

EXPOSED-Excerpt 1

The North Bank Park was located just west of downtown Columbus, below where the Olentangy and Scioto rivers merged to form the bigger Scioto River. The park itself was built on what used to be the pump house for the old Ohio Penitentiary.

He'd happily pointed out to Luke how ironic it was that two federal agents were getting married where criminals were once housed. For some reason, the kid didn't think it was funny at all.

Locking his door, Frank left the reserved spots in the parking lot perpendicularly down the street from the park. A number of parking meters had been reserved on the street beside the park, but they should be for the Edgars' immediate family and grandparents. Besides, his leg could use the exercise.

Walking down Neil Avenue towards the Park's glass-enclosed pavilion where the ceremony would be held, he enjoyed the crisp June air. He had to give it to Luke and Abigail, they'd picked the perfect day for the wedding. He wasn't overly romantic, didn't get gushy when people talked about weddings, but he did believe good things should happen to good people. Especially when one of them almost died.

A little more than a year ago, Abigail had been in the hospital. She'd thrown herself between Luke and a knife. Nearly losing her had been the final wake-up call for the youngest Edgars brother. He'd dropped his playboy lifestyle to focus entirely on Abigail, even after she recovered.

As Frank crossed Long Street in front of the pavilion, a taxi pulled to a stop at the crosswalk. From the backseat emerged a petite woman, her blonde hair pulled up into some zany sort of a bun with strands of it falling loose like straws from an unkempt pile of hay. Dressed in green-khaki cargo pants, hiking boots and a huge, oversized blue sweater, she had two travel bags hanging off her shoulders and her hand hooked around the handle of a garment bag. Aviator-style sunglasses hid half her face.

"Let me get you some extra cash for getting me here so quickly from the airport," she said to the driver as she fished around in one of her bags, losing her grip on the garment bag. "Oh, no!" she yelped, trying to manage everything and losing the carryon bag at the same time.

Acting out of instinct, Frank took two quick strides and grabbed both bags before they hit the pavement. "Got 'em."

"Oh, my God! Thank you," the woman said, turning a relieved smile up at him as if he'd saved her from dropping a baby onto the concrete. "I don't know what I would've done had that crashed on the ground."

She reached for the carryon bag, but he held it firm, wondering what the hell she had in it to make it so heavy, and nodded at the taxi driver behind her.

"Oh, yes." She handed the other man some money and took the handle of the larger suitcase from him.

"You sure this where you want me to drop you, ma'am?" the driver asked in slightly halting English with a middle-eastern accent. He scanned around the pavilion and office buildings in the area then back at her, concern in his eyes.

The woman laughed. Not a childish tinkling or giggling, but a husky, dark, whiskey kind of sound that caught Frank smack in the middle of his chest.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she said, smiling at the man. “You’re probably used to your fares wanting to go to a hotel or their homes, but this is where I need to be this afternoon. It’s a wedding.”

The driver glanced at her clothes, then over at Frank before shrugging. “Most happy felicitations to you both,” he said, then climbed into his cab once more.

The woman started to protest, but the driver had already pulled out into traffic. She watched the taxi for a moment, then whirled on him. He’d never been trout fishing, but her open-mouthed expression of bewilderment reminded him of a fish he’d seen on one of those nature sports shows shown on Sundays before the football games aired.

“How could he possibly think we were getting married?” she asked.

He glanced down at the three-piece tuxedo he had on. Then, quirking one brow, he nodded at the garment bag in her hand. “I have no idea.”

That had her lips slamming shut into a line. He imagined she was glaring at him from behind those sunglasses, which he suddenly wished were gone so he could see what color her eyes were.

“I take it you’re here for the Whitson-Edgars wedding?” she finally asked.

He refrained from asking if there was more than one wedding here today. He might be a bachelor, but he knew that a sarcastic comment to an already irritated woman might result in bodily injury. Instead, he just nodded.

Suddenly her face lit up with a hundred-watt, straight-to-his-gut smile. “Oh, my God, you’ve got to be Frank. Abby’s told me all about you. A man of few words.” Letting go of her suitcase handle, she stuck her hand out to him. “I’m Sydney Peele.”

“The photographer.” He stared at her hand as if it were a cobra ready to strike, his humor and interest in the little tornado of a woman flattened like a tire running over nails in the road.

Her smile fading, she withdrew her hand and grabbed her suitcase once more. “Um, yes. I was...hoping to get here before the wedding party arrived.”

“They’re not here yet.” He wanted to hand her the heavy carryon bag, which he suspected carried the cameras she used to ply her trade into people’s privacy, and distance himself from the pariah of modern social technology. *Paparazzi. Photographers. Demon spawn.* But the woman already had both hands full of bags.

“That’s good. I promised Abby I’d be here to take pictures before the wedding started. Please tell me there’s somewhere I can change? I just got off the plane and came straight here.” There was a slight hesitation in her voice as she glanced around at the glass enclosed pavilion.

Damn it. As much as he wanted to drop her camera case on the concrete sidewalk and possibly smash the offensive equipment of her trade, he couldn’t ignore that little signal of distress.

It was a character flaw. The need to protect. His late partner called it his hero-complex. He couldn’t let someone in trouble—even if it was simply finding a place to change clothes—fend for themselves.

“This way,” he said. Stepping around her, he led the way to the brick portion of the facility in back of the pavilion without waiting to see if she followed. At the entrance, he did hold the door for her, but refused to help wrangle the roll-on type suitcase in for her. “Third door on the right is the women’s restroom.”

“Thanks,” she said with another of those overly-bright smiles, and strutted down the hallway.

Despite her chosen profession, he had to admit those pants shifted nicely on her bottom as she sashayed away, her blonde hair bouncing like a halo around her head as she walked.

It wasn't until the door closed behind her that he realized he still held her bag of camera equipment. He should just leave it outside the bathroom on the floor. But someone might steal them, and he had a feeling it would be very expensive for her to try and replace them.

Damn it.

He stalked to the door and knocked on it—hard. “You forgot your bag.”

The door opened a minute later.

“Oh, thanks,” she said with another smile, the aviator-framed sunglasses now on top of her head. She had a dusting of freckles on her nose and cheeks. “I usually don't let that bag out of my sight,” she said, taking the bag and stepping back into the restroom, closing the door on him.

Purple.

Her eyes were so blue they appeared purple.

Who the hell has purple eyes?

“Castello, give us a hand.”

He shook off the odd numbness that seeing Sydney Peele's eyes had caused him to look to his left in time to see Dave and Matt Edgars hauling in two crates of wine. He hurried to help his friends load in the drinks for the reception, pushing inappropriate thoughts of the little photographer out of his mind. The last thing he needed was to give her any reason to focus her attention, or one of her cameras, on him.