wielde, where are you in your claims to eradicate epilepsy?"

The questions continued as he flashed his most gracious smile while never slacking his pace. Now a hand found his in adulation, then a friendly touch at his back in an attempt to gain his attention. Rebecca, a tall red-hair woman with a flawless porcelain complexion stepped in his path. She was dressed in an emerald green power suit that hugged her curvaceous figure and revealed toned shapely legs that stopped toe to toe with the head of Genoreach Technologies. She winked at him familiarly and Rhys groaned inwardly at her presumption of their past intimacy which had been dead for almost 15 years.

"Rhys, is there any truth to the rumors of a merger with Guver Medical? You and I have talked often and. . .intimately. . .about your low opinion of many medical professionals."

Rhys wouldn't let that pass. "Rebecca, my wife has helped me to improve that opinion considerably. You wouldn't know that as I haven't spoken with you outside of a press conference in more than fourteen years." He gave her a dismissing look as he moved past her. She shot him a vicious glare to the muffled laughter of her colleagues. Finally, he was out the door and moving through the open cubicles and offices as he greeted his staff and employees along the way.

He entered the massive glass doors into his office suite and noted his secretary hadn't returned. Her two administrative assistants were busily collating copies and fielding calls in preparation for an upcoming Bioinformatics Summit in New York the following week.

"Please hold my calls, Sara," he said to the middle-aged Korean woman as she ended one call and prepared to receive another. He caught her wink just as he entered the heavy wooden doors of his office.

He found his beautiful wife standing behind his oak desk bathed in the South's winter sunshine spilling through the wall-length

THE DECEPTION SERIES

window behind her. She was of Spanish and African-American heritage, dressed in a short black leather jacket, white turtleneck shirt, light blue jeans and black heeled boots. Soft raven curls surrounded the golden skin of her face and fell about her shoulders. She looked at least a decade younger than her forty-three years; however, a consummate actress, she could convincingly portray a teenager or an old gaunt hag with equal ease. Her full lips curved as she smiled down at the picture of their children prominently placed on his desk. There were two other pictures of her flanking those of the children.

"Skye, what is it? Are the children in trouble?" He anxiously closed the door and glanced around the office for a dose of serenity before the storm. There were two stylish overstuffed burgundy and black designer chairs arranged in a corner flanking a low glass aquarium table. Motivational pictures of nature, green plants and state of the art audio-visual equipment displayed around the room. Briefly, he glanced at the adjacent wall portrait of his parent's wedding just as he circled the desk to move toward her on soft burgundy plush carpeting, his six-foot frame looming over her by five inches.

"They're fine." She'd replied with a bright smile, too bright. He knew she was about to drop a big one on him. They studied one another silently with the bright colorful fish in the aquarium momentarily providing the only movement in the room. Before she could say another word he enveloped her in his arms. Slightly tilting her head back he gazed into her eyes and saw worlds there. There was the fall and rise of his life; love and fulfillment were there. Releasing a sigh of gratitude, he pressed his mouth gently to hers and replenished his soul. Moving his hands to her face, he caressed the soft vulnerability of her slender neck and deepened the kiss. He trailed gentle kisses along her cheek and into her black silken hair.

"Ahhh Rhys." She softly moaned, "I do love you."

He smiled down at her. "You'd be wise not to incriminate yourself with that confession, darling. I'll hold you to it for the rest of our lives," he teased before gazing into her eyes for long moments. "Whatever you are about to tell me, whatever argument or disagreement we are about to have, know that I love you, too. Nothing will ever change that. I'd give my life...again...for you."

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

Skye became quiet in remembering Rhys's prone body after his encounter with a deadly assassin in Ecuador during their only mission together years ago. She'd had no idea just how vital he was to her life until she lay under him, soaking in his blood as he unconsciously shielded her body on the green floral lawn of a spectacular centuries-old mansion in Ecuador. An assassin lay several feet away, his bloody work finally stopped by disguised DEA agents. That event had exquisitely clarified the feelings she had for Rhys.

"Fortunately, you won't have to take such drastic actions this time. I need to pilot a mission to Buenos Aires. I'll be gone for a week. It's nothing dangerous, just an out and back. The kids are out of school next week. Why not take to them to the cabin in Colorado for a short vacation?"

Rhys knew this explanation was a pale version of the truth. "Not good enough, honey, give me more."

"You are so demanding, Rhys! I wish you'd confine your appetite to our bedroom!" She moved away from him and stood looking down upon the bright and active aquarium world while pouting in invitation for him to share in her humor.

There is Jon's face when he demands his way. Now Rhys was beginning to get really nervous. She was trying to divert him. Redirect his attention. Appeal to his humor and his sexuality. "Again, it won't work. Skye, you haven't been on a mission in over nine years. At your insistence, not mine! You resigned from fieldwork because of the inherent dangers. Have the children slipped in your priorities?"

"Not fair, Rhys! It is only an out and back!" She glowered petulantly, her temper obviously rising at his dogged queries.

"Don't treat me like a stranger, like a person who can't tell when you are blatantly lying to protect me from the truth. Tell me precisely what is going on. What could possibly entice you to set aside all your very logical and sensible decisions to put this life behind you?"

Rhys stalked near her, his voice now a whisper as he reached for her chin and secured it in his right hand. "By God, you had better tell me the truth or I will follow you to the ends of the earth for the answer. And you know I will! But first I'll beat Gabe to a bloody oblivion for allowing you to even consider this lunacy."

Deception's Bind

by

Jacqueline G. Randolph

Book Four in the Deception Series

Prologue

Rhys Wielde was an extremely attractive man in his early thirties: physically and financially. From all accounts he was a confirmed bachelor with a healthy appetite for beautiful athletic women who possessed an additional store of stamina. He didn't have a reputation for longevity in his relationships though he was monogamous in them. She had to give the consortium credit for providing her with an easy target with the added bonus of being deliciously enjoyable. He was a ridiculously naïve, bleeding heart, sanctimonious American, but then there was no one left in the world who expected anything of substance and significance from that quarter of the world anyway. It really didn't matter so long as he kept the contents of his empty head inside his shut mouth while she used his body to sate her lust and allowed her to shield crimes behind his philanthropic projects. She smiled slyly at the irony of her intent. She would to rape him of every ounce of his empty words and disillusioned plans for restoring educational opportunity and humanity dignity in Mexico during his little outreach effort in this wretchedly backward country.

She watched him give his impassioned presentation to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, or UNHCR, of which she was a part and used to disguise her more lucrative criminal purposes. The UNHCR had agreed to partner with this man of international renown in his efforts to create an educational compound on which Mexican and Guatemalan refugee children were fed, clothed, housed, and educated in preparing them as future leaders in their country's economic and political stability. She exchanged looks with several dual-role colleagues whom were part of the narcotic consortium as

they sharing their mutual contempt of the man and his high ideals. She returned her attention to the tall, dark, and powerful Genoreach Technologies, inc. CEO as his presentation transitioned to a video simulation of the completed compound, proposed curriculum and resultant human product. He was six feet tall with rich thick nearly impossible black hair which he wore to his shoulders. His well-cut expensive navy blue serge suit and crisp white collar shirt did little to conceal the muscularly athletic strength and confidence of the man. His mouth was sensual and the hard planes of his face were enhanced with naturally suntanned skin. It was his eyes that were the most alive and the most probing. They were an entity apart from the whole; a fiery ice blue impassioned one moment and a sensually compelling siren the next. His eyes simultaneously touched all the room occupants: collectively and personally. His charismatic delivery had already persuaded the gullible legitimate members of the United Nations council before he'd even reached the midway point of his presentation.

She sat as if in rapt attention to his dynamic presentation while the consortium's plan reeled quickly through her mind. She voraciously calculated the multi-million U.S. dollar profits and the resultant political expansion from their success. She started from the concluding applause and uncrossed her long attractive legs to stand with the audience in their adoring ovation. As Rhys Wielde began moving toward her on his way to the exit door at her back she reached into her valise and slipped on flesh-toned fingerguards before extracting the small gauze pad, careful not to allow the contents to touch her skin. Rhys turned briefly toward her with a ready smile and a smoldering look of attraction as he assessed her Eurasian beauty with a glance of desire. Just as he moved past her, the woman reached out and brushed his exposed hand in the crush of his admirers so that the high and mighty American, Rhys Wielde, only made it to the door before the chemical commenced an assault.

Chapter One

Alexandria, Virginia

Skye Mathews glared ominously at her boss, DEA Chief of Special Operations Gabe Kinski, while quickly losing patience with his inability to understand that she was exhausted and required not a little down time. She had just returned from a grueling mission in Bolivia where she'd collected a few nasty additions to her extensive designs of body scars. Her American assignee had, somehow, guessed her identity after his virulent attack of passionate lust for her and reverted to his chivalrous cultural roots. After having suffered a beating from a thug in an effort to remain in character due to the American's blundering, she had promptly drugged him up with her store of pharmaceuticals, concealed his unconscious carcass for 36 hours in her hidden aircraft and wrapped up the mission in that exact order. Her reward for bringing in the successful mission apparently was not time off for healing and mental recuperation but being tossed into a pond teeming with starving flesh-eating piranhas. The only positive point in Gabe's explanation was that she didn't have to directly deal with an American man this go-round; just the Canadian government and some corporations trying to hitch a ride on a United Nation's vehicle in fulfilling their do-gooder requirement for political or tax purposes. She had long since dispensed with the need or desire for male intimacy in her life. She found it to be too messy, emotionally unfulfilling, and the enormous investment far exceeded the scant rewards.

Skye exhaled heartily and rubbed her red eyes with a hand devoid of two fingernails; compliments of a Bolivian thug's concept of torture. Her hair was black and large soft curls fell to just below her shoulder. Her features were mostly Spanish from her mother and her full lips were the only genetic concession from her African-American father. At 29 years and 5'7" she was slim and athletic and, in fact, wearing her Syracuse University sweatshirt, favorite shorts, white socks and athletic shoes as she was just leaving her hotel suite for a run at the moment that Gabe had ominously shown up at her door.

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

"Gabe, you didn't have to come here for the debrief. I'd planned to visit you at the DEA headquarters this afternoon."

"There's no need for our best agent to suffer the inconvenience of the office. I know this mission has taken a toll on you. It's the least I can do to provide a more comfortable setting for your post mission requirements."

Skye had given him a squinty-eyed look and knew this didn't bode well. A sledge hammer was even now descending from the sky with a trajectory aimed for her head so that she turned her face upward so as not to be caught unawares. "I'd prefer a direct frontal execution and not this cowardly shot in the back approach," she'd reprimanded before giving him an icy look.

Gabe was nonplussed. His protégé of five years had a prickly personality but consistently brought in a successful mission. He was the standard 45 year old Irish Catholic specimen born and raised in Boston, with the requisite accent, and mostly a full head of brown hair atop a muscular stocky height of 5'8. "We need you on a mission Skye; sorry we can't give you any downtime."

Skye detected no sign of remorse or apology in his statement. In her present mood she was inclined to think she was just another piece of furniture or tool in the administration's arsenal with no feelings or considerations with which the leadership need concern themselves. Before that thought could solidify the remembrance of Gabe's friendship, care, and unfaltering support through the past years flooded her heart with warmth. He'd been by her side upon her return from Latin America yesterday and during the DEA medical staff's borderline approval of her mission-ready status.

"I'm tired Gabe; bone weary. Just give me a day or two to get my balance."

"I'm sorry, winner. You know I'd give you that and more if I could. Canada is already moving funds and its interception by those UN pretenders could mean a significant increase of narco-trafficking into the US over the Mexican border. I can only give you 12 hours of recoup time at best. Your private flight is scheduled for ten tonight. I'll leave this mission dossier for your read through before I take you to the airport at nine for the pre-departure brief and to answer any questions you have."

THE DECEPTION SERIES

While Gabe had been talking, Skye walked sluggishly to the hotel refrigerator and retrieved a bottle of orange juice from which she emptied in a long swallow. Tossing the bottle into the trash basket she settled back into the seat across from her boss just as he finished. She said not a word just sighed heavily and shook her head in the affirmative. Gabe stood and walked over to her before placing his hand upon her black silken head.

“Thanks kid. I promise you’ll get a month at your Colorado cabin or that extravagant new mansion you just bought in Mississippi when this is done. There are pretty high international political stakes here, otherwise, we would have used someone else.”

Skye nodded and Gabe made his way to the door. Before letting himself out he turned to face her as she untied and loosened her running shoes and flung them in the air with a strong twist of her ankle. Hauling herself from the chair to the couch, she flopped down in a spread eagle position and closed her eyes.

“I’ll see you at 9,” he reminded before departing. He was secure in her professionalism and sense of duty which would bring her another success. This in spite of her frustration with the administration scheduling and the throbbing aches and pain from her physical and emotional injuries sustained in the line of DEA duty.

Chapter Two

Tampico, Mexico

Rhys awakened in his bed amidst the Mexican cultural splendor of his hotel suite overlooking the pristine white sands of the Beach Miramar. He was groggy and naked with a dry sour taste in his mouth. He tried to recall arriving in his room last night until pain stabbed through his brain from turning his head too sharply. He closed his eyes briefly to obtain relief before focusing on the bedside table clock. The red glowing numbers read 11:27 and a quick glance at the curtained window proved that it was indeed near noon. His last recollection was of concluding his dinner presentation to his audience of UN and Mexican officials in the hotel ballroom last night around

JACQUELINE G. RANDOLPH

nine. He vaguely remembered making his way from that stately hall to the lavish gold gilded crowded elevators and watching the doors close before a sensation of rising and then nothing else. He groaned audibly and hardly recognized his voice. He ran fingers habitually through his thick black hair and blinked a few times before noticing female apparel tossed messily about the room along with his own clothing.

“Oh no,” he groaned, commented, pondered, and dreaded. “No God. Please no.” He begged and pleaded.

“Rhys, I hope you’re not praying for more stamina. I pride myself on my ability to go the distance with any man but after twelve continuous hours of your...creativity I’m going to have to plead exhaustion.”

At seeing the gorgeous Eurasian woman emerge from the bathroom swathed in an oversized coral bath towel Rhys reflexively drew the coral and green designed comforter completely over his nakedness until only his head was visible.

“Your modesty is wasted with me, lover. I know your body better than your mother and your proctologist.” She smiled sensually at him

“Who are you?” Rhys demanded even as his stomach roiled in disgust and his mind roamed his memory trying to retrieve why she looked familiar.

At 33 he was by no means a virgin but he didn’t do casual. Ironically, just last week in Memphis he had ended a relationship with a ravishing red-hair porcelain-white skinned journalist who had used him one time too many during the course of their 13 month relationship. He’d vowed that Rebecca would be the last of the parade of leech-like women who had inhabited his life and bed since the rising star of his international industry recognition within the last five years. The gnawing dissatisfaction with these relationships and the seeming absence of any other brand of women in his world didn’t move to the forefront of his mind until Rebecca hinted at becoming pregnant. Those words clarified a truth for him that he neither wanted this woman as a partner for life nor as the mother of his children. Her hints were nothing more than hints so that he promptly dispatched the physically lovely and otherwise incompatible Rebecca

THE DECEPTION SERIES

from his life. He vowed to never again share his body, life or heart with any woman classified as a temporary fixture while he awaited the genuine article. As archaic as it seemed to all but radical Christians, he'd taken a vow of celibacy. Less than a week later, he literally lay in this inconceivable and unremembered situation.

“Well, so much for our memorable night of passionate acrobatics and fantasies fulfilled.”

The woman commented sarcastically in a slight European accent.

Obviously this lovely woman didn't understand the basic rudiments of answering a direct question. “Perhaps I should put it to you another way. Get out!”