

Conspiracy, Fast Track Thriller #2

By Suzanne Hartmann

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CHAPTER ONE

The spirit of Lady Anne seemed to swirl through the small space, stirring up confusion. Painful memories coiled around Joanne until her breaths came in short gasps. They followed her off the elevator and through the maze of discarded desks, chairs, and office machinery, to the far side of the large storage room.

Her motions on automatic, she pressed a faux knot in the paneling. She then leaned into the soft glow of the newly installed retina scanner it exposed.

Surrounded by the whirling memories of the mystery woman, she wouldn't have been surprised if it registered her as Lady Anne instead of Joanne. But the light snapped off, the panel closed, and a hidden door opened to her left.

Her feet carried her into the Office of Joint Liaisons one slow step at a time, until she stopped before the opened door to director's office. Normally it would have been a welcome sight—the beginning of an exciting assignment, an opportunity to use her enhanced abilities—but today it only served as a reminder of the fact that she couldn't escape her duty.

The reality of her situation seemed to still the whirlwind of memories that belonged to a woman who was dead in the eyes of the world. It settled on Joanne's shoulders like the burden it was, and its weight sunk into her. Like it or not, she had to relive the memories—and possibly face the danger again.

Lord, I thought You saved me from the situation Lady Anne created. I don't know if I can face it again, especially not now.

The moment she crossed the threshold into the office, George Sullivan, rounded the corner of his avant-garde, metal and glass desk. "Jo, it's good to see you." As usual, his tall, athletic bulk nearly engulfed her in his welcoming hug.

When he released her, one of his hands brushed against hers. His thick fingers pressed something small and square into the palm of her hand.

She bit the inside of her lip to hold back any reaction. Her boss passed her a message in his own office? In the headquarters of the country's most clandestine intelligence agency? What in the world was going on?

George placed his hands on her shoulders. "How are you holding up?" His smoky gray eyes, under a full head of almost-black hair, held her gaze as though trying to telegraph his sincerity.

She shrugged. "We have our good days and bad days. After several doctor appointments before the trip here, today has been a bad day."

"I know you'd rather be at home taking care of your husband, but I have to admit you're a welcome sight for sore eyes." He returned to the tall chair behind his desk.

She dropped into one of the chairs in front of his desk. Whatever his game, she had apparently become a player. With the ease of long experience, she slipped into the unexpected role and tucked the note into a pocket of her winter jacket. To cover the movement, she pulled out an elastic scrunchy and gathered her long, curly, brown hair into a ponytail before taking her heavy coat off.

He'd let her know what was going on in eventually, but in the meantime, she'd just as well get to the heart of the reason she'd been called to Washington, D.C. She pulled a thick blue document, folded in thirds, out of her purse and set it on the desk.

One word stood out from the fancy script on the outside of the papers: *Summons*. A summons to be a witness for a Senate hearing.

George gave a miniscule shake of his head, confirming the suspicion gnawing at her. Someone had bugged his office.

He slid the document back towards her. "I know you're not happy about being called for the hearing. But neither of us has done anything wrong, so we just need to answer their questions carefully, but truthfully."

"To a bunch of senators who'd like nothing better than to twist words and use them to their own purposes?" She clamped her mouth shut. If she said anything more, she'd probably say something she'd regret. At least the waiting and wondering that had filled almost every waking moment since she received the Summons would soon be over. But the possible outcomes made it feel like tiny gymnasts had started a practice session in her stomach.

George leaned forward and placed his elbows on the desk. "I don't blame you for being angry. You don't need this on top of what you're going through at home." The pity in his eyes pierced her soul like a poisoned dart.

"I tell you, George." She jabbed a finger towards him. "Nothing good is going to come of this hearing. I just know it."

"It's been a long day for both of us." His tall, leather chair creaked as he leaned back. "Why don't you head to the guest room and get some rest?" An almost invisible shake of his head accompanied his words. "We can talk it over tomorrow morning and outline our plans before we head over to the hearing."

Before her anger could spill over, she imagined winding her emotions into a ball, then shoved it into a file cabinet in her mind and locked it. *Lord, You protected my secrets once. Please protect them again.*

"You're right," she said as she stuffed the dreaded document back into her purse. "I'm not in a proper state of mind to discuss strategy. I feel like I could sleep a week. The flight wasn't long, but after a day like today, it almost makes me wish I lived in D.C. instead of St. Louis. Almost." She gave him a weak smile.

"I could use something to eat too. Some take-out Chinese would hit the spot." He gave his slight paunch a pat.

Food was the last thing on her mind, but it gave her an excuse for leaving in a few minutes. She grabbed her belongings and glanced around the room as she turned to leave. With her enhanced vision, she might be able to locate a hidden camera.

Nothing on the right, so she turned back to George and let her gaze sweep over the paneled walls on the other side of the room. "You ought to head out too. The weather

forecast says it's supposed to get nasty." She glanced at the Jackson Pollock-style painting behind his desk, where a minuscule insect crawled near the top of the frame, but she noticed none of the electronic kind of bug.

"I'm on my way as soon as I finish up some notes."

Joanne followed the hallway to the guest suite she had come to think of as her home away from home. As she entered, the questions churned into overdrive. Who in their right mind would bug the Office of Joint Liaisons? Secrecy surrounded the organization was so tight that only the top tier within the other intelligence organizations even knew of its existence.

She dropped everything on the bed. Preferring to err on the side of caution, she assumed this room was bugged too and pretended to rifle through her coat pockets as though looking for something, pulled out the note, then continued the pretend search in her purse until she pulled out some tissues.

The sight of the summons sticking out of a side pocket triggered an almost-forgotten fact. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence knew about the OJL too. The very people she would sit in front of tomorrow. Could one of its members have leaked information about the OJL? Surely not. They only knew generalities about their operations, not their location or about the enhanced abilities Stimulated Cell Regeneration gave its agents...at least not until Lady Anne's public exploits.

Her hand slid to the scar on her back, just below her neck. The dangerous plan to take care of the Lady Anne issue had nearly cost her life, but it had been worth it to bury her secrets and end the terrorist threats—unless someone was leaking information about the OJL or about Lady Anne.

She wiped her damp eyes with the tissues, then hurled them into the trashcan. Too bad she couldn't get rid of world's interest in the mysterious Lady Anne so easily. At least she wouldn't have to worry about the terrorists anymore. They got what they wanted: Lady Anne's death.

Remembering the need to look for a restaurant, she opened the massive Washington, D.C., phone book that sat on the desk. As she flipped through the pages, a tingle spread out from her torso. It became frigid as it ran down her arms, and left her fingers as cold as ice. She was wrong about the terrorists. If they got wind of the complete truth, they might decide to come after her ... and her family.

No, it could never happen. Too many layers of secrecy surrounded the OJL. No one would ever discover the full truth.

Focus Jo. George needs you. She slid into the seat at the desk and opened the note in her lap while she ran a finger down the listing of restaurants.

Meet me at the horse farm. Call me at 555-867-5309 if you run into trouble.

A new phone number? He must think they tapped his phones too. Whatever was going on, George had drawn her into something serious.

She refolded the note, then grabbed her coat. Time to see what George was up to.