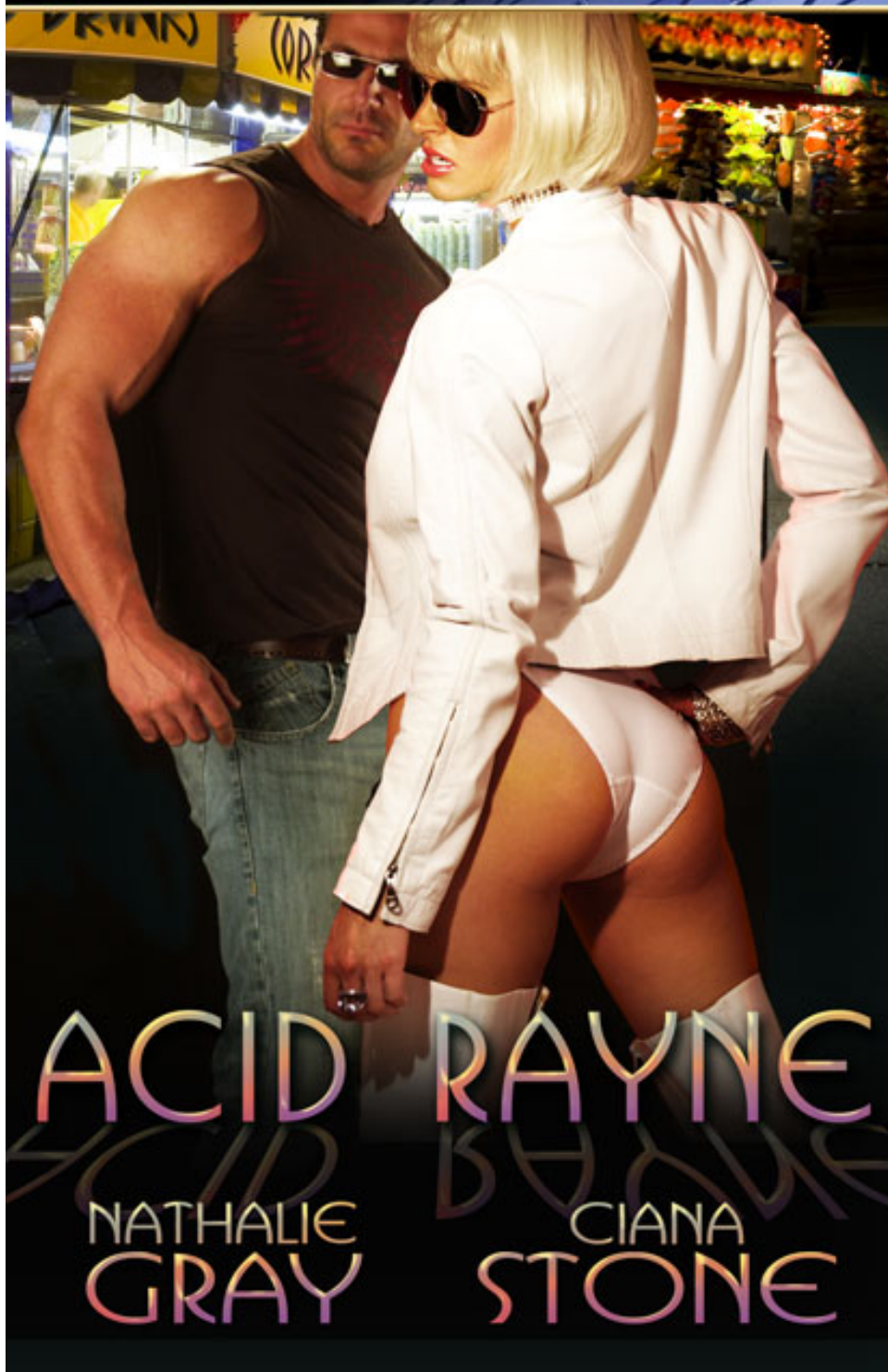


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



ACID RAYNE

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An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Acid Rayne

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ACID RAYNE

Nathalie Gray & Ciana Stone

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Chapter One

Rip pulled the big rig into a busy truck stop that could've been yanked right out of a movie, complete with train wagon diner and a trio of local old guys sitting in the shade of red-white-and-blue awnings. He wondered if they were toothless.

Leaving the engine running as he got out, Rip stretched his legs. It'd been a long haul from Maryland, and they'd driven straight through except for fueling—and defueling—stops.

The rest of the colorful vehicles in his caravan were pulling into the dusty parking lot, so Rip walked over to the lead vehicle as it grumbled to a stop. The door of the white double-cab pickup opened and out stepped Betty.

A familiar thrill rose behind the zipper of his jeans and seriously cramped his style as she sauntered over to him. Blonde bombshell was a tame description for Betty. Six feet and one hundred eighty pounds of sex crammed into acid-washed, skin-tight jeans, a red tank top with glittering letters that read *Are you man enough?* and a white leather jacket with the word *Cow* spelled out on the back in studs and rhinestones. In the couple of months he'd known Betty, not a one had ever teased her about that word on her jacket. Who would? No one would be crazy enough to stand in her way without some serious body armor. She looked able and oh-so willing to “take this outside”, as she oftentimes said.

“Morning, stud,” she said huskily, draping her arms over his shoulders and pressing her pelvis against his now-full erection. She smelled of oranges and mint. A lethal cocktail in his predicament. “Wanna check on Sheila and have a quickie?”

Rip growled at the suggestion and grabbed her behind the neck to pull her to him for a kiss that spelled quite clearly no quickie would satisfy *this* itch. His free hand moved to cup one side of her ass. He was rewarded by her tightening on him like a boa constrictor, devouring him in a kiss that had them both panting. His blood pressure—and his IQ—had just dropped into the single digits.

“Get a room, people!”

The voice ended the kiss but didn't stop Betty from rubbing her lush breasts against his chest and working one hand between them to squeeze his package.

“Yeah, how about we get a room? Doing it on a mattress would be a nice change from the back of a truck. Not that I mind testing the suspension.” She winked then pulled away to offer him that mocking grin so characteristic of her. His life had been so boring before the Valkyrie had answered a “Help Wanted” ad in the paper a couple of months and four states back.

The man behind the intruding voice, all five and a half feet of him, strode up to them. Manny Odem was nearly sixty, but still hard, lean and one of the toughest, take-no-prisoners men Rip had ever known. They'd met when Rip made it into a special unit of the Army Rangers, an elite team of highly trained professionals who weren't listed with the rest and who were called in for missions that officially didn't exist.

Rip, or Ripley Knight back then, had fallen under Manny's command. After he left the Rangers two years ago, he looked Manny up, who'd retired a few years before. He'd found Manny in Melbourne, Florida, negotiating with an old carny to purchase what was arguably the strangest business Rip had ever heard of. The World's Largest Traveling Gator Show and Carnival.

As if life isn't a big enough circus.

Over a couple of bottles of Jack Daniel's, Manny had persuaded Rip to throw in with him. They bought the carnival and Sheila, the albino alligator, who, Rip was sure, easily qualified as one of the largest alligators he'd ever seen. At twenty feet, she was a twelve-hundred-pound bitch with bad breath. But no one would ever tell it to her face.

And she was all his. Well, seventy-five percent anyway.

The first year hadn't been good. There were only six major cities that had standing dates, and all of them were for two-week engagements, which meant only twelve weeks of work to support the operation for the year. Rip had set about trying to line up more cities, focusing on the smaller towns and resort areas where there were folks on holiday, eager for things to do and ways to spend their money. It'd been slow going, but the carnival had squeaked by for two years. Then Betty showed up. As far as Rip was concerned, she was his good luck charm. Now the show had dates lined up for every month of the year, and men paid handsomely to watch her strip down to a thong and bikini top and wrestle Sheila. Hell, even if he got to watch for free, he'd still pay a king's ransom for the honor. There wasn't a thing in the world like Betty's ass in that white leather thong.

Manny lit a smoke and leaned against the side of the trailer on the big rig. "Betty, you go check on Sheila, see if the beast's all right."

Betty's eyes narrowed at the way Manny ordered her, and for a split second there was more than the usual cockiness and attitude in those man-killer blue eyes. Rip was reminded again how much of an oyster she was about her past. Wanted to be paid cash. Slept—when she let him sleep by himself—with an aluminum baseball bat under her pillow. What could she have possibly been doing before she hooked up with his circus? With her size and that pair of stare-through-your-soul blue laser beams, probably something to do with the public. Cop? Nah, too much of a hardhead. Not military, he would've spotted the stance a mile away. Were there female bouncers nowadays? Probably.

After staring a couple of seconds, she gave Manny a charged look but complied when Rip gave her ass a little squeeze, and said, "Thanks, baby."

"For you," she replied, her gaze switching from the tight-faced older man to Rip. She leaned close to nip his chin, action they both knew promised of things to come that would leave them sweaty and exhausted.

Rip reached down to adjust his cock in his pants as she circled behind the trailer to check on the alligator. He swore she'd angled the word *Cow* at Manny yet still managed to swing her ass his way.

A tic pulled at the older man's eyelid.

"Don't," Rip warned, gradually losing his hard-on. Nothing he loathed more than backstabbing and lies.

Manny sucked at his teeth while he hooked his thumbs in the loops of his jeans. "We should make a nice chunk of change on this show."

Glad his partner wouldn't sing his old song about his opinion of Betty and her "secret" past. Manny saw secrets and dangers everywhere he looked...spent too long in the military. Rip nodded. "Sure will."

"Don't know how you managed to get us the state fair, but everyone's looking forward to making some jack and taking a few weeks off."

"Thank Betty," Rip replied with an unblinking look at his former platoon commander. "The fairgrounds manager wouldn't have looked at us twice without her. She played that old boy like he was a fiddle."

Manny snorted and tossed his smoke on the ground, grinding it out with the ball of his foot. "Yeah, she does that, doesn't she? Play people."

"I said *don't*."

The older man picked a bit of tobacco from the tip of his tongue and shrugged. "I'll get everyone inside to eat."

"Good idea. And I'll see about gassing up the trucks. Barring any wrecks, we should hit Orlando by dawn. Give everyone time to catch a few hours sleep then start setting up."

Manny pulled his ever-present pocket knife and started cleaning his fingernails as he walked away.

He was getting sick of Manny's sniper shots at Betty's back. Sick of having to defend her when he knew for a fact she only needed one hand to deal with Manny. Still, he felt as though he owed it to his former boss to let him vent his conspiracy theories once in a while. But not too often.

Rip headed for the back of the trailer and cracked open one of the doors. Betty was just closing the cage that housed Sheila, and judging by the way the alligator's head was up high, her maw parted to sniff the air, he knew it'd be a good show. Coupled with the rest—smallish amusement rides, games, Clyde who juggled chainsaws, Claire's musical act and more—Betty's show had really kicked it up a notch. As much as the notion had shocked him during the first few months, Sheila actually enjoyed rubbing up against folks, her uncommon white tail swishing left and right. Like a twenty-foot scaly dog. It

hadn't taken Betty a week to develop a bond with the gator, a bond that had grown into a bit of wrestling and tug-o-war. Everyone had come over to watch and cheer, and the idea to make this into a bona fide show had taken root.

"You wanna grab a bite?" he asked, squinting in the gloom. Sheila didn't like direct sunlight.

Betty turned to him with a lusty smile. "Oh yeah."

Rip grinned and climbed in the trailer, closing the door behind him. The hell with food.

Rayne, known as Betty to Rip and the rest of the carnys, felt the usual twitch in her belly when the door closed behind Rip's linebacker shoulders. Since first meeting him a couple of months before, she'd walked around in a constant state of horniness. Complicated when a gal was trying to do a job. What was she supposed to? She had a pulse!

The way he presently came up to her, unhurriedly, teasingly, created a scree of goose bumps down her arms. It'd be quick. It'd be hard. And it'd be marvelous.

"Come here, you," she said through her teeth as she fisted his bull-faced buckle belt. The horns dug into her palms.

With a crooked grin—she loved his lips—he let her yank him close. She gasped when he suddenly leaned into her and nipped her jaw. "You *did* offer me a bite."

She couldn't pull his shirt up high or quick enough. That damn belt. She liked it when he looped it in half and snapped it a couple of times to tease her, but when she was trying to get inside those oh-so-fine jeans, the thing was just in the way.

"Quick and dirty, huh?" he growled in her ear as he seized her breasts in his large, calloused hands and squeezed. Hard enough to thrill, not hard enough to hurt. He knew exactly how she liked it.

While she undid the buttons of his jeans, a stitch of remorse jabbed her in the gut. If only Rip knew how he was being screwed. Literally and figuratively. She pushed the guilt down. The old fight long lost to her pragmatic half. Only this time, she could swear she had to fight remorse just a little bit more, had to focus on her task just a little bit harder. Maybe she was getting old. Or soft.

"Not too quick, I hope," she replied with pretend levity. *Take it while you can*, she chanted in her head. *It's all you've got*.

That hard mass he crushed against her pelvis shattered the few remaining doubts about her endeavor. With a low sound in her throat that was part mewl, part growl, she slipped a hand inside his fly and fisted him. Nice and hot. Just for her.

Rip pressed his thick chest on her, pinned her against the trailer's aluminum framework. She knew what was coming. Even if she would've wanted to at least put up a fight—a gal had her pride, after all—Rip managed to entwine his fingers in hers, reverse his wrist and force her free hand out and wide, holding it trapped against the

panel, and all before she even had time to say “whoo, baby”. Not many guys could pin her. She loved every second of it.

He trapped a lobe between his teeth, growled something she didn’t get, released it so he could suck at her throat. The guy left hickies the size and color of prunes. Bring them on. She wore each with pride. And it wasn’t just part of the character she played either.

“Come on,” Rayne urged with a pelvic tilt that pushed him some.

His lips glistened when he pulled away to look down at her. At six four or five, he was a perfect size for her “Valkyrie” figure. Well established in his thirties, stable, broad like a tree, just as solid.

A tree she’d have to chop down eventually.

Damn, forget the job, would ya?!

Rip licked his bottom lip. “Lift your leg.”

After she did, he grabbed the heel of her boot and yanked it off, sock included, then did the other one. She was still pinned by the hand he held against the panel while he thumbed the buttons of her jeans, nice and quick. His big hand barely fit. So hot.

“No panties, huh?”

“Laundry day.”

“Should’ve put the bra in the wash too.” A long lick up her cleavage made her chuckle.

“Make room for me.”

Any other lover she would’ve sent waltzing back to their mother with their balls in their back pocket. But Rip? He could play drill sergeant as long as he liked. She’d give him twenty any day of the week. Her gaze on his, and with her most teasing smile, Rayne parted her thighs so he’d have room to slip lower. She moaned when his fingers parted her.

“Mmm. Wet. I like that.”

She would’ve replied had her brain been able to process more than one message at a time. Right now it was occupied by the fireworks bursting behind her eyelids. Rip’s middle finger circled her, just rough enough, just hard enough, and when she sensed him about to slide in, she bucked and took him up to the knuckle.

“Whoa, babe,” he whispered against her throat.

She let go of his cock so she could bunch the back of his shirt and gripped that thing like someone holding on to the last life jacket on board. Ride on, baby.

Rip disrupted her next few heartbeats when he started thrusting in and out, quick and precise. Well, he *had* been a sharpshooter. The guy had serious aim. Her abs burned from matching his cadence, but she didn’t give a shit and made sure the best lover she’d ever had had ample room to maneuver. The burn intensified. So did the speed. A long groan preceded a couple of drives that all but made her want to scream like a banshee, bump her head against the metal and till his back as if there were no tomorrow.

"Oh damn, damn." She panted his name, which seemed to fuel his rhythm.

"Let me hear it, babe," Rip growled, crushed her mouth under his.

"Ahh, Rip...that's it. Mmm."

A gasp left her when he abruptly abandoned her pussy, a desertion that triggered a fierce urge to kick his fine ass.

"What—"

What was she going to say, anyway? Rayne couldn't remember a thing because Rip had just yanked her jeans down around her ankles, pulled them off completely so he could snake an arm behind one of her knees and was presently standing, hoisting her up against him as though she weighed nothing. At one-eighty-three on the last count, she didn't weigh "nothing" by a long shot.

He pinned her once more against the frame. Hard. Oh, this was going to be good.

With barely enough time for her to hold on to his thick neck, Rip curled his spine. Usually, when a guy first entered, he acted as though he'd either forgotten how or didn't want to hurt her—as if. Not Rip. No, ma'am. He took her the way she enjoyed most. Like a man who knew exactly what he was doing, how his gal was built and how much she could take. Rayne could take quite a lot. In size and girth and vigor. She had muscles, she had curves, and by god, she went after what she wanted. Rip knew that. Bless his heart.

He rodeoed her up higher against the panel so he could curl his pelvis underneath. Then he took her. "Ohhh...fuck. You're hot."

"Yeah."

Once, twice, thrice. He rammed himself to the hilt. With his chest crushed against hers, she wasn't going anywhere. Not that she would. Who cared they were in a dusty trailer occupied by an albino alligator. She wrapped her legs around his strong waist, eager for the ride. Breaths left her quick and shallow, pushed out of her by Rip's muscled torso and his fierce hip work. Thighs pumping like pistons, he took her hard. Still, she managed to hold her own by keeping her thighs like a bear trap around his middle, one hand fisted on the back of his collar, the other curled into his skull, fingernails digging in at his nape. That was her favorite position. Never mind the fancy "flying goose over back-flipping monkey" or some such Kama Sutra nonsense. A good quickie against a wall. Nothing like it!

She felt every nerve ending in her pussy about to be set on fire. With his thick cock and the angle, she was stretched to the limit. Still Rip pounded away, encouraged by her animalistic groans and tightening clutch on his head. *Oh god, oh god...*

"Don't...you...stop." Her growled command seemed to have the same effect a pistol did a racer.

He hammered so hard the framework shook behind her back. Dust floated down. Rip skidded against the sandy floor, his big boots crunching. Rayne *ahh*-ed loudly when he widened his stance, grabbed her butt in two pitiless hands the size of bear paws.

"Betty," he snarled. "Betty, Betty, Betty."

Each instance of her name became a metronome to his thrusts. He pushed. Deep. Deeper. She took. God, she took.

And then there it was. The edge. That place where nothing mattered, where everything and everyone could go screw themselves and her bosses could strike her name off the roster once and for all 'cause there wasn't a thing in the world she'd rather do than be with Rip.

Take me there, stud.

He did.

His muscled shoulders twitched. She felt the grips on her ass dig in painfully deep. Did she care? Not one bit.

"Argh." His voice sounded like thunder. Her own Zeus.

Sweat and juices linked them. With a shove that must have rattled her mother's good china half a country away, he grunted his climax.

"Argh, fuck, Betty...you're...whew."

As she knew he would, he slowed his tempo, lengthened the pushes to take her nice and slow while she squeezed her vaginal muscles around him, milked him, that smooth, burning cock. The second orgasm hit suddenly. She thought she had a few seconds left.

"Ohhh...ohhh..."

He drowned the rest, stole it with his mouth squashed against hers, his tongue doing wonders, his teeth serious damage. Her lips throbbed and burned. Both sets.

Slowly, by small increments, he lowered her so she could unlink her feet and put one down. He kept one of her legs tucked under an elbow.

A few noisy kisses later—man she loved that wet sound—he bit her bottom lip, sucked at it then released both her mouth and leg. Cum dribbled down her thighs when Rip pulled out. A cocky grin that would've cost him a smack on the ass had she been able to control her body, he deftly pulled his shirt out of his jeans—what she'd left tucked in anyway—and crouched so he could wipe her. What other man would do that?

He planted a wet, sloppy kiss on her belly, rose. "I could eat a buffalo herd."

"Mmm," she replied. That was the extent of her verbal abilities right now.

After he shoved the shirt back into his jeans, rearranged himself, Rip hooked his thumbs in the back pockets. "Up for some greasy burgers?"

She shook her head. "Nah. I'll go add to the wash pile."

He grinned, leaned into her for a quick kiss. An unexpected urge to hold on to his shirt collar and not let go tightened her shaking hands. Fake smile firmly on, she unhurriedly dressed. Eew. Jeans against a slicked pussy just didn't feel right. She wished she could stay naked. With Rip. Alone. Without a sword over her head.

"You sure? I could bring you back some if you don't want to go inside." He cocked his head at her, waited.

"Nah. Thanks though. I'll eat corn on the cob when we stop for the night."

With a laugh, Rip grabbed his package. "I'll be looking forward to that."

"You go. Get some fuel back into you. You'll need it."

Rayne followed him to the trailer doors and leaned against one while he pushed the other out, crouched and jumped off. Dust rose around his boots. Sun drove blades of light into her brain, so Rayne squinted.

"You're even prettier when your nose crinkles that way," Rip said, cleared his throat then turned toward the diner. Wind played with the umbrellas and patrons' nerves. "I'll go put the fear of god into those civvies."

His tight ass ranking at eleven on the proverbial Yum Scale, Rayne watched him step inside the diner and join the rest of his crew, who readily entered into an animated conversation. Good people. A stitch of remorse jabbed her in the gut. She was screwing them all, Rip first and foremost. Too bad because she honestly enjoyed being around him. But she had a job to do, and getting soft for a man—even as cute and skilled as Rip—would get her in big trouble. Hell, in her line of work, emotions could get the careless killed. Because the kind of people who stole diamonds—her bosses—from those who smuggled them out of Africa didn't take failure well. They didn't take failure at all. So either she found those rocks Rip or someone in his crew had stolen or she could kiss her pretty face goodbye.

Still, for the first time in her life, doing her job wouldn't feel right. Wouldn't feel right at all.

Chapter Two

Malcolm Morris III gleamed in fancy cursive letters on the brass plaque after he was done rubbing it against his thigh. He put it back on his desk, admired the way corners were sharp enough to make it a weapon. He smiled, looked around at his office. A man's office. A gangster's office. He liked it that way. Kept people on their toes. Had to use every means at his disposal because physically he didn't look like much. His father's side, short all of them. Hair slicked back in a fashion reminiscent of old gangster movies, he'd often been taunted for his looks. Someone once said he had the face of a rat terrier. The particular idiot who'd called him that was dead, but the words still haunted Malcolm. Not that he'd ever admit it to anyone.

He hadn't risen to the top of Miami's diamond privateers on his looks or his physical prowess. He'd gotten where he was through cunning and his talent for getting the goods on people. His empire was built on blackmail and fear. Fear of embarrassment, consequences of one's acts, of ruin. He could ferret out the most elusive spy, print in four colors any Russian mafia boss's private e-mails or find out what a guy's cousin's cousin had had for breakfast. Two weeks ago.

But at the moment, Malcolm was pissed in a royal way. And when that happened, someone's head usually toppled off the chopping block. Made a nice figurative ball. He loved soccer. Probably from his Irish roots.

He had a shipment of diamonds unaccounted for and now his goddamn torpedo had gone silent. It wasn't like her to be quiet. That big bitch could talk a man's ears off. Which meant either she'd found the diamonds, cut and run, thinking to keep them for herself, or something had gone wrong. He was prone to opt for the latter rather than the former since anyone who worked for him knew the price of betrayal. It went like this—whatever he had on them would be made public if he could destroy them with it, and if that card wasn't on the table, then he resorted to physical means. Namely, hunt the idiots down and introduce them to their inner dead guy. Slowly.

But with Acid Rayne, his best clean-up guy—*gal*—he'd never had to worry about a job getting down. So her silence was definitely not good.

His colleague entered the room, all six-feet-whatever of him, opened blue shirt and impeccable black trousers. Fag.

"I have a bit of news you'll find quite interesting," James murmured as he crossed the room to the bar. The guy never opened his freakin' mouth to speak. The snob got on his nerves, bad. He poured himself a snifter of Cognac, some French name that'd hurt a guy's cheeks if he tried to pronounce it. Raymee-something-something-Martin. Whatever. "It seems that our missing shipment may have contained a bit more than we anticipated."

Malcolm's ears perked up like the terrier he supposedly resembled. "Yeah? How so?"

James took a seat in one of the overstuffed leather wingchairs in front of Malcolm's large desk. If it was expensive and if it was big, it was good enough for him. James took great care in crossing his legs, making sure to pinch the crease of his trousers. If one thing could be said about James, despite the prissy ways and stuck-up talk, it was his precision.

The opposite to Malcolm in every physical aspect. Where Malcolm's hair was thin – got it from his father's side, that good for nothin' – James' was fair and full, styled so just one lock fell strategically over his strong forehead. His eyes were the color of storm clouds, gray tinted with blue that darkened when he was pissed off.

Beauty and the Beast. That was how some unfortunate souls had referred to James and Malcolm in the past. Unfortunate for them. They were no longer among the living.

Appearance was the only thing that set James and Malcolm apart. Mentally, they were of the same mind, possessed of a thirst for power, avarice and a particular taste for the suffering of others.

"Word has it that a certain 'item' may have worked its way into the shipment of diamonds we...*liberated*."

"Would you stop the goddamn word games? What kind of 'item'?" Malcolm sat forward, his fingers gripping the edge of the desk. He hated surprises. Even as a boy. No birthday parties for him, no sir. He hated kids anyway. Still did. And puppies too.

"I don't have all the details as yet. Apparently, this 'item' is virtually indistinguishable from a diamond, but isn't naturally occurring –"

"Speak English, for crissake."

James waited a second, sighed. "You can't tell it apart from the rest."

Six fucking syllables. Malcolm had learned at an early age that a vocabulary rich in six-syllable words did not make for a genius. And in his business, words needed to be simple and to the point. *Do what you're told or die.* Nothing there to misunderstand. James liked to use big words, but Malcolm figured it was more of a way to try to demonstrate his superiority than anything else. After all, James *did* answer to him. It didn't much matter how many multiple-syllable words James could use. They both knew who called the shots. "Whatever – so, that thing you can't tell apart from the rest is...?"

"A prototype of some weapon being developed in a joint venture. Big deal too. Several major powers and all."

He'd said that the way he'd talk about the color of his shirt.

Malcolm faked it. Completely faked the cool response of propping his elbows on the table and steeping his hands in front of him, his index fingers pressed against the tip of his pointed chin. Inside, he'd turned to cool slush. *Government weapon. For crissake.*

Then the businessman in him started rubbing his hands. Maybe their little thief had done a good deed in stealing that prototype. Especially if no one could tell it apart from diamonds. Hell, one could hide such an item in his suit pocket. Lucky for him the thing wasn't some new-age submarine...

But. There was always a "but". If the information was correct, then it was even more vital they recover the stolen shipment. *That bitch better report to base. Fast.* He didn't want to deal with another rogue. Already, the thief who'd been supposed to hand over the rocks had apparently been moonlighting. On Malcolm's goddamn time too.

"Get me more information," he said, coming out of his thoughts. "And do it fast."

James smile and rose, smoothing his trousers as he stood. "Of course."

He left without another word. Malcolm watched him close the door behind himself then picked up the phone. He trusted James more than anyone but always kept his own sources handy. One could never have too much information. Plus, he'd never completely trust a guy who drank some fancy French piss.

* * * * *

Arthur Simpkins walked into the conference room and his bowels turned to water. He thought he was going to crap himself. When the director of his department told him to report to the conference room with his current data, he'd expected to see the other members of the project assembled. Not a room full of high-ranking government officials and military officers.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph... They know.

They knew he'd screwed up. And "screwed" was the perfect word for his situation. He'd done the screwing and been paid in kind. That lab tech with the ready smile and finest tits in Washington had not only let him fuck her—he wasn't exactly alpha male material—she'd shown him a thing or two about human anatomy and defying the laws of gravity. He'd been so proud to show her his latest project. "You wait," he'd told her. "You wait until they see the prototype. I won't ever have to beg for financial backing again." That had been a couple months ago. The cute lab tech was now gone. And so was the crystal.

Begging for financial backing. Ha. He'd be lucky if they let him get his stuff from the office.

No, this time, he'd have to beg for mercy.

I should've known she was too cute to be a real scientist. What a moron.

"Dr. Simpkins," said a tall man with iron gray hair and enough metal on his uniform to add ten pounds to his weight. Arthur knew the man. Not personally, but by reputation. General Hank Marshall was one of the old guard. While other men his age had been put out to pasture, Marshall still commanded a position of great authority.

Plus, he looked like the mean son of a bitch he was rumored to be. Arthur's insides liquefied even worse. He had a knack for choosing his bosses.

"Thank you for joining us," Marshall said.

"Cer..." Arthur cleared his throat at the croak that emerged. "Certainly, Sir."

"Dr. Simpkins, I'd like for you to explain—in layman's terms—the device your team is currently developing."

He couldn't stop his borderline genius IQ from spinning in crazy circles. Why does he want to know that? Don't they know already? Is this a test? But to test what? Oh Jesus. Had she been with them, to test his lab's security measures? Had she been a Trojan horse?

Arthur set his laptop on the end of the long table. "Well, Sirs, in brief, we're developing a focusing crystal for the laser turret. In case you haven't read the latest reports, the laser turret is an energy-based—"

"You *do* realize we're all military here, Dr. Simpkins."

A passage from an old children's fable filtered into Arthur's mind, made him want to panic-chuckle.

Without another word,
The wolf made his vengeance good —
Bore off the lambkin to the wood,
And there, without a jury,
Judged, slew, and ate her in his fury.

Arthur swallowed hard. The rest of his nice explanation, that this "weapon creates both thermal and EM—electromagnetic—damage to a target" just filtered out his brain. "Yes, yes, of course. Erm, the reports—"

"We've read the reports," Marshall interrupted again. "What we're interested in hearing from you is about the focusing crystal you invented. The item itself."

"Oh yes, of course." Arthur cleared his throat again. "Well, Sirs, essentially a focusing crystal modifies the beam of the laser, it, erm, modifies, alters, if you will, the type and amount of damage the laser can do. Its range, also. Let's say, for example, that a turret has a 2x multiplier and can fire every three seconds. Whatever damage type the focusing crystal uses will be multiplied by two."

Marshall nodded. "And you have a working prototype?"

That question—and it wasn't a question as much as a confirmation—resounded in Arthur's head like echoes from a nightmare. In the space of a heartbeat, he broke out into a cold sweat and spots danced before his eyes. As yet, his department hadn't notified anyone the prototype was temporarily...misplaced.

"Well..." He cleared his throat once then again. "Actually, Sir... Well you see..."

Marshall leaned back in his chair, gauging him. "Yes, Doctor?"

Arthur knew what unconsciousness felt like. He'd fainted dead away a few times when he was young. To his great shame. Older brothers never forgot that kind of amusement. So he knew what was presently happening to him. Deadened limbs. Numb cheeks. Unfocused vision. Then black.

* * * * *

Rip was fit to be tied. They'd arrived at the fairgrounds in Orlando, only to find out they were a week early.

"Goddamnsonuvabitch."

He went in search of Manny, who was nowhere to be found. No one had seen him for the last couple of hours.

Thinking he might as well go check on Sheila before they unloaded her into the pool they'd secured for her, he headed for the trailer. Just as he reached to open the back gate, it swung out. Rip dodged to one side as Manny hopped to the ground.

"What're you doing in there?" Rip asked. Sheila was one part of the carnival from which Manny usually steered clear. He claimed she was creepy. Rip couldn't really blame him. She kind of was. Not only her massive size but also her albinism made her downright eerie. That Manny would even be in the trailer was curious.

"Checking to see if the vet had finished."

"What vet? Finished what?"

"Gator had some kind of sore on its belly. I called and got a vet to come have a look."

"Sore? Are you sure?"

He'd always had a gift at coming up with doom and gloom scenarios. Losing both his parents in a house fire had exacerbated all the dark streaks in him, made him a "joy" to be around. So a sore on Sheila's belly warranted a good many scenarios that involved bills, cancelled dates, laid-off employees and even bankruptcy. *Argh, fuck.*

Manny's eyes narrowed. "You calling me a liar?"

Whoa.

"Course not. Just find it odd, that's all. You've made it a point to stay a country mile away from that beast since we started and now you're finding sores and calling vets? Doesn't track. What's up, Manny?"

"Just protecting the investment," Manny replied. "Don't believe me, call the vet. I got his number in my trailer."

"No need." Rip held up both hands and shook off the suggestion. "I didn't say I don't believe you. Just find it odd. Man, you're testy today."

"Never found it odd before that I try and keep this fleabag show going." Manny kicked the toe of his worn boot at a clump of grass that clung stubbornly to life in the middle of the dirt lot.

Never mind medals. Now that's heroic.

Rip had always had a special place in his heart for gardens. His mom had had a nice one despite their living in a cramped row house in Brooklyn. He'd never told a living soul about it though. He'd never hear the end of it. Maybe because a garden symbolized "home" to him, something he hadn't had in a long time, even if the aunt and uncle who'd taken him in had been kind and welcoming to the scrawny teen who'd suddenly invaded their lives. Gardens represented family, roots. And his had been chopped off early.

Guilt poked him. Maybe he was just tired. Or maybe he was just off kilter because he hadn't been able to find Betty all afternoon. She made a habit of disappearing hours on end, and even if it didn't mess with anyone's schedule or the show, it bugged him. Something he'd admit only after all his toenails had been ripped off and his feet dunked in ammonia. Admitting to liking Betty would amount to admitting he liked flowers. Not in this lifetime. He'd never live it down. Plus, Betty didn't even like him back, only used him for sex. Poor guy that he was.

"Sorry, man." He clapped Manny on the shoulder. "Tell you what. Why don't you and me take a run down the road to that barbecue place and have us a plate of swine and a couple pitchers of beer? On me."

"Like to, but I got some bizness to tend to," Manny replied, breaking eye contact to pull out a pack of smokes and jam one in his mouth. He talked around the cigarette as he lit it. "Got a line on a tiger this fella's willing to let go of real cheap."

Rip groaned. "Christ, Manny! A tiger?"

"Ain't one of them eat-your-leg uns," Manny said as he exhaled a plume of smoke. "This one's been drugged around for close to five years in one of them have-your-picture-taken-with-a-man-eater traveling shows. Tame as a pussy cat but makes bank." He sniggered. "But then again, we got some of that here ourselves...a man-eater."

"Sheila wouldn't hurt a fly."

Manny's smirk told Rip he hadn't been referring to the gator. Anger flared out his shirt. "I told you to leave her —"

"Argh, Rip, man, can't take a joke anymore?"

"Har, har. Funny."

Rip wanted to argue against the tiger thing but figured he needed to let Manny have this one. He and Manny had been a little at odds ever since Betty showed up. Maybe if he let Manny have the tiger, it would even things out.

"Okay. We'll talk about it later when I track down the grounds manager and get the keys from him. Sheila will be wanting a swim." The Central Florida Fairgrounds people hadn't okayed Sheila for their lake. Insurance wouldn't cover that, even if Rip had a

metal enclosure to pen her in. But they'd accommodated them with a large pool with a locked fence. They'd even cut the chlorine a few days back. If it was too strong, the stuff gave her a rash. Better than nothing.

Manny nodded and stepped away, talking over his shoulder. "When you find that damn giant, tell her she needs to get that pigsty she calls home cleaned up. Anny said Betty took over her room last night and when she went to Betty's it was so full of dirty clothes and stunk so high of cum she had to bunk in with Claire, and you know how well those two get along."

"Gotcha." Rip watched until Manny was out of sight then climbed into the trailer.

Sheila was still. Too still. Rip felt a rush of concern. Not because he cared for the beast, but because her and Betty's show was one of the big pulls. Well, okay, he *did* care. A little. Another thing to put in the compartment labeled "Denial". Flowers, Betty and an albino gator named Sheila. Maybe he ought to see a shrink.

Rip unlocked the cage and stepped inside. Cautiously. She preferred women by a long shot. A lesbian gator?

Not that Sheila had ever tried to hurt him. Unbelievable, but she was actually very friendly. She loved people and was quite affectionate. The problem was, sometimes she got excited and started swinging that big tail around, and she could send even a man Rip's size for a good loop if she hit him.

"Sheila?" Rip worked his way to the side of the cage. "Sheila?"

The alligator didn't move. Didn't even blink. That wasn't normal. Rip nudged her in the side with his foot. Nothing. He tried again. Harder. Still nothing.

"Shit!"

Just his luck, the damn beast was dead. He knelt beside her, feeling for a pulse the way a vet up in D.C. had taught him. She wasn't dead. But it sure wasn't normal for her not to stir after being prodded by a cowboy boot.

"Well hell," he mumbled to himself. If Manny had to call in a vet, the vet would have had to drug her to take care of the sore Manny said she had. Which meant she'd be out for a while.

Whew, man, calm down.

"Where the hell is Betty?" he growled.

Curious to see the sore for himself, he grabbed Sheila to roll her over. "Damn, girl, you need to hit the weights!" He huffed and strained. There was no way he was rolling her over by himself. She was too heavy.

Which brought another thought to mind. How had Manny managed to spot the sore if a single guy couldn't turn her over?

Answer was, he couldn't have. Someone else had to know about it. So why in hell hadn't anybody told him?

He left the cage, making sure it was securely closed, and left the trailer in search of answers and the keys to the goddamn pool enclosure.

* * * * *

She hopped off the bus and looked around. There was a bench a few feet away, miraculously unoccupied. As good a place as any.

She took a seat and pulled out her cell phone. There were no numbers programmed into it. In her line of work, it was important not to leave a trail. Because breadcrumbs *could* kill little Tom Thumb.

She dialed a number from memory. It rang three times before a voice she hated came on the line. "Rayne. It's about time. Have you any idea what kind of aggravation you've caused me? What the hell are you doing?"

"My job," she replied, adjusting her tank top. Damn, she'd gotten sunburned with her arm by the bus window. Looked like a goddamn tourist at Disney World.

"Shabbily, I might say."

"Look, *Jimmy*," she snarled with as much scorn and derision into the word as possible. "I don't need any shit. This isn't a typical job and you know it."

A dramatic sigh came over the line. "Malcolm is quite upset with you."

What kind of sissy uses the word "quite"?

"He'll get over it when I bring him the diamonds."

"I take that to mean you've located them?"

"Not yet."

"Then what, might I ask, have you been doing? This is taking far too long."

She could well imagine James' expression just then, that perfect mouth, the smirk. Someday, she was going to kick the teeth out of his pretty face and make herself a nice necklace.

"You ever tried searching a traveling carnival, Jimmy? These people aren't the trusting sort. I've managed to get into most of the trailers, but so far nothing. I'm your clean-up gal, not some damn bloodhound. You sure this is where she hid them?"

"Positive," James replied. "Rayne, we need to get those rocks back. And quickly."

"Just substitute another shipment," she replied. "Not like Malcolm can't cover the loss. Hell, this is a drop in the bucket to him."

"It's far more complicated than merely some stolen diamonds, Rayne."

And if that didn't raise her hackles all the way to the top. "Exactly *how* more complicated?"

"I'm not at liberty —"

"Fuck liberty!" she cut him off. "I'm the one with my ass in the open! How complicated?"

There was another sigh before he responded. "It appears as if little Penelope was involved in more than we realized."

"She's dead. I got to clean that mess too, remember?"

"When she absconded with the diamonds, she had in her possession a rather unique article."

Quite, rather, absconded. For fuck's sake, just speak English.

"I'm listening."

"A focusing crystal for a laser turret."

A chill raced down her spine. Oh shit, military stuff. They had latitude. They had manpower. She had neither. "And you think she hid it with the diamonds before she was killed?" That little viper. Good thing someone had offed her because Rayne would've loved wringing her scrawny little neck right about now.

"That's exactly what I think. And that crystal is infinitely more valuable than the diamonds. And I want it."

"I just bet it is."

"Which means either you find them and fast, or Malcolm is going to send a replacement."

Another chill claimed her. Malcolm's temper could top hers. Easily. Plus, he had an endless supply of willing eyes working for him whereas she had just the two. A gal had to sleep sometime. And if she pissed off Malcolm, one time, she'd go to sleep and never wake up. If she was lucky. "Yeah, yeah," she replied, bravado a skill she'd mastered over the years. "Tell him to take a pill, huh."

"I just might."

"You know what I meant," she pushed through her teeth. "I'll be in touch."

"Sooner rather than later would be wise."

"Shit." It suddenly started to rain. Great. Just great.

"What?"

"It's raining. Probably fucking acid rain."

James laughed. "Perfect."

"I don't see anything funny or perfect about it."

"My dear, where's your sense of humor? Can't you see the irony of the moment? Rain? Acid?"

"Yeah, funny. Later, James."

She hung up to the sound of his laughter. Acid Rayne. That was her, the nickname Malcolm and his right-hand man had given her when she'd taken the "post" of clean-up gal to the pair of Miami privateers. Basically, her job was to worry and pick up the pieces. Just like having kids. Ha.

She lowered her head when fat drops of rain splattered on her face. *Would you look at that?* Acid Rayne and alligators. What the hell had her life come to?

Chapter Three

Late afternoon sun reflected in bright shards off store windows and the hundreds of cars in the multitude of car lots that lined the road. It created an eye-watering glare that mixed with the heat shimmering up from the road in a visible wave as the bus rounded the corner down West Colonial Drive. It lumbered to a stop at the entrance of the fairgrounds.

As soon as she stepped off and cut a look across the dried field of tromped-down grass, she knew she was in shit. How deep and how smelly would remain to be seen. Rip stood with a couple of the roustabouts, vehemently arguing over something or other, his fists on his hips and his upper body leaned forward as if he could hammer his words home with his posture. They all turned toward her as the bus rumbled on to its next stop. The stench it left behind made her crinkle her nose. Weren't there laws against polluters? Damn, it reeked.

After a few waves, the rousties left and Rip marched for her, eyes narrowed.

"Betty, man, I've been looking all over for you. Where have you been?"

Despite the storm brewing in his brown gaze, all she could think about was how nice his jeans hugged his thighs and cupped his crotch, and how she'd like to fist all that gorgeous sun-bleached brown hair and give a few pulls. Hook her legs around his linebacker shoulders maybe? Hee-haw.

"What?" she replied, popping a hip. She'd never done that before becoming "Betty". It kind of fit with the name. "You watching my comings and goings now?"

He waved the air in front of him as though he'd just walked through a particularly virulent fart. In reality it was the yearly convergence of lovebugs. Innocuous insects whose primary goal in life seemed to be mating. A pair of the little things landed and stuck on Rip's shirt collar.

"We're a week too early. Manny wants a tiger. Sheila's sick. I couldn't find you. It's been that kinda day."

"Well, I missed you too," she replied, staving off the laugh. Rip looked pissed for real. And if not many people on Earth scared her, Rip sure did. He was big for starters and had that predatory *thing* just underneath the easygoing veneer. She could spot a hunter when she saw one. Birds of a feather and all that.

Rip managed a tight smile.

"Have you eaten yet?" Her question was asked with an inflection that made it clear she wasn't talking about chowing down on a burger and fries.

A wicked grin pulled the corner of his mouth. He slipped his four fingers in and fisted the front of her jeans—how he got his bear paw in there, she had no idea...the pants were *tight*—and reeled her in. “No, and I’m starving. Got anything in mind?”

“I always got something in mind, stud. Are the trailers hooked up yet?”

“Mine is.” He kissed her throat. The pair of lovebugs must have decided to get a quieter host on which to do their thing and flew away.

She *mmm*-ed then slipped her thigh between his, nudged his package in the process. Man, she loved playing with him. “Let me get my stuff and I’ll see you in your trailer. I’ll take your mind off things.”

A quick bark of laughter shook his shoulders. “And humble too. What makes you think sex with you will take my mind off things?”

Rayne curled her arm around his neck and flexed her biceps to hoist herself up to him. “You saying an old fart who wants a pet tiger, an albino gator and some keys occupy your mind more than what I’ve got for you?”

Rip released her jeans so he could wrap his hands over her ass. She couldn’t get over how strong he was. He easily lifted her against him. The tips of her steel-toed construction boots barely touched the ground. “Ten minutes, babe. If you’re not in my trailer by then, I’ll come find you wherever you are and give the locals a hell of a sex show.”

Rayne groaned when he crushed his mouth on hers. She returned the deep kiss and laughed when Rip slapped her ass and walked off. Not a fake laugh either. She was growing fond of him, her big stud. She whistled appreciatively when he adjusted himself down by the crotch area. That he’d flip her the bird made it all the more exciting. Playing hard to get. As if.

Honestly thrilled—and *honest* wasn’t a word in her dictionary, especially these last few weeks—Rayne sauntered over to the trailer she shared with Suz, got her toiletries bag and clean clothes then found the ladies’ bathhouse. The best she’d seen so far. Nice and clean and with cubicles too. She had a shower—hot water, bless their hearts—and, wearing her favorite tank top, boxer shorts and flip-flops, took what looked like a shortcut across the grounds to Rip’s trailer. People turned to stare. She didn’t care. She’d never been a shy or modest girl. Hard to do with her physique.

Her mom was even more “bodacious”. Her word. Which was saying something, considering that mom’s little darling was six feet and packing a 40DD rack.

Plus, she “wrestled” a gator while in a thong and bikini top. Not what her phys-ed-teacher single mom had planned for her only child. To shake her ass half naked and become the clean-up gal to a pair of Miami privateers. Mom didn’t know about the gun collection either. To her mother, she was Rayne Brogan, welder at a fence factory in Gastonia, North Carolina. Had to explain the muscles and the scars, right? Her mama wasn’t an idiot.

She came around the corner of a concrete electricity shed and started. Manny was leaning against the opposite side, smoking and cleaning his nails with a pocket knife. She instantly hated herself for letting him affect her. Creepy old turd.

He snapped the knife closed against his thigh then pocketed it. "I was just looking for you."

The urge to reply "whatever" was strong, but she resisted and just shrugged.

"You aiming at starting a brush fire, dressed like that?" He blew a cigarette puff and gave her the once-over, squinting one eye against the drift of smoke.

Her laugh wasn't terribly friendly but he'd had it coming for weeks. "Get the old blood pumping, do I?"

"Nah. You're not my type."

"Too big for you to handle, huh?" She winked and started to walk around Manny.

He stepped sideways to block her path. Reflexes immediately hit the red zone. "You shouldn't do that, Manny. A girl could get the wrong impression."

"You're hardly a girl, 'Betty'," he replied around his smoke. "And you're not getting the wrong impression either. Why don't you get your big ass on the next bus out of town."

This wasn't a question but a warning shot. In her mental book of threats, Manny had suddenly gone from "creepy old turd" to "creepy old turd worth a double look".

"Oh, and what for? Don't you like me?" She bounced her eyebrows, pretending he hadn't raised her alarms when everything in her was clamoring to never, ever turn her back on this one again.

"I think we both know you don't belong here. I've seen you snoop around, get in people's stuff. Don't think you have me fooled."

Shit. He knows.

Would he scream if she made a grab at him and conked him out? She was quick, but not quick enough to keep someone from screaming or yelping. He wasn't heavy, probably hundred and fifty tops. But then she'd ruin her chance to keep searching the carnival and would have to hightail it out of there fast. Maybe she could just put the fear of God into him, make him want to explore his other options.

As she explored her own, Manny took a step closer. "I *know* what you're after."

Rayne felt the cocky, mocking grin she kept on around the carnival—not all that fake, come to think of it—tighten into the dangerous mask she knew she wore when she meant business.

Manny must have seen the difference as well because he stepped back, eyes narrowed. The smoke dangled loosely from his lips. "Who *are* you?"

"Now I'm going to forget what you just said. I'm in a good mood. I'm going to Rip's trailer and we're going to screw like rabbits. We're going to get some fuel into us at the bar later on and then we're going to come back home and go at it again." She leaned into him. "Word to the wise, don't piss off a girl on a hot date."

Before he could find something to reply—not that he seemed likely, slack-jawed and round-eyed as he was—Rayne walked around in a large circle, made sure to keep him in her sight the whole while and spotted Rip’s trailer parked near the lake. She knocked, didn’t wait for an answer and instantly felt her mood lighten.

A naked Rip just out of the shower and still dripping wet always did that.

“Just come in, why don’t you?” he grumbled as he twisted the cap off a beer bottle and carefully emptied it in a long, narrow glass. Why he bothered, she had no idea. She drank hers straight from the bottle.

“Found the keys you were looking for?”

He nodded. “Sheila won’t get in the pool though, just lays there on the ramp with her butt in it and the other half sticking out. She looks pissed.”

Rayne shrugged. “Maybe she’s PMSing. Give her a few days.”

There was something strangely graceful and meticulous about the way he emptied the bottle and set it on the counter, which belied the massive muscles strapping his tall frame. She liked the duality in him, the brute strength and the tact. Because that chain of thought would unfailingly bring her to a guilt trip of epic proportions—one growing by the day, dammit—Rayne closed the door and leaned against it.

“You going to offer me one, stud?”

“Only one left. I thought we could share.”

He arched an eyebrow when she detached her shoulder from the polymer panel and crossed the distance between them so she could drop the roll of extra clothes on the padded bench. Burnt orange upholstery. Spotless though. Rip’s trailer was clean enough to eat off the floor. Hers was barely fit to fumigate. Her mom would like him. Hell, she’d like him too if her job wasn’t getting in the way.

Rayne licked her lips, took the glass and emptied half of it in a long swallow. With a sigh of satisfaction, she plunked it back on the counter. “Beer and toothpaste. Yum.”

That sexy smirk of his pulled all the way up his cheek. He loosely corralled her against the counter and between his arms. His cock pushed against her hip. “Man, you’re turning me on.”

“Always good to hear.”

He nuzzled her neck, bit the tank top’s strap and let it snap back on her shoulder. “No, I’m serious. You’re turning me *on*. As in every sense of the word.”

She pretended to smile when in fact she wanted to cringe. “I didn’t know there was more than one.”

“You know,” he murmured in her ear. Licked her lobe. Whew. “I have a proposition for you.”

Her heart sank. She couldn’t even look Rip in the eye. Anything personal, any action of sharing something—even a bottle of beer—was adding a layer she didn’t need. And a proposition of any kind coming from Ripley Knight would only make everything more difficult. Such as betraying his trust.

"I'd like to cut you in on the biz. Make you a partner. What do you think?"

She'd expected a twinge of remorse, a jab of guilt. She got both. More than a bit too. What she hadn't expected was the engulfing sense of loss. She was wasting a precious thing here. She was lying to a good man and it made her feel dirty. Stupid too. Her mom was no fool but maybe she'd raised a big one.

She sighed, leaned her head against his chest so her hair would hide her face. "Can't we just have sex?"

Couldn't they just screw for the sheer pleasure and leave all the emotional baggage at the door? Because Rayne realized that her emotional baggage for Rip was multiplying exponentially. Each day spent with him would make it that much harder to ultimately stab him in the back. Another thing she'd begun to suspect—maybe it was Rip who had the rocks. Her list of possible suspects dwindled by the day. Penelope hadn't been a novice at thieving and conniving, which told Rayne that whoever had offed her was either a pro killer or someone with some training. Rip had training. So maybe she stood to go against him for the rocks.

Oh joy.

What if she couldn't do it? What would Malcolm think of *that*? He'd come do it himself, no doubt. James could delay the inevitable spike of temper only so far. If she didn't get the rocks back—along with that damn prototype—then she'd be unable to stop Malcolm from coming here in the flesh. A pissed-off Malcolm. It was one thing to lie to Rip, but she wouldn't hurt him or cause him to be hurt. Not Rip.

The sound of his chuckles was a razorblade across her heart. "Never heard it from a woman before. Just sex, huh?"

She kissed his chin. "Just sex—man, you need a shave!"

"I wasn't allowed to grow even a five o'clock shadow for eleven years. Now that I can, I will. Don't like it?"

"I like it fine. Just don't rub yourself against me, all right?"

"Oh, I intend to do a lot more than just rub myself against you."

With a grunt, he laced his arms around her waist and hoisted her onto the counter, creating one spectacular wedgie that denuded half her butt. She landed with a *plop* of bare skin against the Formica countertop boasting genuine 1970s tiny gold splatter pattern against a cream background. They shared a laugh before Rip dove for her mouth again, and this time, gave her no choice but to wrap her legs around his middle and hold on for dear life. He pushed against her in his enthusiasm. Something either broke loose or clunked against the cabinet door behind her shoulder. The deep bass tremolo of his chuckle passed from his chest to hers. Made her want to grin like an idiot.

Happy sex. Two compatible people with similar appetites. The best sex short of the in-love kind. She wouldn't even let herself *hope* for that. Not in her line of work, not in the life she'd built for herself.

His hands, those big, strong, warm hands, were all over her body, in her hair, sometimes demanding, often dominant but always knowing. His hands knew her. Her own knew him in return and gave as much as she received.

His mouth also knew how she wanted things. Rip must have felt instinctively he had to make his lips moth-light when he kissed her shoulder, lipped the tender skin below her ear. When she felt like being sucked and licked and bitten, Rip, without being told or urged with body language, abruptly changed tactics. As if he could tell, as if he felt or sensed things on a whole other level than the rest of them. Obviously, he was a finely tuned bundle of instincts and observation. A hunter. He must have been one hell of a sharpshooter in his military years. His records had been slim, which told her that after his Rangers training, he must have been taken in by some other, deeper ops.

"What are you thinking about?" he murmured in her ear.

So he could tell she'd been mentally wandering. What a slipup on her part. Rayne mentally tut-tutted. She was losing her edge around Rip.

"Nothing."

He pulled away to take a look at her, arched an eyebrow. "You're good. But not that good."

Rayne Brogan knew with certainty, with pitiless clarity, that she was in deeper trouble than she'd ever been, mainly because of two factors. One, she knew Rip could be a danger to her mission—hell, to herself too if he learned what she did. And two, she willingly chose not to address the source of the threat.

In her world, she was a dead woman.

"You're right, I *am* good," she replied. Had his eyes grown a bit darker? "And at this too."

She licked his throat from Adam's apple to chin. Slowly. Her tongue made a long raspy sound against his stubble. He visibly shivered, pushed his hips harder against her.

It felt to her as though she'd triggered something in Rip. Something that had lain dormant for some time. Maybe always. Something animalistic.

He pinned her knees and pushed them farther apart against the counter's edge, bent over so he could devour her breasts through the tank top, down lower, everywhere her boxers revealed skin, using his chin and teeth to push fabric aside and out of his way.

She rolled her butt back when Rip zeroed in on her pussy and through the thin cotton, licked and sucked it. Not even bothering to take them off, he ate her right through them, made them so wet with his saliva and her own juices that Rayne felt everything as if the shorts weren't even there. Her feet tingled with lack of circulation. She didn't care. Planting her hands behind her, she pushed her pussy hard against his face, rolled it against his chin, squeezed her thigh muscles so he'd have to work to keep her pinned down. She loved watching him work for her. Work her.

A long groan left her when he managed to move the crotch of her boxers out of the way and give her denuded pussy a serious tongue-lashing. With increasing vigor and sound effects, she readied for the wave coming at her. And damn, it was a good one.

She spilled her pleasure just as Rip abandoned a knee so he could introduce a finger into her. The perfect timing and angle elevated her orgasm to woo-damn proportions and reduced her mental faculties to little more than one-word processes.

Fuck. Now. Hurry.

But Rip seemed to have other plans. Instead of letting her ride her wave, he stood, trapped one of her wrists in the process and rolled against the counter so he leaned back against it. Rayne barely managed not to fall on her face when Rip yanked her off the counter and “draped” her around him. A hot palm landed on her shoulder. Pushed increasingly harder.

Pissed off and ready to break some heads, Rayne bent her leg and brought her knee right up against his package. “You left me hanging,” she snarled.

Rip nipped her chin. That’d leave a mark. “Yeah?”

“Oh, you’re gonna be sorry.”

He replied something smart-ass that died in a strangle when she dropped to her knees and, in a two-fist extension of her frustration, wolfed him down to the base. His balls constricted noticeably, so just for good measure, she squeezed them in a fist while she sucked him harder than she’d ever done before. To him or to anyone else for that matter. She hadn’t come properly because of him. She’d pay him in kind.

With any luck, he’d pay *her* in kind right after. Sex with Rip was the best.

Thick with veins and the base completely hairless—she loved that he shaved himself around the cock to go with the nice, hard and smooth rest of him—Rayne fisted him as hard as she could. And she could make a fist, dammit. A couple of pumps were enough. On her tongue, she tasted the pre-cum. Even if it killed her as much as it did him, she stood and left him there, panting, waiting for a climax that never came because she too could time herself pretty damn well.

“So,” she asked, knowing—hoping—to tease him beyond reason, “how did you like that?” She licked her upper lip. Might as well go all the way.

He’d already collided against her by the time her brain warned “freight train, incoming”. Both of them went waltzing against the opposite wall a few feet back, thudded against it in a snarl of limbs. The garbage can rolled away, spilled its content on his spotless floor. A pile of documents, envelopes and stationary stuff toppled from a plastic fold-up table bolted against the wall. Rayne slipped on the loose sheets of paper when she arched against Rip to try to pin him on the wall. Failing pathetically—and if that didn’t just thrill her to the core. She half chuckled, half grunted when he wrapped his arms around her in a steel bear hug and back-marched her to the counter again. Her foot wasn’t even two inches off the floor to make room for him when Rip angled his hip for a forceful penetration that she welcomed with ferocity. When his cock pushed against her sex, she made damn sure her boxers weren’t in the way. He took her.

She didn't care that his ruthless fingers curled into her thighs. She didn't care that his mouth trapped and bit her nipple. Rip knew she could take it. He wasn't taking her hard because he was a violent man who needed to pin his women down beneath him and feel tough for it. He was taking her hard because that was how she wanted it. He knew her. Man, he knew her.

With low grunts, he thrust as though he feared the end of the world were nigh and he'd be left with a good mad worked up and no place to put it. Rayne wrapped a leg around his middle and squeezed those quads hard enough to hurt a lesser man.

"Oh babe," he snarled.

Working those fabulous thighs, he pushed in, curled out, back in. Deep. Deeper. Quicker. Her clit throbbed. Flesh distended to the burning point. The speed of his taking belied the length of his cock, which was enough to make a girl fan herself. Rayne angled her pelvis to receive even more vigorous hip work.

Close. So close.

"Come on!"

He did.

Each push banged her shoulder against the cabinet, produced a rattling noise that didn't begin to cover her voice. She'd always been a vocal lover. But with Rip, she was turning into a cantatrice.

Furious stabs pushed her to the limit. To the edge. Then freefall. Pleasure exploded in white and golden fireworks behind her eyelids, in tingles and tremors all over her arms and legs, in the metallic tang of blood in her mouth—she'd bitten her tongue—and in uncontrollable shaking. A second after her own climax, she felt Rip get to his. A long, deep groan rumbled in his chest when he pushed deep enough to hoist her off the counter, penetration that he kept complete instead of pulling back. The end of him sheathed into the end of her. Perfect fit.

Tiny but potent pulsations warmed her in a multitude of ways. She loved that he'd come in her. She'd never allowed a man to do that. Had actually started the Pill shortly after meeting him. Not that she had anything against condoms and neither did Rip, but when she'd shown him the little round container, his smirk had risen to the occasion.

"Does that mean it's level two now?" he'd asked, half mocking, half expectant.

She'd let him roast in it for a while before she'd answered. "Yeah, stud. It's level two."

He'd looked sincerely honored and thrilled. As he should be.

Rip presently settled her back against the counter then nuzzled her neck. "You're a gym on legs."

Her laugh startled both of them. After a second or two, his shoulders started shaking as well. She quieted before he did. Guilt made sure of that.

"Man," she panted, swallowed. "It's like we have something against beds, you know."

Rip leaned his torso back so he could look at her. His smile, so disarming and contagious, lit up his eyes. A pearl of sweat trickled down his temple. "My poor kitchen."

Rayne hooked her chin on his shoulder so she wouldn't have to look him in the eye and held him tight until the spasms quieted, the arrhythmic hammering of her heart slowed. Rip was perfect for her. And she was wasting all of it. Dammit.

So her mom *had* raised a fool after all.

Chapter Four

Even hours later at the fairgrounds only bar, Rip regretted his words. He never should've spilled his guts to Betty. Already he could feel the difference in her behavior. She was avoiding his gaze. Had he embarrassed her? Not likely, the woman was made of reinforced steel. Had he brought up painful memories then? An old boyfriend who'd broken her heart? Man, he'd bust the guy's kneecaps if that was the case. He'd never been a player. Never led a woman on to get inside her pants. Never had to. A woman's heart was a precious commodity, not to be taken lightly. And when one gave it to a guy, he better take care of it.

Rip watched Betty bring back their sixth pitcher of beer. Everyone had bought one in turn, except for Manny, who sat in his chair with a bowl of peanuts and a beer bottle he hadn't touched.

His motley bunch looked like perfectly civilized tea drinkers having cucumber sandwiches and exchanging on high art compared to the raucous patrons filling the bar to the rafters. He'd already had to give the evil eye to a table of guys who'd looked at Betty a bit too much for his taste. When he'd booked the dates, Rip had had no idea his carnival would be sharing the fairgrounds with a bunch of Neanderthals. Who knew a farm equipment expo could be so damn rowdy?

While the rest of the guys left to go "watch the ladies", Rip decided to stay at the present bar for various reasons. One, Betty was sexier in jeans and a tank top than any emaciated girl in a bikini. Two, he felt part boss, part protector to the rest of the women in his troupe. And three, had he gone with the guys, it would've left Manny and Betty alone...not something he wanted. Plus, the appeal of exotic dancers had long worn off. Maybe he was getting old. At thirty-nine.

A new song began, something he didn't know. Too much bass. Betty and the rest of the girls *squee*-ed as only women could and as one trouped to the dance floor—a patch of parquet in the corner. The only females in the entire establishment—Christ, even the staff was all male—they quickly drew more attention than Rip thought was good. Maybe he was getting old *and* paranoid.

With the tempo, Betty's blonde head popped over the rest like a meerkat on speed. She was so drunk tonight. He'd never seen her inebriated before. She was a funny drunk too. Not at all the fight-picking kind, something that could've been plausible with her personality. What a contradiction, an enigma, she was turning out to be. How boring his life had been before her.

And how unruly too since there it was, sure as taxes, one of the guys from that other table had just gotten up and started dancing behind Betty. *His* Betty. Goddammit.

She must have been taller than the interloper by at least half a head. It didn't seem to bother the guy any since he raised his arms and loosely "caged" her from behind while he danced some pathetic grind-o-machine up and down her long body. Good woman, she didn't even turn around, just kept doing her thing. The rest of the women made various "eeww" faces, one of them looking back Rip's way.

"Sure has a knack for calling attention to herself," Manny remarked. He shook his head in obvious disgust.

"A woman can dance without calling for this," Rip replied a bit too forcefully for his pride.

Manny arched an eyebrow. "You should stay away from her. She's trouble, if you ask me."

"I didn't and I don't."

In good fun, Betty turned to her unwanted companion and made room for him in their little circle. His buddies must have thought this was as good an invitation as any to come crash their party as all five or six of them swarmed the little patch of parquet and crowded the women. One even got his hands full of Betty's curvy hips and swung to her rhythm. Rip was on his feet the second the guy's hands landed. Betty only laughed it off, said something to the intruder, who shook his head and grinned.

Manny put a hand over Rip's forearm. "She can deal with this herself."

"If it was anyone else, you'd be there in a second."

Manny dropped his hand and shrugged.

Yeah, that's what I thought.

Rip reached the edge of the now-crowded dance floor a second before another guy planted himself in front of Betty so he too could grind himself up and down the grinning Valkyrie. The rest cheered. What was *up* with these guys? One of his employees, the petite Claire, threw Rip an affronted look, as if saying "*Aren't you gonna do anything?*"

Hell yeah he was!

He barely had time to cringe when the guy behind Betty grabbed her ass in two handfuls. Her easygoing grin evaporated.

Rip could've laughed at the "uh-oh" expression coming over the idiot's face.

Her elbow came up hard and fast, hit the guy in the throat. He dropped in a grimacing heap, kind of like a sack of cement.

Whoa. He'd never seen that move on her. She fought differently drunk than she did sober? As if she'd let go of certain standards. As if something deeper, closer to the core, surfaced. Rip had seen fighting in his life, he'd seen pro moves. And this was one of them. Quick, dirty and effective. Pro training produced moves like those. Who the hell was his Betty?

The man in front pushed her roughly on the chest, yelled something. Rip didn't see what else happened afterward. Because after the guy pushed Betty—dared put his filthy hands on her—Rip got tunnel vision.

He grabbed the closest guy and reeled him back from the clump already forming around Betty. A quick punch to the muzzle ought to do.

One down.

A fist connected against the side of his head. His eyes still on the tall blonde in the middle of the dance floor, Rip quickly dispatched the current asshole and sent him waltzing back against his buddies.

By the corner of his eye, he spotted Manny cutting a path through the crowd and coming in at another angle. Glad to have the old man finally show some support for the troops, Rip used his bulk to shoulder his way to Betty, but only managed to push through a few feet closer. Something landed on the back of his head that made him see stars.

Without even turning around, he kicked hard and low, connected against something softer than the heel of his cowboy boot. A weight tackled him, sent him sideways against a table, over which he sent his unseen attacker.

Chaos erupted in the bar. Someone killed the music and flashed the lights several times. A beer bottle crashed against the wall and broke in a geyser of white spray.

The top of Manny's white head neared Betty's location. Good man. Even if he didn't like her, he was still going to watch her back.

Then something happened that froze the blood in Rip's veins, blanketed his brain with black and white images like Chinese shadows. Betty grimaced then her blonde head slipped below the crowd.

She was hurt.

He pushed, punched, kicked and generally abused his way to her, taking out a couple of guys in the process, until he stood by Manny, who'd grabbed Betty by an arm to steady her. She whirled around, palm coming up and fast for Manny's face. She would've broken his nose—hell, assuredly sent shards of bone right into his brain with the force of her blow—had Rip not blocked her.

Her blue eyes spelled murder when she reached back to rub her waist, right over her leather belt holding the outdated but killer jeans in place. It came back bright red. She stared at it then at Rip and Manny in turn. A nasty sort of smile pulled her lips to one side. She nodded.

"Christ! Betty!"

Rip couldn't get over the blood on her hand. Someone had cut her? A beer bottle maybe? Surely it couldn't have been serious, otherwise she wouldn't have been standing there, staring holes into everyone's hide. Still, blood coming out of her body just about triggered every protective instinct he had. And some he didn't know about.

"I'm fine," she snarled through her teeth. "I've had worse."

"You're not fine, you're bleeding!" Claire said as she walked around Betty and leaned over. She put her hand over her mouth. Anny circled the seething Valkyrie as well but was cowed into abruptly taking a few steps back. Betty could've killed with those eyes.

"Okay," Manny said, grabbing Claire and Anny by an arm, pulling them to him. "I think we had enough fun for one night." He stared up at Betty, curled his upper lip. "Ain't that right?"

Before Betty could reply, Rip fisted her belt buckle, reeled her to him then behind him as he put his body between the last couple of drunken idiots and her. But by that time, the fight had left out of most people. Funny how quickly it could start and end. Hollywood never got it right.

The male staff—now he knew why—made short work of clearing the place and tossing everyone out, including his bunch. Rip knew he'd get a call in the morning. As long as they didn't kick them out of the fairgrounds. Or sue them. With Sheila ill and Betty injured, he didn't need any more problems.

Betty yanked her arm out of his grip and started walking backward so she could stare at him and Manny. He didn't like the look she gave him. The nearest lamp post set along the fairgrounds paths illuminated her face in angular pools of shadow. Moisture weighed the air down. A storm was brewing. And not just weather-wise.

"Come show me," he said calmly even if he wanted to smack her upside the head and force her over his knee so he could look at her back.

She just lifted her chin higher. Oh damn. The storm.

"Don't give me that look. Hold your ass still so I can look."

Rip planted a hand on her shoulder and spun her around so he could see how bad the cut was. Good thing she wore a thick leather belt because it'd taken most of the hit. No beer bottle had done this. Too narrow. A blade. Someone had actually *stabbed* her.

"I'm fine," she murmured, about to turn away. "I know these things, and I'm fine."

Rip stopped her by curling a finger in the loop of her jeans. "I'll tell you if it's fine or not. You don't have eyes in your ass, do you? *Stay.*"

He heard her curse under her breath.

Stubborn, pigheaded woman.

Claire joined him and together they held the jeans down and tank top up to see better. Betty was right. She seemed to know "these things" and was fine. But he knew "these things" too. And something didn't track. He straightened and faced her.

Claire and two other women who'd joined them said something about a first-aid kit and to stay put and whatever. Rip didn't hear much above the *whoosh* of his heartbeat in his skull. She could've been seriously hurt.

Betty reached back again, grimaced then shook her head. "Well, that'll teach me to watch my back."

Manny started to light himself a cigarette but Betty smacked the lighter and smoke from his hand. "I should've seen it coming, huh?"

Rip couldn't believe it. "Hey! Cut that shit out!"

"Nah," Manny replied. "Let her vent it out. She has a lot on her chest. Don't you, 'Betty'?"

She shook her head, had a mirthless chuckle. "You sneaky old turd."

"What the hell's going on?" Rip planted his fists on his hips. He'd had enough of them acting like school kids with a grudge. "Manny probably saved you—"

"Argh, for Christ's sake," Betty interrupted with a disgusted grimace. "Give me a fucking break. He's—"

Manny pushed her against the shoulder, which unbalanced her a bit. Not much. She pretended to go at him, grinned meanly when he twitched.

"Why don't you tell Rip why you're here, huh?"

Up to that point, her blue eyes reflected nothing but anger, but with Manny's taunting words, they grew wider. She snapped her mouth shut and looked away when Rip stared at her.

"What do you mean, Manny? And be careful what words you choose."

It must have been the ice in his tone, but his former commander nodded then snapped his chin in Betty's direction. "She ain't here for the carnival. She's been playing you from the start."

The rhinestones and studs glittered on her tank top when she took a deep breath. The words *Are You Man Enough?* sparkled in the light of the lamp post.

Was he man enough? To hear the truth? Her truth?

"What? You're making no sense."

"She ain't here as a regular worker, and she ain't here for Sheila, and she sure as hell ain't here for you."

"So what am I here for then?" Betty asked, her voice surprisingly gentle. Which was worse than if she'd shouted. She sounded *defeated*. Rip didn't like that his hard-as-nails Valkyrie would look so damn brittle. It turned his protective dial to the Dumbass Zone. He'd do anything for her. Had he been a fool?

"Okay, one of you come out and say it—and I frankly don't give a shit which one does." A sinking feeling engulfed Rip. *Had* he been a fool?

Manny narrowed his eyes. "You've been too far down her pants to notice her snooping around the place, going into folks' trailers."

"What are you saying, old man?"

"She's a thief."

A pregnant silence settled over the three. Betty's eyes alternatively narrowed then flared. She seemed to want to say something and her mouth worked but no sound came out. Finally, she leaned over and cocked her head sideways.

"You think I'm after Rip's *money*?"

Rip could tell she'd expected something else. She shook her head several times, looked up then cursed. "Yeah, I'm after Rip's millions. I'm wrestling a gator to get at the man's fortune." She set her gaze on Rip. Unwavering. "I'm *not* stealing from you."

He believed her. Somehow, he did. Even if the sinking feeling wouldn't relent, even if he knew she was lying about something else. Probably everything else. At least, it wasn't about that. Of that he was sure. Still, she'd lost his trust. He knew it. She knew it. Manny knew it, damn him.

Manny sucked at his teeth. "My mistake," he said slowly, eyes narrowed. "You're here for something *else* then."

"I think that's enough, Manny."

Betty stormed away without another word. Had Rip not known her better, he would've thought she looked scared.

* * * * *

The battle Rayne was engaged in was one alien to her. She had no experience to draw on, no combat training to depend on in this fight. She'd faced armed gunmen, had fought hand-to-hand with knife-wielding cokeheads, had tackled single-handedly a gang sent by one of Malcolm's many competitors, and had even brought down a guy with a freaking Taser. None of that had scared her. But the idea Rip would turn against her created a churning in her stomach that brought an acid taste of fear with it.

She was *terrified*.

She'd avoided Rip and Manny for three days after the bar fight, trying to get things right in her head. For Christ's sake, she was a professional. She didn't let men get to her. Ever. How the hell had Rip done it? Snuck right into her soul. It sucked. It purely sucked. Long and loud. And she didn't know what to do about it. For the first time in her life, she didn't know *what to do*. Who knew her "problem-solving skills" — she'd aced those career tests at school — would first lead her to Malcolm and James' business venture, make her one of the best in her field only to fail her when crunch time came around.

Unfortunately she was out of time. On several fronts. The carnival was in set-up phase and her show was already scheduled to be one of the first. She figured it would be safe to go spend time with Sheila. No one much bothered with the alligator, and Rip was busy overseeing the set up.

Sheila hadn't been right since they'd arrived in Florida. She showed no interest in the pool Rip had set up for her, wasn't eating and seemed to be in discomfort. Rayne had tried several times to coax Sheila into eating or cooling off in the water, but the gator was having no part in it. She'd even snapped at Rayne, which was a first.

Which made Rayne even more determined to figure out what was going on with the gator. Without the cover of her act with Sheila, she had no reason to be there, so she needed Sheila healthy and performance-fit.

She found Sheila harnessed to the axel of the trailer, just the lower third of her tail in the pool and the rest of her plopped on the grass, unmoving.

"Hey, chickie," Rayne greeted her in the familiar way.

There was no response. Rayne went over to the feed bucket and dug out a chunk of meat. "Come on, big girl, let's have a snack."

Still no responsive sign. Sheila looked as though she actually *pouted*.

"The hell with this," Rayne grumbled. She unfastened the chain from the axel, wound it around her left wrist several times and gave a small tug. "Come on, Sheila. Let's go for a swim. It'll cool you off."

It took a lot of tugging, but finally she got the harnessed gator moving. Amazingly no one stopped her as she led the gator past the pavilion and to the edge of the lake that bordered the fairgrounds. Several people did, however, give her a wide berth.

She had to grin. Until she met Sheila, she'd have sworn there was no way in the seventh level of hell that an alligator was tamable. Much less that there'd be an albino gator who actually liked people and acted more like a trained dog than a gargantuan reptile. She was no Dr. Doolittle, but that beast—

Sheila perked up at the sight of the water, threw her legs into high gear and raced past Rayne, tail swishing left and right.

"Oh shit," was all she had time to say before Sheila took to the water, dragging Rayne after her.

"Hold on!"

Rayne planted her feet in the muck at the edge of the water and pulled back on the chain. Her arms and shoulders strained and her legs trembled. For a few moments she stayed the forward momentum of the gator.

"Hey, chickie! Come back to—"

But she was no match for Sheila. Two seconds later she was being dragged into the water in a spectacular geyser. Serious arm twisting didn't do shit against the chain she'd wrapped around her wrist. A sharp pull forced her to keep her arm straight out, muscles taut unless she wanted to kiss it goodbye. This was *not* good. She could swim, but not fast enough to keep up with a half ton of gator. Sheila dove and Rayne was dragged under. She kicked for the surface as she ploughed through the water, struggling to hang on to the chain as Sheila headed for deeper water. Up above her head, late afternoon sun wavered through the thickening depths of water between the sky and Rayne. And between air.

Chapter Five

Rip had just finished helping on the Flying Jinny when Claire ran up to him, red-faced and out of breath. "Come... Quick..." she gasped out the words.

Rip grabbed her by the arm and started in the direction she'd come with a one-word question. "Where?"

"The lake," she forced out the words, fighting to keep up with his long strides.

As he crossed the trailer area, he spotted Manny heading away from the lake. He was walking fast. Strange for the unflappable old man.

"Hurry," Claire urged.

She was slowing him down so he released her and broke into a run. There was quite a crowd gathered by the large pavilion. He raced alongside and drew to a quick stop as he took a look at the lake.

"New bally?" Clyde, one of the roustabouts, asked as he sidled up beside Rip. Bally was a term used by carnys—another Rip had had to learn—to mean a free performance intended to attract both tips and visitors to the nearby sideshow.

Rip just shook his head and stared in amazement at the sight on the lake.

* * * * *

Rayne gave another loud curse, earning a cheer from the people on shore. What had started as a disaster had taken a definite upswing. She'd been hanging on to the chain, being pulled through the water, coughing and spewing behind Sheila, when a man with long greasy hair and a scraggly beard pulled up alongside her in a fishing boat.

"What'cha got there?" he yelled as he cut speed to keep his boat from overtaking her.

"Gator!"

"Gimme yer hand!"

Rayne kept a death grip on the chain with her left hand—even if the thing was coiled at least three times around her wrist, digging painfully—and extended her right. Cigarette hanging loosely on his lip, he abandoned the throttle so he could lean over and grab her hand. He started pulling with all his might. Coughed smoke and ashes. With his help, Rayne managed to crawl into the boat, coughing, snorting. Cursing.

No sooner had she flopped in and hit the floorboard of the boat, it jerked then leaned to one side. Sheila had increased speed. A lot. She wasn't so sick then.

"Woaaaaa!" the man cheered. He rushed back to his bench and grabbed the throttle once more. "That must be a big'un! We're going damn near five miles an hour!"

Yeah, she's big all right.

Rayne managed to flounder to her feet. Thanks to the boat gliding effortlessly over the water, it was much easier to hang on. In fact, it was kind of cool. Music suddenly blared behind her and she cut a look over her shoulder. The man had an old portable boom box with a broken antenna, and from the speakers blasted George Thorogood and The Destroyers' "Bad to the Bone".

Rayne couldn't help but chuckle. The man's face was split in a huge grin. One look at herself and she understood why. The white tank top clung to her and the boxer shorts had slunk down to the crack of her ass.

"B-b-b-b-baaaaad!" growled the boom box. "Bad to the bonnnnnne!"

For a nanosecond she considered sitting down and playing safe. Then she heard a cheer coming from land. There was a crowd gathered, watching.

When had she ever played it safe?

She stood, grabbed the chain with her other hand. With feet planted wide on the front bench of the boat, she began an awkward but hysterical bump and grind to the music. Her impromptu captain *du jour* couldn't have grinned any wider, neither could the frog logo on his too-small T-shirt. The cheers from the shore grew louder. Sheila was circling the lake, and by the time the song was drawing to a close, the boat was headed toward shore. Good girl.

Rayne looked at the people and right there front and center stood Rip, his massive arms crossed over his chest, his face set in a hard mask of annoyance. Suddenly the fun went out of the adventure. Rayne hopped out of the boat as it slowed. Sheila waddled up on shore, gave a throaty roar and flopped down in the mud, looking quite happy with herself, leaving Rayne to give the boater a tight "thanks" and wade ashore.

"What the hell was that?" Rip demanded as he marched down to the water's edge to meet her, having to shout to be heard over the cheers and calls from the crowd.

"I was trying to cheer her up and she...got away from me."

"A stunt like that can get us tossed, Betty."

"Looks to me like we just got folks excited," she retorted. Why did she even bother? She didn't care about the carnival or the folks who worked there. Right?

Yeah, keep telling yourself that.

"Nice try, but we don't spring for a few more days."

"Oh yeah. Right."

She looked away. Not because she couldn't man-up to face Rip's chastising but because looking in his eyes stole her thunder. Just stripped the warrior right out of her and reduced her to a damn needy female. And that chapped her ass.

"Look, no harm done, so why don't you get Sheila back to her trailer and get cleaned up. Maybe we can have a drink after we finish setting up."

"Uh sure," she agreed without hesitation.

She still wasn't quite ready to be around Rip. Not only did being in his presence take her strength, it sent her hormones into a freaking five alarm fire. The man made her wet just by looking at him. Plus, she had to keep her marbles in a tight clump if she was going to get the job done. Thinking of the rocks and whatever prototype Penelope had stolen turned her stomach. She'd have to go digging around folks' trailers again. They had to be here somewhere. Unless she went directly for Manny, cornered him and roughed him up a bit, made him talk. She'd have to clear it with Beauty and the Beast first. Malcolm wouldn't care if someone tore the toenails off an old lady but James would. He'd always been the more careful of the two. Sometimes she suspected James had his own thing on the side, with his own connections.

She gave the chain a gentle tug to get Sheila, who seemed quite happy to waddle beside her back to the trailer, moving. The gator crawled into the shallow pool and did a long, lazy rollover.

And that was when Rayne saw it. A stitched cut on her belly.

"What the hell?" she murmured, climbing into the pool. By then Sheila was once again on her belly.

"Come on, baby, roll over," Rayne coaxed, nudging her in the side the way she did during the shows.

Apparently in a better mood since her swim, Sheila complied. Rayne knelt and ran her fingers over the cut. It looked like a surgical incision, nice and neat. And there was a lump beneath the surface. Something hard.

Something was rotten. No way this was an accident. There was something in the gator, and it didn't get there by itself. No way was Rip responsible. He'd have told her. Wouldn't he? He wasn't the lying type.

No, that's your type, Rayne Brogan, remember?

It had to be someone else. She'd put money on the old turd. *Manny, you slimy little fart.*

She climbed out of the pool, gears spinning at ten thousand rotations per minute in her head. This was ammunition she could use. Manny had made it clear they were at war, and in war one had to use everything at one's disposal. She'd use this against him. As soon as she cleaned up, she'd find Rip and tell him. Then she'd enjoy watching Manny try to squirm his way out of it. Without Manny, she'd be able to snoop around with more leisure. Those rocks would be in Malcolm's hand by next week and she'd be gone far from...

From Rip, not just the carnival. And why the hell not? She didn't belong here, wrestling a gator...

"Holy mother of shit," she murmured.

She knew where the rocks were.

She had to call Malcolm and James. Now. She rushed for her trailer to get her stuff so she could clean up. She'd have to be discreet about it, wait until everyone was gone,

return to Sheila's fancy trailer and sneak in. If she was right, she'd get the rocks back and high-tail it out of Orlando on the next plane to Miami.

Her own trailer was empty when she arrived, so she dripped her way to her room. After gathering her cell phone, which she slipped in the back pocket of her rolled-up jeans, her clothes, toiletries and towels, she retraced her steps, stopping at the small refrigerator. There was beer and one soft drink in a plastic bottle that was half empty. It had to be hers. She was the only one who drank regular sodas. All the other gals liked the diet drinks. Rayne snorted. Like those diet drinks were going to counteract the buckets of food.

Thinking the soda would kill the taste of the lake that was still in her mouth, she grabbed it and chugged it down. After a satisfying belch, she headed for the shower.

It took longer than normal to reach the bathhouse, thanks to the number of people who stopped her along the way to compliment her on her "show" with Sheila at the lake. Rayne wished Rip felt the same way. The thought she'd want—or *need*, more aptly—a man's compliments or favorable reception just made her want to kick her own ass. What was wrong with her? She had to stop thinking about him, about what he'd come to mean to her. Which was nothing, of course. She tried to swallow the growing lump in her throat but couldn't, so she took another long swallow. For the first time, a long, sneaky belch through the nose didn't make her grin.

Thoughts of Rip kind of ripped her. On several fronts. First was the burning yearning that always gripped her when she thought of him and all the wonderful things he made her feel with his clever mouth and hands, not to mention that award-winning rod he packed. Whew.

But there was more than just good sex when it came to Rip. And that still scared her because she couldn't see how they could have a future if he ever found out she wasn't who she'd claimed to be. He would go out with a "Betty", she knew, but not with a "Rayne Brogan". What man would?

Trying to shove the thoughts aside as she reached the bathhouse, she found an empty shower and turned on the water.

Man did the water feel good. No, not good. It was much better than good. It was like liquid light on her skin. Tiny shards of light danced off streams of water and ran down her body in glowing rivulets. It was electrifying. Damn near orgasmic.

And that one thought gave her a moment of clarity. No way a shower felt that good. Her eyes widened and she stood frozen under the spray. Her heart rate was fast, faster than normal and everything seemed to have taken on deeper, richer, more brilliant hues.

"Uh-oh," she mumbled then giggled at the sound of her own voice.

Was the lake water toxic? No, it couldn't be that. This felt infinitely more profound than some gastric problem. It felt like...

"Drugs."

The murmured word made her grin like an idiot.

The sensuous feel of the water on her skin intruded and evaporated reason. It felt so good. So damn good. Nothing could feel better. And that thought brought a vision of Rip's face to her turbulent mind. There *was* one thing that could feel better.

Forgetting about the rest of the shower, she wrapped a towel around herself and hurried from the bathhouse.

The brilliance of daylight shattered her vision, sending her reeling as a kaleidoscope of colors danced around her. She laughed and danced in the direction she thought she needed to go. Who cared if people stared.

* * * * *

Rip was wiping his face with an already-soaked bandana when he saw her.

"What...?"

Betty was dancing her way along across the field, her head tilted back and singing. He grinned at the sight. That body wrapped in a skimpy towel was enough to give a priest a hard-on.

His mental faculties diminishing proportionally with the distance separating the dancing Valkyrie and him, he circled her so she wouldn't spot him, snuck right up and grabbed her from behind. She squealed. Actually *squealed*. That set an alarm off in Rip's head. Betty might shout, yell, bellow, growl or belly laugh, but never squeal.

He turned her around and she grinned at him. "Hey, stud. Wanna wrestle? Or better yet, wanna fuck?"

Her hands went to the button of his jeans as her mouth latched on to his like a vampire, sucking his tongue into her as if she wanted to chew it right off. Not that he minded the kind of fiery attention but still, something didn't track.

Rip fought her hands from his pants and broke free from the kiss. "What the hell's up with you?"

"Just warm for your form," she replied, and moved too fast for him to stop to fist his cock through his jeans. And man, was he ever hard.

"Stop." He grabbed her wrist and held it captive. A man had his standards.

"Aw, Rip," she complained, and pressed her pelvis forward to grind against him.

As she did, he got a good look at her eyes. "Fuck."

"Yes, please."

"Come on." He turned her around and marched her toward his trailer.

It wasn't easygoing. Betty was constantly turning to try to grab him, all the while grinning like mad and stumbling around like a drunk. Rip felt as though someone had gripped his innards in a fist. He could tell she was drugged. That wasn't like her. Well, at least as far as he knew. But then again, what did he know about Betty?

He finally managed to get her inside the trailer, having to pry her hands off the doorjamb, the counter, himself. An octopus.

"Okay, what'd you take?" he asked as he pulled the door closed behind him.

"Took a swim with a gator," she replied, and made a grab for him.

"Uh-uh." He batted away her hand.

"Ooooh, yeah! Let's play rough. I like it rough."

Rip blocked when her fist shot at his face, and countered, giving her a firm but gentle shove on the shoulder. What the hell was wrong with her?

Next came her foot as she tried to kick his feet from under him. Rip skipped and avoided sprawling on his ass only because his elbow knocked against the table and sent everything down along the wall. Despite the state of her, she could deliver. Well, so could he.

Economically, so he wouldn't overdo it and hurt her, Rip used his greater reach to grab her by a shoulder and spin her around, barely able to duck in time when she snapped her elbow back. That would've hurt. Huffing and puffing, he pinned her against the wall with his body crushed against hers, teeth gritted to resist the temptation of filling his hands with her generous form. Man, she could reduce him to a lusty beast whenever she wanted. Despite the recent events and their three days' hiatus, he still felt like pudding whenever she came strutting around with that rhinestone top and leather jacket. She might hide things from him—he had no doubt about that—but she couldn't fake the reaction he saw in those man-killer blue eyes of hers. Her body liked his, even if he knew she felt nothing for him.

"Come on, big boy," she said, taunting. "Show me who's my daddy."

She snorted an unladylike laugh that made him salivate. That woman was just the best. She fit him perfectly, physically and otherwise. Too bad she'd chosen to desecrate her luscious body with whatever chemicals she'd taken. And she didn't even smoke. So disappointing.

"Who's your daddy, huh?" he parroted her, produced a belly laugh that did wonders to his disintegrating self-control.

She stretched both muscled arms high over her head, like a cat scratching at the polymer paneling while she curved her butt up against his crotch, rubbed it left and right. There ought to be laws against such cruel and unusual punishment.

"Mmm," she moaned. "Show me what you do to bad girls."

His hand having dispensed with his brain's sanction, he cupped her ass, squeezed then rubbed over her generous hip so he could get at Betty's pussy, which he found drenched with the familiar honey he'd come to crave like a drowning man would air. He slipped his middle finger in. Not too rough but just enough.

"Ohh yeahhh," she said. "That's it, yeah."

Rip's brain registered movement a split second before her heel connected with his balls. Pain, so sudden and unexpected, exploded in his lower belly. He grunted something, he had no idea what, and pushed himself far from the dangerous Valkyrie.

"Goddamn," he managed to snarl, holding his package with one hand and leaning against the counter with the other.

Betty rolled on the wall so she faced him, yanked the towel off and grinned a lopsided one. "Oops?"

Her heart hammered and her breath was harsh and fast, but Rayne wasn't about to let up on the best sex-wrestling she'd had in her life. It'd been a sneaky and vicious shot, but well worth the expressions animating Rip's face like those old-fashioned flipbooks.

Scowling, Rip came at her quick and hard. She blocked his initial attack but he fooled her, deflecting her counterattack—had that backhand connected, he would've lost a few teeth for sure—and executing a quick takedown that stole her breath. One second she was on her feet and the next she was pinned beneath him on the floor. The feel of his hard body on hers, combined with his smell and the thrill of the fight had her writhing for more.

"Get out of those clothes before I tear them off you," she warned, grabbing his shirt and trying to rip it off at the collar.

Rip's face tightened in what looked like anger. For a split second she thought he was going to hurt her or at least give her one hell of a tongue-lashing. Instead he claimed her lips in a savage kiss.

Rayne had no reason left. The hunger was too strong. She wanted him too much. She returned the kiss with as much passion as it was given, rough and demanding.

Rip tore away from her and rose, towering above her. She felt wet need spill from her sex as she watched him strip with jerky, rough tugs. The sound of stitching ripping triggered saliva to pool under her tongue.

When he was standing naked above her, she knelt up, reaching for his cock with greedy hands. She flicked her tongue at its head, which earned her the sound of his sharp intake of breath. His hands fisted in her hair, pulling her forward. She eagerly opened her mouth, reaching around him to dig her fingers into the firm swell of his ass and pulled him against her.

She'd never felt anything so good, never tasted a man more succulent. In long, slurping strokes she laved his cock, taking it deep into her mouth then withdrawing to run her tongue up and down its length, doing it fast and noisy.

She worked her tongue lower, around and under his balls, felt them tighten. "Mmm," she moaned up at him. "You like that, don't you?"

His fists in her hair tightened. She had her answer.

Rayne returned her attention to his cock and just as she started to take him in her mouth, he yanked on her hair, pulling her to her feet for a searing kiss that ended in her groaning into his mouth as his hand moved between her legs. He must have enjoyed

her throaty sounds since he kissed her more roughly and rammed his fingers inside her, stroking fast and hard.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she pulled away to mumble against his mouth.

He straightened to look in her eyes. "Like that?"

"Don't stop," she warned, feeling the buildup of an orgasm.

He rewarded her with a wicked smile. With his hand still fisted in her hair, he pulled her head back sharply. She arched against him to relieve the pressure and his mouth claimed a nipple, sucking hard, teeth nipping lightly.

She was so close.

"Yesss... Ahh, yes."

Rayne moaned, ground against his hand as he continued to finger-fuck her.

"More, more, more."

His response was a wordless growl. Still latched on to her breast, he forced her to the floor. Finally relinquishing hold of her hair, he spread her legs with demanding hands that sure as hell would leave marks, kneeling between them.

She was ready for him, wanting to feel him buried to the hilt inside her. But he obviously had other ideas because he bowed between her spread legs and lapped at the wetness that spilled from her. She tried to squeeze her thighs around his shoulders, but he kept her put with his big hands around her knees, fingers digging in, grinding her bones into the floor. She loved every second of it.

His tongue knew all the right places. Within moments her clit was on fire and she had two fistfuls of his hair, trying to drive his tongue deeper inside her. He took her so close. So close that a breath could have sent her tumbling into freefall. But before she could make the leap, he rose and pulled her forward onto him. Impaled her.

"Ahh!"

Her scream of pleasure filled the trailer. She wrapped her legs around his waist and exploded into a million pieces. Reality vanished. All she knew was sensation. Endless sensation. So good. Brilliance splitting into long shards, each cut into her brain. She came like a bomb.

Then pain.

Excruciating. Blinding.

Her lungs constricted. Her chest felt as if it were going to explode. Fire inside. Everywhere. Choking her.

"Rip," she managed to snarl.

Oh god, she was dying.

Rip's dick deflated like a pricked balloon when he saw Betty's skin turn white and her eyes bug. She was clawing at her throat, making weak gasping sounds. He acted

without thinking, jerked her to a sitting position and moved behind her. She was still trying to catch her breath without success.

He didn't know what she'd taken, but whatever it was, she'd clearly overdone it. Jesus Christ! Why did she go and do such a stupid thing? He had to get that poison out of her system somehow. And fast.

"Hold on, Betty," he murmured because his voice had decided to fail him.

Rip pried open her mouth and jammed his fingers down her throat. The third time he felt the lurch of her body. A moment later she spewed. Like a geyser.

After nearly a minute of retching and gasping, she drew in a long, shaking breath. Her head fell back against his shoulder. Her heart was still hammering way too fast. She wasn't out of the woods yet, he knew. Rip fumbled around on the floor for his pants and found his cell phone. With one arm around Betty, who'd started shaking badly, he dialed 9-1-1 and demanded an ambulance. Or he thought he did. It was all like a bad dream. One in which he was afraid to his core he'd lose the most precious thing in his life. A nightmare more than a dream.

Naked on the floor, he held her and waited.

Chapter Six

"Mr. Knight?" a nurse called from the desk of the emergency room.

Rip stood and hurried over. "Yeah?"

"I need Ms. Briggs identification," the nurse said.

"I don't have it. I already told you I'll pay."

"I still need her identification, Mr. Knight." She did look sorry. He was sorry too. For knowing so little about Betty, for not pressing her harder when she seemed in the mood to let a precious bit of intel go for free. Should have, could have. Fuck.

"Here." Manny's voice from behind him made Rip turn. Manny held out a woman's wallet.

Suz accompanied him. She looked pale and worried. "How is she?"

Rip shrugged. "She'll be fine for now." Turning to Manny, he added, "Where'd you get that?"

"Suz found it in her trailer. I figured you'd need it."

"How'd you know where to go?"

"Asked the driver while they was loadin' her up."

"Oh." He felt foolish for his spike of distrust and thankfully took the wallet from Manny, who had a weird look of prissy gratification.

"Mr. Knight?" the nurse got his attention. "The identification?"

"Oh yeah. Right." He took the wallet, opened it. There was a fat wad of cash and a driver's license. From Florida. The face in the photo was right, but the name wasn't. It was issued to Rayne Brogan.

He cut a look at Manny who was watching with glittering eyes. "What?" Rip asked defensively, and snatched out the license to hand to the nurse. "A lot of folks go by other names in this business. You know that as well as I do." An emphatic nod from Suz didn't help him feel any better.

Manny snorted and turned away. Rip stood there stewing as the nurse filled out the information. *Rayne Brogan*? She'd lied to him. Every day since they'd met. And he'd trusted her. Slept with her. Damn near fallen in love with her.

He felt like a chump. When the nurse handed him the license, he crammed it back inside the wallet and took a seat beside Suz and Manny, who was leaning back in a chair with his eyes closed. With a mumbled apology, the nurse hurried down the corridor. Rip heard a door swoosh open then close.

"I been trying to tell you," Manny said without opening his eyes. "She ain't who you think she is."

"Fine. Then why don't you tell me just who the fuck Betty is since you know so much." Rip fought to keep his voice down. He was seething. At Betty for lying, and at Manny for being so damn smug about it. And at himself for trying to pretend it didn't piss him off.

"Mr. Ripley?" the nurse called out.

"Yeah?" Rip turned his attention to her.

She motioned to him so he joined her at the desk. "You can see her now," the nurse said, her eyes black like coffee beans. A pin shaped in a dragonfly glittered at her collar. He stared at the blue gems so much like Betty's eyes. *Rayne's* eyes.

"It's through that door and third room on the left."

"Thanks."

Rip followed her directions all the while feeling like a bull about to enter the arena. He knew there'd be a fight. He knew he'd lose something in it, would never be the same even if he managed get back out in one piece. He stopped outside the third door, took a deep breath then pushed the door open.

She was sitting up on the bed, wearing a white hospital gown when Rip entered. Her face was still pale and there were dark crescents under her eyes. She looked so fragile compared to the towering Valkyrie who could stare through a man's very soul. His anyway.

"When can I leave?" Her voice was raspy.

"Don't know."

"I need to get out of here, Rip."

He nodded. "I guess so...Rayne."

Her eyes widened like a deer caught in headlights, but she quickly recovered. "What? Like Ripley's your real name?"

"Matter of fact, it is."

"Oh well...whatever. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that you lied to me." He tossed the wallet on the foot of her bed. It rebounded on the cream-of-mint-colored blanket.

They both watched it in silence.

"Only about the name," she said after awhile, and swung her legs to the side of the bed. She looked too woozy to stand yet. "Just the name."

"Really?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest, leaning back against the wall, effectively closing himself off to her. His first instinct had been to steady her. He fought it with all his heart, which she'd basically trampled with her lies and backstabbing. If she'd lied about that, what else about her wasn't true? Maybe Manny had been right, she was a thief snooping around people's things.

"Yeah, *really*," she snapped.

He couldn't help it. "Yeah? Kind of like you not doing drugs?"

"I didn't *take* fucking drugs."

She was getting mad. Why wouldn't he believe she hadn't taken anything? Plus, she had her suspicions. For the sudden onset of her symptoms, she realized she had to have been poisoned, that someone had slipped something to her, tried to kill her. Again. And she'd bet her bottom dollar it was that weasel Manny. Just as she was certain it had to have been Manny who found her wallet and gave it to Rip. She'd hidden it pretty well, and even if she hadn't, Rip would've never gone through her things. Manny would. Happily.

"Then you want to explain this?" Rip asked, pointing at her wallet.

She'd been going over it the last half-hour and thought she knew what had happened. The trouble was, she had to tread carefully. She needed to divert Rip's attention from her deception and onto Manny's. Because he wasn't who he said, no more than she was.

Poor Rip. Surrounded by liars.

"Here's what I know," she started slowly so she could think things through before blurting out everything. Because, goddammit, she wanted to. Tell him everything and damn the consequences to herself.

"After the deal at the lake with Sheila, I took her back to the pool then went to my trailer for shower stuff and clothes." Rip stared, silent, so she went on. "I grabbed a soft drink out of the fridge. It was half gone already but I guzzled the rest of it to get the taste of the lake out of my mouth. Then I went to the bathhouse. And while I was there, whatever had been put in the soda kicked in."

"Convenient," Rip commented.

"Fuck you," she barked. "That's the way it went down. And dollar to a donut Manny's behind it."

He threw his arms up. "What the hell is it with you two? Jesus!"

Rayne started to light into him, but bit her tongue. The only way she was going to convince him was to stay calm.

"Rip, listen. I know you think you can trust Manny but you can't. He's not dealing square with you. And he's tried twice to kill me."

"*What?*" His eyes couldn't have flared any wider.

"Who do you think stabbed me at the bar?"

Rip came off the wall as if he'd been electrocuted. "Uh-uh, I saw it. He was trying to get to you to help. I *saw* it. He reached out and —"

"And I turned just in time to keep from getting a knife in the kidney."

She looked him dead in the eye. She knew how affected he'd been by seeing her stabbed. She had to play on that, play on his feelings, as dirty as that made her feel. Otherwise, this whole thing just might blow up in her face. And if that happened, Malcolm just might send a team to take care of all of them. Or worse, come himself.

She'd never do anything to hurt Rip. Lie to him, sneak around his carnival for the stolen rocks. That was one thing. But let her bosses come do things their way was out of the question. She could take care of this, just as she had any other job. She had to keep it just a job, otherwise she'd lose herself, and if that happened, Rip could get hurt.

"I might have lied about my name," she said, for once honest with the man she'd come to like so much. "But not about that. Or about the drugs. He's declared war, Rip."

"Why? What possible reason would Manny have to want to kill you?"

She played her trump card. "Take a look at Sheila's belly then ask me that."

"What?"

"She's got an incision on her belly. And something's been put in her. There's a lump and it's hard." Diamond hard.

Rayne saw that she'd hit a nerve by the expression on Rip's face. He wasn't entirely surprised, which told her she was right. Manny was responsible. And that meant the rocks—and whatever piece of tech the government was after—were sewn up nice and neat in the gator. Now what remained to be seen was who'd get to Sheila first. Manny, Rip or her. Christ, what a cluster fuck.

Rip's mind went back in time. Finding Manny in Sheila's trailer. The story about the vet. He shook his head and paced the floor, running his hands over the top of his head.

What the hell was going on? Who did he believe? Manny or Betty? Make that Rayne? Manny and he went back a long way. Manny hadn't ever lied to him. Had he? And what about Rayne? She'd lied to him about her name. What else had she lied about? But he *wanted* to believe her. Desperately wanted to. Only he couldn't. Not anymore. Rip wanted to laugh at his idiocy. Was that it, that feeling in his chest? Was that his heart breaking? What a moron.

"Rip?"

He stopped pacing and faced her. "Shut up. Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it."

"Fine, then next time you can fill out papers at the fucking morgue."

He advanced on her, putting both hands on top of her shoulders. "You listen to me. No one's getting killed. I don't know what's going on between you and Manny, but I'll get to the bottom of it. So, if there's anything you haven't told me, now would be a good time."

A long silence settled in the room. Those blue eyes welled, looked away.

He had his answer. Yet he couldn't help reaching out one last time, hoping, praying, she'd take his offer.

"I'm not stupid, Bet—Rayne, and not without contacts. Whatever is going on, I can do something about it."

Rayne gently took his hand, squeezed it then peeled it off her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Rip. I can't."

Anger replaced solicitude. "I'll find out what I need to know, Rayne. And if I find out you've lied about other things..."

He let the rest go unsaid. Because they both knew there was no need to finish. If he found out she'd lied, they'd be finished. Permanently. Because he didn't even want to think about how that'd feel. Because unless something major happened, he'd already lost her. There was blood in the water and the sharks were circling.

Or alligators more appropriately.

"Suz is here," Rip forced through his teeth. He turned to leave. "She'll take you back in her truck."

"I'm going back with you. Rip!"

He just left.

Manny was waiting for him when Rip returned to the emergency waiting room. The older man stood, snapped his chin in the usual salute and indicated Rip should follow him.

"I called in some old favors and there's some things you need to know."

Rip's heart sank. Each of them wanted one last tug at him to bring him on to their side. Well, fuck them both. He wasn't a puppet. "Stay out of my way, Manny."

He saw from the look on his old commander's face that his words had an impact.

"You *want* to know, Rip. Believe me."

"Fine," Rip barked, tossing the keys to Manny. "You drive." He was in no condition to wield half a ton of metal anyway. Just might lose his temper and get a speeding ticket on top of things. When had his world become a shit hole?

Suz jumped up from her seat, the magazine sliding from her lap. "Where's Betty?"

"In her room. She'll be out in a moment. You drive her back."

She took the curt tone without a word, for which he was infinitely grateful. She did look hurt though when she crossed her arms and nodded, black ponytail slipping over a shoulder. "'Kay."

Rip waited until they started walking down the glass-enclosed hall to the outside. People in wheelchairs, hooked to intravenous poles, in their work clothes, bathrobes or hospital gowns. Pain etched on tight faces. A strained laugh here and there. Children oblivious, clawing at a candy machine. He envied them.

"Let's hear it," he snarled out the corner of his mouth. He saw Manny nodding.

"Like I said, I called in some favors and got some information on Rayne."

"I'm listening." A knot suddenly formed in his gut.

"Like we already know, her real name's Rayne Brogan. And despite what her mama thinks, she ain't no welder at a fence factory in North Carolina."

"Welder?"

"So her mama thinks. Truth of it is she's a torpedo for some nasty types in Miami."

"A torpedo?"

"A merc."

Rip's eyebrows shot up. That explained her moves. He knew she was a pro. She fought like one. But a mercenary?

"So?"

"So she can't be trusted."

Rip didn't move until Manny pressed the automatic unlock. He wrenched the door open, sat, buckled in then crossed his arms. Heat inside the cab made him even more pissed off. He needed a drink. He'd never needed a drink before. Oblivion would be good right about now. Drink himself into next month.

"Same could be said about us old-timers."

"We served our country and did what needed to be done. Took care of shit the brass didn't have the balls for. Nowhere near the same." Anger laced the older man's words. Rip turned to watch him twist the ignition key, angrily shift into gear and yank on the steering wheel when the engine roared to life.

"Merc or black ops, it's pretty much the same," Rip argued. "That's no reason to get all —"

"Maybe. Still don't explain what she's doing here, does it?"

Rip's eyes narrowed. Suddenly all he could think about was the incision in Sheila's belly. He couldn't put his finger on the why of it, but he was convinced that one factor was the key to this whole mess. All he had to do was decide which of his closest friends was lying the most. Ha.

"Tell me about that sore on Sheila."

Manny's eyebrows shot up. "I told you. She had a sore. I called a vet and he came and checked it. She had something stuck in her. Stick or something. It was causing an infection. He cut it out, stitched it up."

"You sure?"

Manny navigated the parking lot a bit too quickly for Rip's taste. "You calling me a liar, Rip?"

Rip knew the dangerous glitter that came into Manny's eyes when his friend turned to stare at him. He might be small and getting on in age, but Manny still knew a hundred ways to kill a man. Was he strong enough to handle a full-grown gator though? Put something in her, stitch her back up? Without help? Rip decided to play it cool. He'd learn more that way. Plus, he'd known Manny for years, whereas Rayne had only invaded his life, all sexy six feet of her, a couple of months before.

"Nope, just wanted to make sure she was fit for the show."

"She's a goddamn gator. 'Course she's fit. Problem is, as I see it, are we gonna let this Rayne Brogan hang around or give her the boot?"

Rip had to take a few breaths to get his heart rate back from the danger zone. "She brings in the crowd for the show and makes good scratch for us. I don't see any reason to get rid of her." He saw plenty. Just didn't want to admit it.

"Your ears not working, boy?"

"Boy?" Rip's voice rose a notch.

Manny punched the steering wheel. "That damn woman's got you pussy-whipped, Rip. Sure as shit. She's a merc and don't belong here."

"Now you listen, Manny, 'cause I'm only gonna say this once. I'm nowhere near pussy-whipped and I don't care if she's a merc. She makes us money, she's good to have around in a fight, and unless she's been dipping into the kitty or ripping us off in some way I don't know about, I have no reason to give her the boot. Besides, we need her for the gator show."

Manny sucked his teeth then stopped behind the last cars of a traffic jam the size of a mall parking lot. He snarled a curse, shook his head. "Then maybe we should start looking for a replacement 'cause the bottom line is, it's her or me, Rip. Your choice."

To give himself something to do, Rip rolled the window all the way down and let his elbow hang out. Sun made the metal uncomfortably hot but he didn't care. Focusing on the small pain felt much better than the one spreading inside his chest.

"We'll talk about it at the carnival," he said flatly.

Manny or Rayne? That was the last thing Rip wanted to hear. Manny was his oldest friend. It was Manny who'd talked him into this gig. He didn't want to do it alone. And then there was Rayne. Rip sighed. Seemed that no matter which way he went he was going to lose someone. The question was, which one of them could be trusted the least?

* * * * *

She slipped the cell phone back in the pocket of her jeans, which lay on the bed. That'd been the hardest thing she'd had to do. James had sounded ecstatic that she'd found the rocks. Yay for him. She felt like shit. Like Judas.

Rayne's legs felt like jelly, so did her spine. She'd watched Rip storm out of her hospital room, completely powerless to stop him, even to convince him to wait a goddamn minute while she changed. She'd had to accept Suz's help as the quiet brunette held her hand while Rayne yanked the gown off and wrestled into her own clothes. The bra and tank top had pulled on the pieces of tape still stuck to her arms. She'd quickly gotten rid of all the hospital gear and things, signed herself out then forced Suz to give her the keys to the little blue pickup. "Little" compared to the white monster assigned to her.

Think, Brogan. Think.

One, right now Manny was with Rip, alone somewhere, free to tell him everything he wanted. He'd probably taken her name down and called in a few connections. The old bastard must have some good ones.

Two, she had to get to Sheila before anyone else did, including Rip. *Especially* Rip. So she had to get herself tweezers or something and get those stitches out. She'd put Sheila out first. They had enough meds for the gator to conk her out for a little while,

just long enough to get the rocks out, tape her back and leave a note for Rip to get a vet. Poor Sheila would be bitchy for days.

Three, she had to do all this behind Rip's back. And that sucked.

Four, she had to do it *fast*.

"Hold on," she said as she twisted the key to the ignition. After a heart-stopping wheeze — *don't you die on me* — the engine burped to life, reached its normal rhythm then roared when she gunned it. By her side, Suz grabbed the dashboard and sent a pair of superhero bobbleheads tumbling into the foot well.

"Christ! Betty!"

"I said hold on."

She drove like a maniac. Manny had a good fifteen minutes on her, and if she didn't step on it, he'd have time to get to the gator before she did. He probably wouldn't try anything right away, not with Rip breathing down his neck, wanting answers. She felt so bad for him. So cheap. Here he was, stuck between liars with an agenda. Only thing was, she didn't know how far Manny would go to protect the rocks while she knew *exactly* how low Malcolm would sink to get them back. She'd be damned if she'd let rat face get his hands on Rip. She was a liar and a cheat, a merc and a shitty driver, but she wouldn't hurt an innocent man.

"Would you — holy shit!"

Suz's hand flew in front of her face when Rayne swerved to avoid a pair of burgundy Goldwing motorcycles, all fancy lights and luggage racks. The middle-aged couple scowled at her as she passed them to the right.

"I'll put on some music," Suz announced.

Rayne could've laughed at the strain in the woman's voice. The radio crackled in-between stations since it'd been set up for the previous stop, two states back. Within seconds, Suz found the news channel, which announced construction work on some major highway she didn't know.

"Is that us?"

Suz shrugged. "I think so. Look," she pointed ahead at a cluster of signs. "That exit there, that's the one reduced to one lane."

Teeth gritted, Rayne swerved back into the main traffic, ignored the angry horns behind her, then took the next exit, hoping it'd take her to the fairgrounds faster than the first exit would've. If Manny got his hands on Sheila, she was toast.

Buildings flew past. Models on advertisement boards promising wonders with their Botoxed foreheads and too-white teeth. Vacations to places riddled with poverty and crime. Rayne kept her foot halfway down the accelerator, her hands in death grips on the wheel and her gaze riveted to the road.

"What time is it?"

Suz checked her watch. "Seven-thirty. Are you in a hurry?"

Rayne snorted a laugh. She was many things. In a hurry among those.

It amazed her she didn't get arrested or kill anyone when she turned the last corner, tires screeching, driving right over the cement divider and onto the fairgrounds proper. Her head hurt. Her throat was raw. She wanted something to drink bad but had no time for anything other than getting at Sheila.

"Hey, Rip's there already," Suz commented as she pointed to their right. The back end of his truck stuck out from behind his trailer. "Hey!"

Rayne had slammed on the brakes and rushed out. Running proved difficult because her stomach threatened to buck at every step, but she forced the nausea down, kept her legs pumping, and as she jumped over the trailer hitch, she realized it was too late.

Rip sat on the bottom step of his trailer, a beer bottle in a hand and guns in his gaze. Manny was nowhere to be seen.

Rayne skidded to a full stop in front of him. "Shit."

"Yep." He took a long swig, kept staring at her over the bottle.

"Where's Manny?"

He shrugged. "Never mind Manny."

Anger flared. "Goddammit! Where is he?"

He stood so abruptly she took a step back. "Don't you curse at me. I know what you are. You fucking liar."

"We don't have time for this," she started, lost her chain of thought when Rip grabbed her arm and reeled her close.

"You're a merc."

Rayne mentally stumbled. Manny had impressive connections.

"Yeah, so?" she replied as calmly as she could.

"Just that? 'Yeah, so?' You're gonna have to do a lot better than that, Rayne. First, just who the fuck are you and why are you here?"

"My name's Rayne Brogan and I work for some...privateers."

"You mean thugs."

"Whatever."

"Don't 'whatever' me. You're a hired gun." He released her arm.

"Partly," she admitted.

"Which means?"

"That it's my job to clean the messes, get rid of stuff. Not people. That's someone else's job."

Rip's face tightened and she felt a momentary stab of fear. She hadn't forgotten his past or his abilities, and with the anger simmering in his eyes, she wouldn't be surprised if he made a move on her. He emptied his bottle in a long swallow then tossed it to the ground. Rip never did that. She swallowed hard.

"Did you have to clean up someone's mess here? Who're you supposed to get rid of? Manny? Me?"

The thought chilled her to the bone. "I'd never hurt you, Rip—"

He laughed a mirthless laugh. "Oh, that's a good one."

"We have to get Sheila. I'll tell you everything on the way, okay?"

"No. You're gonna tell me now. Everything." He stepped back from her, waiting, his eyes like knives.

This was the moment she'd hoped to avoid. But there was no way around it. Either she came clean with him and took her chances that he didn't either run her off or take her out, or she faced the music with Malcolm and James. And as frightening as Rip could be, what he would do to her would be a walk in the park compared to what Beauty and the Beast would do.

Besides, even though she fought it, there was still a kernel of hope inside her that what burned between them was more than just great sex.

"There was a girl who worked for my bosses. She stole something from them. Diamonds. Intel suggested she'd hidden them here, in your carnival. I needed to get inside so I could locate them."

Rip's head jerked as if he'd been slapped. His eyes blazed. "You fucking cunt!" he shouted. "You *played* me?"

"Not entirely," she argued, bounding back a step. "Just long enough to get the job. Then it turned real. I swear."

"You're a fucking liar. Sonofabitch. I should've known. Manny was right about you. You're nothing but a fucking—whore. A lying, thieving, sorry-ass whore."

The words cut like a razor. Insults were that much harder to accept when they were accurate. Except for the last part.

"I might have lied to you about why I was here, but I'm nobody's whore."

"Except for those thugs you work for. You fucked me damn near blind, making me think you were digging it and me, and the whole time you were fucking playing me."

Despite her resolve, Rayne took a step back when he advanced on her, fists clenched tight at his sides and his eyes flashing.

Anger swelled larger than pain. She snapped her chin up. "That's not true. I fucked you 'cause I liked it."

"'Cause you were *paid* to do it. Shit on a fucking stick. I must be the dumbest motherfucker on the planet."

"Just calm down. Come with me. I'll show you Sheila and—"

"Calm down?" He reached out and grabbed her so fast she had no time to react. He jerked her up close, his breath hot in her face. "You listen and listen fucking good, *Rayne*. You played me and I fell for it, but those days are gone. You got it? I'm going

with you to see Sheila and that thing in her belly. But you can bet your ass that after I sort this out, I don't ever want to see your lying face again. You got it?"

"I had no choice. Please believe me."

She hated the pleading sound of her own voice. She never begged. Never. And yet here she was, wanting to fall to her knees and beg him to believe her.

"Let's go."

Before he turned his back to her, she saw the flicker in his eyes, saw the hurt registered on his face and it hit her like a brick to the head. It hadn't been just good sex and fun for Rip. He'd cared about her.

For the first time since she was nine and had broken her wrist playing baseball, she wanted to cry.

She followed him like a beaten dog until they came to a clump of rousties milling around and smoking.

"What the fuck do I pay you for?" Rip yelled from still several paces away.

They turned as one man and froze. One of them, Clyde, shrugged and pointed across the fairgrounds toward the street corner. "Got Manny set up, like you said."

"Set up for what?"

"Why, the gator. We got Manny all set up with the gator."

Both Bennie and Ray, brothers and star dirt bike riders, grinned. "Old man looked right pissed too."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" snarled Rip. His men looked properly cowed by the tone. "Where's Manny?"

Rayne's heart sank to her heels. She knew exactly what had happened.

Clyde crossed his arms. The skull tattooed on his forearm didn't smile and neither did he. "She's got this sore inside her belly, right, so Manny said. He said you wanted us to set him up so he can take her to the university to get checked by them specialists they got there."

"Abscess, probably," commented Bennie, nodding. Everything was an abscess according to him.

Rip closed his eyes briefly, angled his face up. "Fuck," he murmured.

Rayne hooked her thumb over a shoulder, pretending levity. "We can still catch—"

"Shut up. I'm thinking."

Everyone fell silent, clearly confused and cowed by the boss' sour temperament. So unlike Rip. But it was her fault, wasn't it? She'd made him this way. Tears stung her eyes. She avoided the men's questioning stares, slipped her thumb in the back pocket of her jeans and turned to leave. "I'll take the Bronco." And then she'd call James again to announce the "good" news.

"No, you won't."

When Rip passed her, jogging the first few feet then breaking into a sprint, she took off after him with all she had. They reached the dusty, filled-with-stickers black Bronco at the same time, he went for the driver side and she yanked the passenger door wide, climbing inside. She'd already buckled up by the time he sat.

"Get out, Rayne. You're not coming." He didn't even look at her as he flipped the sun visor down and caught the extra key.

"You'll need me when you get to Manny."

"I'm done listening to you," he said in a resigned voice. "You made a fool of me once. No more. So get out. Now."

"No," she retorted as she leaned over and put her hand on his forearm. "I'm coming and you can't stop me."

He shook her hand off and faced her. "Don't ever — ever — touch me again."

There was nothing Rayne could do but sit back in her seat and look out the window when he shot out of the parking lot to lay chase to Manny. It didn't seem to matter to Rip that she'd been telling the truth. At least about that part.

Then she did that thing she hadn't done since she was nine. She let the tears come.

Chapter Seven

So she *hadn't* lied about that. Manny *was* hiding something.

He'd taken off with Sheila under pretext that Rip had said so. Clearly, he'd lied. So he must have lied about something else. About Rayne? But no, she'd confessed to him in person. She was a merc sent to his carnival to retrieve some diamonds. To fuck him blind while she snooped around the place for her bosses.

He already regretted calling her all those awful names. He hadn't meant most of them. Well, maybe the lying bitch part. But certainly not the rest. He wasn't a brute. He'd never treated a woman this way. He knew she could take it, and this, perhaps, had convinced him it'd be okay to scream and curse at her, had somehow made it right when it hadn't been. But goddammit, she'd made a fool of him and he never wanted to have anything to do with her again. He gripped the wheel harder. Manny couldn't be very far. Rip had only been at his trailer for maybe fifteen minutes before Rayne showed up.

She'd looked like shit too. Pale and drawn. Her hair a blonde mess and her clothes thrown on haphazardly. Could it be true Manny had tried to stab her? Then poison her? If he tamped down his bruised male ego long enough, he thought he could see the truth in some of what she'd said. Clearly, she'd backstabbed him, had used him to get at those damn diamonds. But she'd never tried to hurt him. That he knew. If, in fact, Manny had tried to kill her twice, that made *his* lies much graver than hers. Shit.

Movement from his passenger forced him to throw a quick glance sideways. He wished he hadn't. He'd never known someone could cry without making a sound. Tears made her high cheekbones shiny, her eyes puffy and red. She sniffled, rubbed the back of her hand under her nose. He couldn't even look at her without his stomach twisting in a knot.

With an angry tug, he pulled the glove compartment open and tossed her the pack of tissue. She took it without a word.

Then the top of a white climate-controlled trailer caught his eye. Sheila's trailer. It'd been his first purchase when he'd joined The World's Largest Traveling Gator Show and Carnival. A top-of-the-line climate-controlled, super-smooth suspension trailer so the gator wouldn't be bounced around the back of a retrofitted bread truck as she'd been before. He'd also had her choker changed to a custom-made harness. Poor thing had been raised a sideshow for the color of her scales. Even if he would've preferred seeing a wild animal in the wild, it'd be irresponsible to toss her back when all she knew were humans.

Above the rest of the cars, the trailer gleamed like white gold in the setting sun. "There." He pointed ahead.

Rayne must have spotted it because she sat up straighter. Gone were the tears. Back to business. Man, he could've fallen for a woman like her. *Had* fallen. Hard.

She reached for the buckle on her seat belt. "Get me close. I'll jump over and stop him."

"What? Are you nuts?"

The mere thought of Rayne missing her mark and ending up under six thousand pounds of truck and trailer froze the blood in his veins. "I'll get him to stop."

"He won't. He knows now, he'll run you off the road."

"No he won't. Just stay in your goddamn seat."

As if on cue, the white trailer veered off to take the highway at a much more acute angle than anyone would have given the live cargo in the back. It also accelerated quite a bit.

He muttered a curse, simultaneously hit the brakes and swerved right so he could follow onto the ramp behind the speeding truck. With the kind of horsepower it packed under the hood, it could move. Maybe he shouldn't have changed it so fast. The bread truck had been much slower.

Up ahead, the white climate-controlled trailer gleamed like an unattainable mirage. With the thickening traffic, the chase had slowed to below fifty miles an hour. But the road was so packed they could barely weave around traffic. More and more brake lights flashed on. If they didn't get to Manny in the next few minutes, they'd be too far back to follow the top of the white truck and would lose him to the traffic. He'd probably take an exit, which they'd see too late.

Shit, shit, shit.

Rayne's mind was racing. She had to get Rip out of the picture so she could stop Manny. But how? She cut her eyes over at him. The clench of his jaw and lowered brows over narrowed eyes was a sure clue he was pissed enough that he'd never give up until he caught up with Manny. She couldn't take the chance he'd be stuck in the middle of it all. What if the unthinkable happened?

Which meant there was only one option open to her and it was one that gave her a sharp stab of guilt. Blowing out a breath, she climbed onto her knees and pretended to search behind the seat.

"What the hell're you doing?"

"Looking for something to throw."

"To throw?"

"Yeah, if you can get close enough, I can heave something through the window. That should either slow him down or stop him long enough for us to hem him in and take the truck."

"Nothing back there," Rip shot at her, and swerved around a slower vehicle on the narrow road.

Rayne used the maneuver to pretend to be off balance. She reached back to brace herself against the dash board.

"Sit down!" Rip barked at her.

Rayne saw her chance. It was risky and if she missed her mark she'd only succeed in pissing him off. Hoping her aim was true she pushed off, her right arm shooting forward with her hand in a fist.

Rip's eyes widened a moment before Rayne's fist met its mark, one half inch above his eye bridge, right between the eyes.

She saw his eyes swim before they rolled back in his head and knew she'd succeeded in hitting the right spot. He'd only be unconscious for a few minutes, but enough to give her time to ditch him. Rip slumped against the window. The SUV swerved sharply and she grabbed the wheel, turning on the seat to jam her left foot onto the brake.

It was a palm-sweating, butt-tightening few moments before she got the SUV pulled over onto the side of the road. She figured she had ten minutes or less before he'd wake with a splitting headache and case of anger hot enough to start a nuclear meltdown. She had to be long gone before that happened.

It took several muscle-straining minutes to drag Rip's unconscious body across the seat and out of the truck via the passenger door.

She hated to leave him lying on the side of the road but saw no other option. He had his cell phone on him, so he could call for help when he woke. She made sure he was far enough off the highway there was no danger of someone running over him before she climbed back into the SUV. Already cars were slowing down to look at her. Someone honked.

The white roof of the climate-controlled trailer kept going. Farther. Farther still. She couldn't afford any more delays. Rip groaned. Shit.

A red Mustang had its signal on, coming toward her. Rayne waited for it to pass, but when it slowed and started to pull over, she rushed back to the SUV and floored the accelerator as she pulled out, in pursuit of Manny and the alligator that was going to set them all free from this mess.

* * * * *

Rip groaned as his eyes flew open and he tried to sit. Damn. He should've seen that blow coming. He shook his head to clear his vision.

"Maybe you should stay still," a female voice said from beside him.

A young and curvaceous brunette knelt beside him, dressed in expensive clothing and fingernails painted fire truck red. She was maybe twenty, he guessed.

"I'm fine, thanks," he grumbled, and climbed to his feet.

"I saw that woman drag you out of the truck." The young woman tried to take his arm to steady him. "She stole your SUV."

Rip stopped himself in the act of jerking away from her touch as his eyes fell on the Mustang. Same color as her nails. A cop magnet for sure. "That your car?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"For—hey wait!"

Rip grabbed the key from her hand. A key chain bearing a Japanese girlish character grinned at him. The word PUCCA gleamed as red as the young woman's fingernails and car. Had a theme going.

She hurried after him, yelling and cursing, as he stomped over and climbed in behind the wheel, having a momentary struggle with the seat control to get it slid back far enough to accommodate his height. He thumbed the lock just in time to prevent her from wrenching the door open.

"Hey," she yelled through the door, banged her fist on it. "You can't do that!"

"I'm sorry, lady, I really am," Rip growled as he started the car. He threw it into gear, fishtailed onto the road. Left her there, jumping up and down and a cell phone already on her ear.

He sped through traffic, weaving in and out between the cars at breakneck speed. There, not far ahead.

Teeth just about fused together, he passed one car, another, then swerved onto the shoulder to avoid an oncoming car, dodging back onto the road, racing around three cars and pulling up beside a big black Bronco. He wondered how Rayne would react to his crazy stunt, if she'd see this one coming.

Furious at Rayne "Betty" Brogan for making an ass out of him, enraged at himself for letting her—and even more for still harboring feelings for the loud-mouthed Valkyrie—Rip gripped the wheel tighter. He was done fucking around.

Rip rammed the SUV.

Rayne didn't see him until it was too late. She was too busy trying to keep up with Manny, so when the red Mustang closed in beside her, she cut it a quick look and saw Rip's furious face. Shit. A split second later, he rammed her SUV.

"Goddamn!"

The Bronco was bigger and heavier and took the impact with barely a jolt. Rayne's eyes narrowed as she jerked the wheel to the left. Two could play that game.

But Rip had anticipated her maneuver and the Mustang moved out of range a second before impact, roaring ahead of her.

"What the fuck?" Had he spotted Manny and was trying to beat her to the punch?

The answer to that question came in a heart-pounding realization as Rip executed a perfect Bat Turn, tires screeching like banshees as he swerved sideways to block the road.

Rayne jammed her foot onto the brake. Tires smoked and screamed, horns blew as she and everyone else coming in both directions fought to come to a stop without colliding into anyone else. The smell of tires and hot asphalt stung her nose.

Rip was out of the Mustang before Rayne had completely stopped the Bronco. Minivans and SUVs, sports cars and delivery trucks squealed to a full stop in both lanes. Horns blared behind and around her. But she had eyes and ears only for Rip as he stomped up to the truck. She could have gunned it, swerve around him, smash into the Mustang and push it off from the middle of the road. But that would have meant taking a chance on Rip's life. Not something she was willing to do. What if he did something crazy—crazier than what he'd already done—and was hurt? God, she'd never forgive herself.

But Rayne revved the engine anyway, let the brakes slip and the SUV lurch a foot forward, hoping to scare Rip off. It didn't work. She did it again, growing desperate. The roar from the engine didn't seem to faze him.

"Rip, get out of the way," she yelled as she thumbed the window control and closed it. "I swear, Rip."

He didn't.

Her words died in her throat when he put his hand on the corner of the hood and twisted fast for a spinning back kick. Too late to do anything else, Rayne only had time to cringe and protect her face as the heel of his cowboy boot shattered the driver side window.

"Are you *nuts*?" she snarled, eyes closed when glass diamonds showered her.

She felt his arm inside the cabin, yanking, searching. The engine died. "Move over. Now."

Rayne knew better than to argue with a pissed-off man who could kick a vehicle's windows out. Besides, a distraction was headed their way. She unbuckled her seat belt and started to slide over.

Outside, a pair of large men had folded out of a ludicrously small car and came marching for the SUV. Rip couldn't have seen them.

"Help!" Rayne yelled as loud as she could. "Help me!"

Rip's face registered surprise and anger as she shouldered the passenger door open and rushed out. By the time she'd cleared the hood, both large men had crowded Rip and started yelling and posturing as men usually did. Rayne didn't wait.

By the time she heard grunts of pain—Rip had wasted no time—Rayne was sliding behind the wheel of the Mustang. The engine still purred.

"Damn you, Rayne!" Rip shouted as she peeled off, leaving him standing in the middle of the road with angry motorists blowing their horns, a pair of kneeling men in sports jerseys and probably the best chance of staying alive.

Rayne hated to do it to him. She liked Rip. Hell, it was probably more than like. And because of that, she had to leave him cursing her and probably hating her. She had to stop Manny and get the goods from Sheila and deliver them to Malcolm. And Rip couldn't be within a country mile of that meeting. Malcolm didn't like leaving loose ends, and if Rip was around, the chances of him getting killed were high. Too high. Not a gamble she was willing to make.

Gritting her teeth and stomping the accelerator, Rayne raced down the highway, her eyes peeled for a glimpse of the trailer bearing the alligator and her ticket to freedom. Because she'd just decided that working for Beauty and the Beast wasn't doing it for her anymore. Just too messed up. She'd hurt someone for whom she'd come to care and nothing would ever make the bad taste go away. Hell, maybe she'd go back to her "cover" job and work as a welder. Sure as taxes was better than stabbing good men like Rip in the back.

"What a mess," she hissed as she gave a quick yank to the wheel to avoid a station wagon with wood panels. As weird as it was, an incongruous thought sliced through the adrenaline and chaos.

God, those things were *still* around?

* * * * *

Manny crowed as he watched in the rearview mirror traffic thickening to the point of becoming a parking lot. Rip and that blonde had a kettle of fish to fry now. Once I-4 backed up, it stayed that way for hours. Still, Rip was a resourceful guy and Manny wasn't stupid, so to hedge his bets he'd take the 192 exit, take Poinciana Boulevard and approach the Kissimmee Airport from the south. It would take a few more minutes but even if Rip managed to get himself out of the traffic jam, he'd be bust-assing down I-4.

He felt pretty secure once he turned onto Poinciana Boulevard. It was still a two-lane road despite all the developing going on in the area, making it slow and extremely busy. Keeping at the speed limit, he placed a call to Marshall.

"Hey. Had to plug the phone in. I should be there in about twenty minutes."

"Where are you?"

"On Poinciana Boulevard. Just passed Owen Brown."

"I'm sending an escort."

"No need."

"That's not how I see it. I'm sending two cars. Four men in each. You'll fall in between them and stay there. I'm not convinced the airport is secure, so the drop has been changed."

"To where?"

"Just take Poinciana to Pleasant Hill. Before you get to Kissimmee my men will have reached you. Follow them."

Manny sucked his teeth. "I don't think —"

"I don't give a rat's ass what you think," Marshall snapped. It wasn't like the oily politician wannabe to lose his cool. "Do what you're told and you get paid."

The line went dead, leaving Manny cursing under his breath. He'd be glad to have this done and over with. Take his money and find him a nice little tropical place to settle down, drink and fish. To hell with traveling carnivals, white gators and big-ass bitches.

Sure enough, by the time he pulled up at the stoplight at Pleasant Hill, there was a dark Ford sedan in front of him and another identical behind him. He couldn't see the occupants. The windows were tinted dark enough they probably bordered on being illegal.

Fifteen minutes later he was following the lead car down Neptune Road, a two-lane road that wound its way around the north-eastern end of Lake Tohopekaliga. When he glanced into his rearview mirror at the dark sedan following him, his heart jumped painfully. A red Mustang was weaving in and out of traffic, closing in fast.

"Motherfucker..."

Sure as the world, shit was getting ready to hit the fan because that wasn't any part of Marshall's escorts.

* * * * *

Delmar Owens had never been recognized for anything in his life. He was never the star quarterback or the pitcher with the killer fast ball or even the team mascot. He'd spent his entire life in obscurity. But that was going to change. When he'd read about cluster ballooning, he knew how he was going to claim his fame. He'd set himself up in a lawn chair purchased special for the occasion at Walmart. Duct-taped to the bottom of his chair to create a platform were two sawed-off two-by-fours and a Styrofoam cooler. He'd tied to the chair legs water and soda bottles, and a plastic container of ham sandwiches.

And attached to the chair's armature and towering over his head in the pale blue Floridian sky were seventy-two helium weather balloons looking like five-foot-wide strawberry jawbreakers.

He presently patted his cell phone in the pocket of his shirt underneath his orange life vest. Ray Ban sunglasses and a Florida Gators ball hat completed his flight suit. A pellet gun rested snugly in the right pocket of his cargo shorts and bungee cords wrapped around his waist secured him to the chair. Could never be too sure. Despite his safety precautions, he was starting to get cold feet. And the ground was way, way below. A road thick with traffic glimmered like a metallic snake just below the tip of his

black-and-white Converse shoes. Delmar looked up above his head and grinned. Yep, cluster ballooning would pull him right out of obscurity.

He checked his watch, nodded. Earlier that morning, Delmar had lifted off from Tampa, expecting the winds to push him north. He'd traveled a bit more easterly than anticipated but wasn't worried. He was still a good hour from the coast and if the wind would just shift a little, he'd head straight on up the state. His plan was to cross Georgia and South Carolina and land at the Lowe's Motor Speedway in North Carolina.

Yep, things were looking up for Delmar. His phone rang. It was his wife.

"Delmar, you gotta set down."

"But I'm just now passing Kissimmee."

"I don't care. You gotta set down. A bulletin just came on the TV. Looks like we're in for a tropical storm and if you don't come down you're liable to get blown out to sea."

Well, jeez. That wasn't good news. Delmar sure didn't want to abort on his first try. He'd never claim a record with this puny flight. But he didn't want to end up in the middle of the Atlantic either. So he promised his wife he'd set down, pocketed his phone and pulled out his pellet gun. He took a look around and that was when he realized he'd flown *really* close to a very big lake. He'd better set down quickly. He didn't want to take a chance on coming down in the marshland around the lake, or worse yet in the lake. Anyone with a grain of sense didn't go in the lakes. They were crawling with gators.

So, taking aim, Delmar started shooting out balloons. It only took four or five before he started to descend. But the wind was still carrying him toward the lake. He hurriedly shot out a dozen of the balloons. He was starting to come down nicely now. Good. Maybe he'd shoot out just a few more. To be on the safe side. 'Cause he was a cautious guy.

He realized too late he'd shot out too many balloons. Suddenly his chair was descending fast. And there was a road full of traffic coming at him hard and fast. Clenching his eyes and his ass, he waited for the impact, praying he'd miss the road.

He should've worn a helmet instead of a ball hat.

Chapter Eight

Rayne was two cars behind the trailer carrying the alligator. She'd tried twice to pass the dark sedan in front of her, but each time the driver would swerve over, blocking her. Professionals. Shit. She eased out toward the center of the road to see if there was a clear shot. She'd get around the fucker or run him off the road.

And that was when she saw it. A man in a lawn chair with big red balloons tied to it, coming down like a rock, right in front of Manny's truck.

She'd heard once that sometimes in the middle of a calamity, time seemed to slow to a crawl. She'd never believed it. Until now. In slow motion, the man in the lawn chair plunked down in the road, balloons bobbing in the wind. Just like that.

Chaos erupted.

Manny's truck swerved to miss him and ran a car in the oncoming lane off the road. It then swerved again to avoid hitting another truck head-on. He must have cut the wheel too hard because the truck swayed then tipped, falling on the driver's side and sliding off the road into grass and bushes.

All at once everyone on the road was slamming on brakes, running off the road or into another vehicle. The dark sedan managed to brake relatively straight barely ten feet in front of her bumper. With a curse, Rayne stomped the brakes and jerked the wheel. The Mustang slid off the road, tearing up grass and a couple of palmetto bushes before lurching to a stop. Key still in the ignition, she jumped out and ran back to the road.

What a mess. A truck transporting processed fish had overturned. The road was awash with salt water and slimy fish parts. Vehicles were on the road and off, people already getting out and screaming at one another for their cars being damaged. It was one gigantic cluster fuck.

She made her way through the people, the squished fish and toward the overturned truck. Manny was crawling out the passenger window by the time she reached the truck. He hopped down and she stepped right in his path.

"You sorry little fuck," she snarled.

He had time to open his mouth before she decked him. Drew her fist back and pounded him one right in the face. It lifted him up off his feet and sent him slamming into the underside of the truck. He was out cold when he hit the ground.

Rayne wasted no more time. Around the back of the trailer, she managed to get the doors open, letting the one angled toward the ground thump down into the carnage of fish guts and asphalt.

Inside, Sheila roared. It was a sound that made the hair stand on the back of Rayne's neck.

"Hey, girl, you okay?" she called out as she leaned over and stepped inside.

Sheila roared again and thrashed around in reply. Rayne reached for the latch of the cage then hesitated. She needed to get Sheila out of there, but how was she going to transport her? The Mustang? Somehow the thought of a twenty-foot gator riding behind her wasn't very appealing.

Standing to one side and talking in what she hoped was a soothing manner, she released the gate. It swung down, clanging into the side of the trailer with a sound as loud as a cannon.

Not good. Sheila let out a roar and made a beeline for freedom.

Rayne heard screams the moment Sheila cleared the trailer. Uh-oh. She hurried after the gator and saw her racing through the fish carnage, headed for the other side of the road. There was nothing Rayne could do to stop her. She ran back inside the trailer, grabbed the chain and harness they used to stake Sheila out in the sun and took off in pursuit.

A couple hundred feet behind, Rip grimaced as the white truck and trailer lost control and fell onto its side. Poor beast trapped inside. With the mayhem in front of him, he might as well do the rest on foot. He was clearing the last few cars, angled frontward, sideways and some completely facing back, when he spotted the bottom door—opened—on the back of the climate-controlled trailer. And there, to his right. Fuck.

Rayne with a chain draped over her body, racing for the brush beyond the road. He didn't think to ask where she was headed or why. He'd recognized the chain. Sheila was gone.

Rayne was pushing aside palmetto leaves when he caught up with her and grabbed her arm. The heavy chain served to unbalance her enough that she staggered.

She tried to jerk free before she looked to see who had hold of her. She looked like shit. Blue eyes watery and underlined with dark crescents, her hair a mess.

"Rip, Sheila's gone."

Despite all that had happened, she still looked glad to see him. To his shame, he felt the same way toward her. Even if she was a backstabbing, lying bitch. A merc. The toughest, loudest, most gorgeous woman ever to plow into his life and break all of his defensive walls. Where had the rage gone? For fuck's sake, couldn't he at least hang on to *that*?

Are You Man Enough? sparkled on her tank top despite the mud and stains from the chain.

Was he?

He released her so he could break a branch that had snagged into the chain. "Let's go."

She took a step away, stopped as if uncertain. Then turning around, she plowed through the underbrush. "She doesn't have that big a head start," she threw behind her shoulder. "We can catch up."

"Not if she reaches the water."

Like a rampaging rhino, Rip shouldered through the foliage right behind her, broke branches left and right and kicked in the teeth every bit of training he'd ever received. Not a fucking stitch of stealth in their advance. Time was of the essence.

"Water?" Rayne looked over her shoulder.

"Lake Toho."

"Which is?"

"About a quarter of a mile in the direction we're headed."

"Shit."

Rip couldn't agree more.

Florida may be the vacation capital of the country, but that only applied to white sandy beaches and overblown amusement parks. In the wild, it was a strange and scary landscape. Particularly in the vicinity of a lake. The soil was black and marshy, sucking at their feet and legs in a way that conjured up unreasonable fears at what lay buried in the stinking black miasma.

Rip wouldn't admit it, but the place gave him a serious case of the creeping willies. Danger hid every other foot. In the clumps of sharp saw grass tangled with vines and leaves the size of his torso competed with the needle points of the palmettos, it hid within the snarled and deformed trees with the thick shiny leaves reminiscent of an oak and behind thick fronds of ferns, which had to be home to any number of venomous snakes.

In the distance, sirens from emergency vehicles wailed. They froze to listen.

"Damn. Already?"

"Let's go," he said as he pressed his hand on the small of her back. A jolt of awareness made him snatch it back. She must have felt something as well because she shivered, looked about to say something but just turned and kept going.

As they wrestled against vindictive, sticky flora, lizards scrambled up branches, launched themselves from stem to stem while frogs sang in a cacophony of throaty cries to the surrounding creatures. Had it not been for the fact Sheila was the key to bursting this abscess once and for all—wouldn't Bennie agree on this one—Rip would have turned tail and headed back for the safety of the road.

A faint sound caught his ear. Years of training and conditioning didn't just vanish after a couple of years out of duty.

He grabbed her arm to stop her. "Listen."

Above the rapid thump of his own heart, the buzz of mosquitoes and the incessant croak of the invisible frogs, they remained still and strained to hear. Sure enough there was a grunt.

"Sheila?" Rayne called. "Sheila, it's Rayne. Where are you, Sheila?"

An answering grunt had her yanking her booted feet free of the black sludge and heading in the direction of the sound, Rip hot on her heels. It wasn't long before they spotted the gator. Shit on a stick...

"She doesn't look too happy to see us," Rayne whispered to him.

Sheila looked anything *but* happy. Her great tail was swishing back and forth and her body looked tense as though she were poised to either run or attack.

Rayne snapped her chin at him. "What do we do?"

"Hope she settles down enough for us to get her chained."

"Then what? We're not going to drag her out of here."

"If we can get her chained to a tree I'll go get a tranc and knock her out and get some of the people from the carnival to help me move her."

"If," Rayne pointed out. "Big if."

"You got a better idea?"

"No."

"Wow," Rip sneered. The venom in his voice surprised him. The wound was still too raw to think rationally. "Honest truth. I bet that hurt."

She turned wounded blue lasers to him. "That was a cheap shot, Rip, and by the looks of you, you know it too."

What look? He didn't have a goddamn look!

"Go to her right and I'll come in from her left," Rip said. He chose to ignore Rayne's gaze still on him as he took a few cautious steps forward. The gator didn't seem to pay attention to him as she lay there with her head slightly up, maw parted, eyes fixed.

"I'm sorry," Rayne said behind him. "I'd do things differently if I could. I wouldn't fall for you and get all tangled up in stupid feelings. You believe that, right?"

Fall for you. "Just focus on Sheila."

"Tell me you believe it, Rip. Tell me you don't think I was lying about that."

"About what, Rayne?" he snapped. "Just come out and say it."

Construction boots blackened with muck, Rayne circumvented the still gator, slowly, as a hunter would, murmuring softly that everything would be all right, that they'd make it out the three of them, no bad guys would come mess with them. When she stood a couple feet to Sheila's right, chain loosely hanging in her hands, Rayne crouched. She looked up at him through the sweat- and mud-matted bangs.

And he knew.

Despite the hurt, the shame and the anger, Rip knew without a shadow of a doubt that this time, Rayne "Betty" Brogan was telling the truth. At least about that if nothing else.

He joined her by Sheila's other side, helped drape the chain over the thick body then squeezed a hand underneath to retrieve the harness's carabiner, which had slid

down along the webbed belt. Sheila didn't move a muscle. Sweat dangled from the tip of his nose as he clipped the loop at the end of the chain to the gator's harness.

Rip patted Sheila's back. "Wrap the other end to a tree, okay, in case she decides to bolt."

Rayne's boots made sucking sounds as she backtracked and flicked the end of the chain around the gnarled "knee" of a relatively-small cypress tree. She wiped sweat from her brow, planted fists on her hips. Her tank top was a mess but still the message glittered in the foliage's shade. Breasts made to be held and kneaded rose and fell with her labored breath. The humidity alone was crushing, but her close call with the drugs Manny had slipped her must have taken its toll. She looked dead tired. But still the sexiest woman he'd ever seen.

Are You Man Enough? The tank top challenged.

Fuck yeah!

He *was* man enough to go toe-to-toe with that warrior woman, to match the fighter and connect with the lover, to take everything she threw at him and toss it right back at her. As much as her deception had hurt deep—she'd have to work hard to regain his trust, if ever—no one else had ever come close to making him feel like a real man. He may disagree with her tactics and her way of life even, but he knew that beneath the hard exterior and loud mouth, there was a woman in there who matched him in all the ways that counted. And the rest? Well, it could go to hell.

Plus, the sight of her standing there like a victorious Valkyrie back from the war gave him a bad case of the must-fuck. His cock thought so too and hardened at the thought of another disorderly go with the curvy, six-foot-of-woman bombshell.

"Well, stud, that wasn't so bad," she said, the way he'd expect "Betty" to. Maybe she had more of that woman inside her than he thought. Maybe it hadn't been that much of a lie after all. "Wasn't so bad at all."

He wanted to say this before his brain totally shut down and all blood flow sank below the belt. "You and me, we're going to have a talk. And if I like what I'm hearing, maybe—just *maybe*—I won't kick your ass for what you did."

Despite the tiredness, the old sparkle lit her eyes. "Kicking, definitely not, but slapping? Hmm."

She turned to him, cocky grin back full on, and at that precious moment of revival, all hell broke loose. Sheila roared at the same moment three men burst through the brush.

Did someone have a voodoo doll of her somewhere and was gleefully sticking needles in it? Because this couldn't possibly be worse timing.

Rip and she had just come to a sort of implicit truce without either making an overt first move—who knew she could be such a wussy—and then these thugs showed up. Damn them.

Rayne had already adopted a defensive crouch when one of the suits leveled a pistol tipped with a bright orange feather. He fired to the left of her feet. Rayne yelped and leaped back when the dart hit Sheila near the armpit. She thrashed the brush behind her with violent swats of her tail, roared at the outrage—the beast had had a *bad* day—then charged.

To Rayne's twisted sense of humor, Sheila's charge sent the suits backpedaling and falling over themselves like clowns in a circus. Enough chain was left for the gator to get at least fifteen feet forward before the tree stopped her. The chain twanged with a sound like a badly tuned guitar. Not even a pace from the closest clown, who squealed and snatched his foot back.

Rip rushed for the one closest to him, punched the guy in the gut twice rapidly, each strike sounding like a felt drum, bent him in half then with a quick-and-dirty elbow to the throat sent him sprawling on his ass.

She didn't wait for the other two to jump Rip and, just as Sheila had done, charged.

Maybe it was the sight of a woman—in construction boots, acid-washed jeans and tank top—or maybe it was the speed of her attack, but whatever it was, both men looked as if they faced an oncoming train. One slipped a hand in his jacket, the other brought a gun up level. But a split second too late. She used every ounce on her plentiful frame—she *was* her mother's daughter at least in some points—and tackled the pair. Gunshot erupted when the one suit fired in the air. She landed on top of the other, who was still trying to get his gun out of his jacket.

"Rayne!"

She'd seen and assessed the threat but was thankful for Rip's warning. While he grabbed the suit who'd shot his gun and yanked him from her, Rayne brought her knee down hard. Her suit howled when she rammed her kneecap in his balls. Two fistfuls of his jacket in her fists, she knelt up, steadied him. Using the lapels as handles, she yanked him to her just as she snapped her chin down. The suit got to taste her forehead and smell it too. She felt bones crunching. Not hers.

"Come on," Rip snarled. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Amidst groans of pain, she rushed to Sheila and untied the chain from around the tree while Rip searched one of the guys. He joined her two seconds later, ramming a gun behind the bull-faced belt buckle and a fistful of capped feathered darts that he tucked in his back pocket.

Sheila was clearly slowed by the tranquilizer—whatever it was—but not completely conked out. Thank heaven because Rayne didn't know how they'd manage to drag the massive gator toward the lake. They couldn't go back. Forward was their only chance. Rayne quickly pulled the dart from Sheila's armpit, got a full-throated roar in reply then ran on after Rip. Muck sucked at her feet and lower legs. Shit, she could barely lift them anymore. Mosquitoes buzzed around her and as soon as she stopped, they'd be on her like a donkey on briars. At least the frogs had stopped. Although she would've liked the cover.

"There," Rip said, pointing. "Water. Hurry."

He cleared the thickest of the brambles so she could follow Sheila, who'd decided that the smell of water warranted a bit more speed. Luckily for Rayne, the tranc must have dulled the gator's senses. Tail swishing left and right, she placidly kept the chain taut but not too much. Mud and sodden leaves splattered her white body. The sight they must have made.

"You okay?" Rip threw behind his shoulder as he jumped over a fallen tree partly submerged in green, muddy water.

"Yeah, you?"

"Couldn't be better. I live for that stuff. Bad guys shooting darts at my pets, sloshing around in a foot of shit. Yep, couldn't be any fucking better."

Rayne couldn't help the snort of laughter, quickly subdued when Rip turned a murderous glare on her.

"Sorry."

"You know," he went on, leaped out of the way when Sheila went swishing past, aiming straight for the water glimmering between gnarled trees up ahead. "That's the same lake as the fairgrounds. Toho."

"You're thinking of going back? Manny and his bosses will have thought of that." Rayne grunted with the effort of keeping up with the gator. "Damn, girl, slow the hell down, would ya?"

"Not going back with her," Rip replied. Sheila roared when she cleared the foliage and reached a sort of thin beach. There, she snapped her maw a couple of times, did a complete about-turn that sent Rayne scrambling to follow and not end up facing the gator. To her shock, the beast's eyes closed as she settled on her belly, legs retracted.

"She's gone to sleep?" Rayne whispered. God, finally.

"Perfect place too," he replied with a faint smile. "Good girl."

A roar like a dragon made both of them jump on the spot. A heron took flight not far to the right.

Rayne unwrapped the chain from around her wrist. "What the hell is *that*?"

Rip quickly hid his gun in the back of his jeans instead of the front because, from amongst the saw grass and tufts of foliage floating over the water, erupted an airboat. Canary yellow and as loud as a jumbo jet, it swerved left and right. Passengers sat in the front, hanging on for dear life. One brave soul with a red baseball cap took pictures with one hand.

"Hey!" Rayne rushed to the water's edge, waving frantically. "Hey!"

Rip pulled her back by the tank top. "Are you mad? They'll see us. Christ."

"Exactly." She waved and jumped up and down. "Heyyy!"

To his alarm, someone in the boat pointed then others did as well until the captain, sitting in a long-legged chair, brought the airboat closer to the lakeside, rotor aimed away and creating ripples in its wake.

Rayne plastered her hands to her ears. Damn the thing was loud. She looked down at Sheila. The gator didn't even stir.

"Goddammit, they're coming," Rip snarled as he backed away.

"Good," Rayne replied, grinning. "We don't know how many more of Manny's thugs are after us. We need a ride out of here."

He didn't seem to agree. Well, they couldn't afford to be careful anymore.

Hooting and cheering, Rayne waded knee-deep into the water as the airboat captain cut the motor and let the momentum push the craft up toward the thin beach. She realized the thing wasn't all yellow as she'd first thought but hand-painted a garish yellow-and-black-leopard pattern, complete with a drippy sign that read *Captain Bob's Best Boggy Tours* welded across the rotor cage.

As soon as he turned to her and took his faded cap off, she recognized him.

"Bad to the bone," he called with a cheerful wave. "Whatchew doin' here?"

"We need a ride," Rayne yelled.

The look of horror on the man's passengers when they spotted Sheila. Cameras clicked, a couple with flashes. Rayne wished there wouldn't be such blazing visual proof of Rip's and her activity, but that couldn't be helped right now.

She heard Rip mutter a curse by her side as he steadied the airboat's prow with the tip of his cowboy boot nudged in the metal ledge surrounding the craft. "Yeah," he said with a fake grin. "We need a ride to the vet. You know one who doesn't charge an arm and a leg?"

"Matter of fact my daughter's a vet up at the wildlife refuge across the lake. What's up with your gator?" the man asked, grinning as he looked at Rayne up and down. "Been in the soup, eh?"

"Yeah," she replied as she looped her thumbs in her back pockets, knowing the man was looking at one thing and one thing only. Actually, *two* things. "That'd be so nice of you to get us to that refuge. Sheila's in a bad state, needs to have her belly looked at."

"For you, my blonde goddess," he winked. "Anythin'. Get'er on board."

To the horrified protest of some passengers, he and a couple of excited men in sports jerseys helped Rip and Rayne pull Sheila on board. Luckily, the airboat, once its motor was cut, had sunk to within a couple of inches above the surface. When the gator was safely tucked along the rows of benches and she and Rip were seated directly on the floorboard, Captain Bob gunned it. The rotor's roar drowned any attempt at conversation so Rayne just sat cross-legged and pretended not to see Rip giving the evil eye to one of the men who was checking her out with a "hey, baby" look. She saw Rip's face tense and followed his gaze. Damn.

Back the way they'd left, a pair of men burst through the bush shortly before a third one—she would've recognized Manny's spare form anywhere—joined them. Rayne turned a big fake grin at Captain Bob, motioning for him to really give it. He did. The airboat tilted left then right as he swerved and showed his—truly impressive—piloting skills. She whooped in all the appropriate places. Looking back at the brackish water that frothed in their wake, Rayne's grin hardened. *Try to read the boat's name, you slimy little shit.*

Rip must have understood because he nodded to her, a new light dancing in his eyes. She tried not to cling to the hope that maybe, just maybe, she hadn't messed everything up for good between them.

If she'd be asked how to get to the refuge, Rayne wouldn't have a clue. Every tuft looked the same on the marshy lake, every little island identical to its neighbor and every marina they passed could've been one and the same. Finally, after a few minutes of isolation they emerged from between two big clumps of saw grass. In front of them, wooden shacks dotted the waterline with a large white building a bit more inland. They neared a wooden pier that sorely needed repairs and a bit of wood stain. Rip was first to stand and jump out of the airboat when it'd slowed by the quay. Grinning around his cigarette, Captain Bob unhooked a length of rope at the end of which dangled an orange buoy. He twirled it at Rip, who caught it in one hand then expertly looped it in figure eights around the anvil-shaped mooring post. Some of the women beamed when he helped them off the unsteady floorboard and onto the quay. When everyone had left—some clamoring for a refund, others only too happy to snap a last picture of Sleeping Beauty—Captain Bob hiked his denim shorts with an elbow and escorted Rip and Rayne up a concrete path. A wooden sign that read *Feathers, Scales and Flippers* sitting horizontally to a pair of rotten beams served as a gate. Inside the compound, a fourteen-passenger bus was leaving by the only road Rayne could see.

"Here ya go," Captain Bob announced as they reached the white building. "Rachel! Hey, Rachel!"

A short brunette in faded coveralls burst out the front door, rubber gloves in one pocket and shades pushed up over her forehead.

"These folks' gator's sick. Got 'er down by the quay."

Rayne expected questions, excuses as to why she wouldn't or couldn't take care of this "walk-in", but instead, Rachel nodded. "I'll get the quad."

They all met back at the airboat where Sheila breathed in deep, rumbling breaths. The four of them made short work of loading the slumbering gator into the trailer hitched to the quad. Rachel drove slowly back up the slope and around the building. Rachel's clinic could've used with a bit of updating—it resembled an old garage with counters along the walls—but it was clean and well equipped to deal with large patients. A shallow concrete enclosure sloped toward a wooden "doggie door". They rolled the trailer there and gently tilted it until Sheila slid all the way out. Her eyes never moved and fixed straight ahead.

"What did you give it?" Rachel asked as she muzzled the gator with a leather strap.

Rip pulled one of the capped darts from his back pocket and showed it to her. Rachel grimaced. "That stuff should be banned. It's way too powerful." She arched an eyebrow. "How come you got that?"

"It's not mine," he snapped, took a long breath. "It's been a long day, okay? I took it from the ones who shot a dart into her. But the real problem is her belly. She has something in it. Something foreign."

Rachel still didn't look convinced but she and the rest rolled Sheila onto her side and strapped her there with webbed belts. The cut on Sheila's pallid belly looked larger in the unforgiving fluorescents. Poor thing. Rayne shook her head. Goddammit.

Rachel sucked through her teeth. "You did that?" she asked. No woman had ever scared Rayne, but this one just might.

Rip shook his head. "Someone tried to steal her this afternoon. Took off with my truck and Sheila in the trailer. When I got her back, she had this thing in her belly."

"Hmm." Rachel narrowed her eyes, sucked through her teeth some more. "Smugglers, maybe." She grimaced as she patted the sutures and the hard lump underneath. Rayne felt sweat trickle down her back. She cleared her throat, waited.

With her elbow right against the gator's armpit, Rachel went to work and soon had all the stitches out. "My God, it's a chunky one. What do you feed it?"

"Meat and dog food. And she's a *she*," Rip replied. He grinned for the first time since he'd found out what Rayne did for a living. She'd missed that crooked smile. "Sheila likes dog food with a bit of gravy and warm water."

Both Captain Bob and his daughter grinned. "Yeah, well, she's fat but she must be happy," Rachel remarked. She opened the cut with a hemostat.

And there it was. What Beauty and the Beast would do anything to get their hands on. Wrapped in several condoms, the lump was the size of two walnuts end to end.

"How come there's no blood?" Rayne asked as she bent over to check out the wound.

"Smugglers all right. And that wasn't a shit job, got it nice and neat between skin and fat," Rachel answered. "I hate smugglers."

Captain Bob nodded emphatically as he placed the package in a plastic bowl on the counter. "I'd like ter do it to 'em, see if they like it."

"Whoever did this had training," Rachel went on. "The smugglers had access to a vet. I doubt it—*she*—felt anything at all because they only cut through the first layer, where there aren't any blood vessels. That's why she's not bleeding and didn't feel a thing. I'll patch her up though, so it doesn't infect."

"You wanna ride back to the fairgrounds?" Captain Bob asked. Somehow, Rayne knew he understood more about the situation than he let on.

Rip shook his head. "We can't leave Sheila behind."

"She's not going anywhere for a couple of days," Rachel said, straightening. "We have habitats here. I'll find her a quiet spot."

A yawn stretching his mouth wide, Captain Bob fished inside his shorts pocket and pulled a key with a silvery fishing lure as a keychain. "There," he said, throwing it to Rip. "Down by the water, there's a boat—a Zodiac. Ya know yor way 'round here? Got a motel a quarter mile up toward the town, nothin' fancy mind ya, but it's quiet. Can reach it by water, for fishin' season, y'know. Just tell them I sent ya."

Rayne wanted to hug him. While Rip pocketed the key, she wrapped a hand around the package in the bowl but Rachel stopped her with a look. "There's no need to call the police, is there? No one's gonna come snoop around my refuge and disturb my patients, will they?"

Rayne shook her head. "I'm sure they want *this* more than the gator, as cute as she is."

"Good. 'Cause I don't want trouble."

Trouble. Ha. Her middle name.

Chapter Nine

Rip couldn't believe how easy it'd been to get the package. Well, he didn't technically *have* it per se. Rayne did.

The way to the motel proved short and sweet, thank heaven, because he was dead on his feet. Adrenaline had long left him and every ache and pain he'd accumulated over the long day was starting to clamor for attention and a bit of TLC. His knuckles hurt the worst. But he was sure the guy's face hurt even more.

It'd taken a prodigal leap of faith to leave Rayne in the Zodiac with the gun *and* the package while he checked them into a room. He half expected her to be gone when he came back out of the humble reception building, carrying granola bars, gum and the lone remaining bottle of water from the vending machine. But no. There she was, sitting nice and quiet in the Zodiac, eyes closed, long legs crossed at the ankles while she leaned back against the inflatable side. His hands tingled with the urge to wrap them around her breasts and give a quick squeeze.

"We're set," he announced. Rayne opened her eyes, offered him a crooked grin that did wonders to his blood pressure as she stood and kicked a leg over the side and onto the wooden quay.

She followed him down past a few "rooms" that resembled garden sheds more than anything else. The place catered to fishermen who only came back to sleep and so wasn't meant to be pretty. At least it was relatively clean as he unlocked then pushed the door inside the darkened room.

Rayne reached for the light but he stopped her with his hand around her wrist. "Better leave it out."

"You're right." She sighed. "Is that food? Gimme."

Pulled right out of the 1970s, their room was smaller than his trailer. He closed and locked the door while Rayne hungrily chewed half a granola bar, pulled the drapes until only a thin blade of evening sun stabbed and hit the opposite wall. A painting on velvet of some type of fish—he didn't fish, didn't even eat it—made him smile. Five-star luxury.

"You mind if I take a shower before we do anything else."

His cock hardened at the thought of her naked in the same quarter mile as him. Damn. It'd be hard to focus. He threw her a slanted glance, caught her looking back at him. No words were needed. Why was it that he couldn't keep it in his pants whenever the Valkyrie was around? Goddammit.

She put the package by the phone on a small dresser, rubbed her hand on her thigh. The devil knew he wanted to do that too. Rub and grab her thigh, let her wrap her long and muscled legs around his middle for an epic go against the wall.

The double bed looked more inviting by the second, despite the forest green faux velvet cover and lumpy mattress.

"Get a shower," he said under his breath. "Then we'll talk."

"Talk?"

Had someone cancelled Christmas, she wouldn't have looked more disappointed. She shrugged, downed half the bottle of water then stuck a piece of gun in her mouth. Muscles twitched along her jaw. Rip walked up to her, pleased by her reaction—eyes and nostrils flared in a mix of alarm and trepidation—and dug four fingers into the front of her jeans. Reeled her in to nip her chin. Smelled mint on her breath.

"You think you can get back in my pants the same day I found out you lied to me all that time?"

Her smile wavered. "I sure was hoping to."

Rip shook his head. "You're something else, Rayne Brogan."

"You sure know how to flatter a girl."

"Did I say that was a compliment?" Damn if he'd let her sway him that easy. Even if she was looking at him as if he were the tastiest treat on the dessert buffet.

True to style, she reached out and cupped his package. "Some things don't lie."

Fuck it. He couldn't argue with that. Hell, right now he didn't want to. Trust might be hard to come by, but lust? That was a no-brainer. He was damn near Jonesing to get into her.

She met him more than halfway when he pulled her in. Their lips met in a clash of tongues and teeth, grunts and pants as hands fought to eliminate the offending clothing that stood in their way. He'd chew her clothes off if he had to.

Locked in the kiss, still wiggling out of nasty clothes, Rip backed up toward the bathroom, jerked back the shower curtain and fumbled for the shower controls. "Shit." He had to break away to take a look.

And wished he hadn't. The shower was little more than a step down into a tiled area that had probably seen its last luster during the Truman administration. What grout was left between the tiles looked none too clean.

But then, neither one of them was anywhere close to clean at the moment. He turned on the water full force, heard a clank and rumble and three thin streams jetted from the lime-encrusted showerhead.

Rip looked at Rayne who grinned, shrugged and shoved him back against the tiled wall, plastering herself against him with a kiss hot enough to melt titanium. The gum switched mouths.

Much as he wanted to kick her legs apart and ram inside her, the need to get rid of the stench that coated them was stronger. "Clean first," he mumbled into her mouth.

She drew back with a smile and looked around for soap. "Fuck."

"Over there," Rip pointed to a stack of small wrapped bars of soap on the sink. Rayne grabbed the stack and started unpeeling the paper, passing the bars to Rip. He reached up to try to adjust the shower head and the damn thing came off in his hand.

A fat stream of water poured down from the pipe. Rayne laughed. Well, it was an improvement. He tossed the shower head in the direction of the plastic trash can and turned Rayne into the stream of water.

Black gunk rolled down her body. Rip started with her hair, soaping her. She leaned her head back, eyes closed to rinse as he worked down her body. Damn what a body. He washed faster, reached her feet then turned her to do her back.

By the time he was finished he needed a cold shower. She finished rinsing and took the soap from him. "My turn."

He'd never imagined that being washed would be such an erotic experience. Her strong fingers worked the soap into his hair, massaging in a way that was both relaxing and stimulating. Once she was finished there, she worked her way down, covering every inch of him with her soapy hands.

When she reached his cock, she slowed a bit, taking time to soap and rinse twice, the entire process making his knees feel a little on the rubbery side. The woman had good hands. He even swallowed his gum when she teasingly pumped him once.

By the time he was rinsed she was on him, all hands and lips, sucking his tongue into her mouth and fisting him firm enough to have him wanting to spurt then and there. She must have had some sort of power over him. He couldn't explain it other than that. Rayne had *something*. Couldn't define it, couldn't control it. Christ, he couldn't even think straight when she crouched down and that hot mouth closed on him. It wasn't long before he had to stop her. It was either that or she was going to get left out of the party.

"Gimme a breather," he snarled, rubbed water from his face. This woman knew how his system worked.

She stood and pushed him back against the wall, a dangerously lusty sparkle in her eyes. Rip blamed his crazy day or the soap on the floor when he lost his balance and whacked his shoulder against the tiled wall, his back making a loud slapping noise.

"What the motherfuck—?"

Rayne howled when a half dozen tiles clattered down the wall to the shower floor.

"Yeah," he snarled, brushing grout from his arm. "That's very funny—"

She pressed up against him, lifting one leg high to provide room as she worked her hand between their bodies and grabbed his cock, rubbing it against her wet pussy and effectively silencing him.

Rip groaned. One push and he'd be in her. That hot, glorious flesh squeezing him. Then he looked down at her.

And his world tilted. Void of makeup, her hair slicked back, the face that looked up at him was the woman he'd known as Betty, and yet not. There was something missing. He searched her face and eyes. What was it?

Yes! The mask was gone. The deception. The eyes that stared back were lacking the look that had always told him she was hiding something. And removing that element changed her. He saw something he'd never imagined seeing in her. A kind of innocence and vulnerability. She might want him to think she was all brawn and raw sex, but the truth was, she was as much a victim of her emotions as anyone.

And that slayed him.

He stopped her in the act of guiding his cock inside her. "Slow down, Rayne. We've got all the time in the world."

Rayne blinked in surprise. That tone was not one she'd heard from him before. It was the gentle croon of...a *lover*. Not a sex partner, but a lover. Someone with emotion invested. Did he feel something for her?

Tears threatened, surprising and horrifying her. What the hell was wrong with her? She tried to look away, but Rip held her face in both hands, his eyes searching hers. Christ, he was killing her. Seeing inside to places she didn't want revealed.

"It's okay," he whispered, and lowered his lips to hers.

This wasn't just a kiss of passion. Slow and tender, his tongue tasting and exploring, he took his time. It unhinged her. Excited her. Thrilled her. And scared her to death.

When the kiss ended, he reached down to turn off the water. "Let's take this to the bed."

She nodded, not quite trusting her voice. Rip grabbed a towel and handed it to her. Cheap thing. Thin and barely big enough to wrap around her hips, but it served its purpose.

He took her hand and led her to the bed, stripping back the ancient green cover and heavily bleached sheets. "I want something from you, Rayne."

She gave him a look heavy on the "well, damn, so do I" but he ignored her as he smoothed the sheets for her.

"I want to make love to you."

She wasn't sure who was more surprised by his statement, him or her, because he looked a bit stunned once the words were out of his mouth. Rayne wasn't sure she knew how to make love. Fuck? Hell yeah, that she understood. But make love? Wouldn't that mess everything up? Dull her edge? Create another layer of knots she'd have to work out later? But if not with Ripley Knight, then who else?

Yeah, who else?

Frankly, there *was* no one else. If there had to be a first time for everything, now was as good a time as any. And it was a sure bet she'd never meet anyone else with

whom she'd want to try. She may not let it show, but she had quite the blind spot for Rip. Not only because of their mutual carnal hunger but on a level deeper than she'd ever felt for anyone. As though he knew her, deep down inside, had seen behind her mask and enjoyed what was there. Crazy.

Rip lay her back on the bed and sat beside her, his hands tracing lightly down the length of her body and back up. "Damn if you aren't the sexiest woman I've ever laid eyes on, Rayne Brogan."

She smiled up at him, trying to keep the moment light with a tease. "My friends just call me Rayne."

Rip smiled in return. "How about your lovers?"

The tease went right out of her. "I don't know. I'm not sure I ever had one."

"Then it's time to remedy that."

"You think?"

"Oh yeah. Definitely."

"Well, what if I'm not looking for a lover?"

That wasn't the right thing to say. She saw it in his face. "Then what are you looking for?"

"This," she said as she sat to slide her arms up and circle his neck. She pulled his head down. When their lips met, she surrendered, offering everything. Not just her body but for the first time, *herself*. The whole deal. And damn the torpedoes.

Rip probably didn't understand what she meant with the kiss, but she hoped that he recognized on some innate level deeper than consciousness or verbal communication what she was offering. He must have. His response was to wrap his arms around her and pull her close, deepening the kiss.

If later she could pinpoint a moment where everything changed for her, it'd be this kiss, in this humble motel room. It'd be with this man. *Her* man.

Needs and urges suddenly blazed like a gun's muzzle flash. Rayne broke away. Impatience born of hunger had her lips moving to his chest, licking his skin and working her way down his body, stopping at his cock. So hot and soft-skinned. Silk stretched over metal. At once hard and soft. She flicked her tongue over the head then lay back, extending her hand to him.

"If you mean what you said," she began, abruptly stopped when a lump in her throat choked her. The way he was looking at her...

That was love shining in his eyes. He loved her.

Tears welled. Her first reaction was to angrily wipe them away with the back of her hand, curse a good one, let the tough woman who didn't need a damn man or anybody else for that matter have the last word. As usual. Yeah, that was her first reaction. But it didn't last.

"I did mean it," he said gently. "I wouldn't yank your chain about that. Never."

Rip moved, spreading her legs so he was kneeling between them. Rayne shivered in anticipation when his fingertips tracked lazily up the inside of her legs. For a big man he could deliver a surprisingly light touch. His fingers brushed the sides of her sex and she spread her legs wider, bending her knees to provide better access.

"Rayne," he murmured as his eyes moved from hers to her pussy. He repeated her name several times until it sounded like a mantra.

She rolled her pelvis while he stroked her outer lips. Her labia swelled almost immediately, wet need making his fingers slick. Hell's bells she wanted him. With an intensity that nearly crossed the line into madness. She longed to wrap her legs around him and pull him down on her but refrained. She'd play it his way. Plus, she owed it to him and to herself to give this budding attachment between them a chance. Wasn't there a song about that? "Give Love a Chance" or something? Fitting.

"God, that's so good," she murmured as he spread her wide.

She pressed into the sensation when first a finger then a second started to move inside her. A climax started to build, rumbling like a hungry beast. When his thumb, slick with her juice, circled then pressed against her anus, she exploded, coating his hand with her warm juice.

His eyebrows rose in silent question and she smiled up at him. The smile vanished as their gazes met. No words needed. Rip leaned down, bracing himself on his hands. Rayne's arms moved to circle his neck as his lips met hers, caressing, his tongue parting her lips to taste her.

She couldn't stop the groan. Deepening the kiss, her tongue warred with his for dominance.

Rip's mind was void of every thought other than the feel and taste of her. His heart hammered and his skin burned with suppressed need. When Rayne wrapped her muscular legs around his waist and hoisted her hips up to press her hot sex against him, a fever swept through his mind. He grabbed her by the hips and sat back on his heels, pulling her onto him. She hissed a sharp, excited breath, followed by a mumble he couldn't make out. It didn't matter. Her first gasp had stabbed him with a shard of hunger so strong it damn near blinded him.

Heat from Rayne's wet pussy radiated through Rip's groin as she rotated her hips, grinding on the length of his cock. Every rub and slide weakened his control. His hands tightened on her hips, fingers digging in as he fought to hold the need at bay, to resist ramming inside her and fucking her as if there were no tomorrow. Holy hell. He wanted to take it slow, to love her easy, but she was so damn potent. He had to get her off his lap or he wouldn't hold to his vow to make love and not merely fuck. With a quick move he rolled her onto her back and pressed down on her, pinning her to the bed and gathering her breasts in his hands to feast on her nipples.

"Rip... Oh man." A moan followed. Then another.

An arch against his mouth preceded her hands working between their bodies to fist his cock. It was like having a live wire shoved against his skin. Current shot through him, burning and tingling, nerve endings doing a frantic dance.

She started to stroke him and he lost control of a groan, closing his eyes. Her touch was like electricity, sending jolts running rampant through him, all culminating in his cock. His breath caught in his throat when her warm hand closed on him and stroked. He groaned and closed his eyes, suckling one breast with ferocity while fighting the demands of his dick to plunge inside her, pound hard and fast and sate his ravenous need.

He raised his head from her breasts and their gazes met.

Rayne's breath caught at the look on his face. It was so replete with hunger. Her own need was intensified to the point that the throb of her heart was an echoing pulse sounding loud in her ears. She had to have him soon or she was going to spontaneously combust.

Fisting both hands in his hair, she pulled him to her, exploring, tasting his lips, nipping at the full bottom lip before indulging herself in the warmth of his mouth. She'd never tasted anything better. His taste, coupled with the fire that was threatening to consume her had her trembling and sweaty, breathing hard with desire.

At Rip's groan she pulled back to stare into his eyes. She saw heat and need. And still the emotion—powerful and raw—that had glittered in the depths of his eyes earlier. It was still there. Not a passing thing. That shook her to the core of her soul, brought to the surface all the longings she'd so carefully buried under her bristly carapace.

She couldn't look anymore. Couldn't take what it did to her. Closing her eyes, she traced her fingers over his face, memorizing the feel of him. When she reached his mouth, she opened her eyes. He was watching with a tender expression on his face. Slowly he smiled. A sexy smile that caused a hitch in her breathing.

"You know what I want, don't you," he murmured. Hunger darkened his eyes.

"Take it."

Rayne pulled him down again, licking at his lips then devoured them in a kiss that was as demanding as an addict eager for the next high. Damn, she was trying to be slow and gentle, to follow his lead, but there wasn't much gentle about her need for him. It was a full-blown, bring-down-the-rafters itch that either had to be scratched or would drive her insane.

Moving her mouth to latch on to the side of his neck, she rolled so he was beneath her. He'd have a hickey as dark as the black muck they'd fought through tomorrow, but right now it didn't matter. His taste was unique. Exotic and oh-so male. Even his smell made her horny. Sliding down his body, she explored his chest with her mouth, taking her time, lost in the feel and taste of him as she worked her way lower. She slithered between his legs, spreading his thighs to kneel between them and then took a long, slow

look up the length of his body. Call the fire trucks, baby. This man was hot enough to start a blaze. Their eyes met as she fisted his cock. The slight arch of his body provoked a stab of powerful feminine satisfaction inside her. Just as she started to stroke him, he grasped her wrists and sat up, pulling her arms behind her back.

"Hey..."

The firm grip of his hands reminded her of his strength. Not many men could best her in a one-on-one. No brag, just fact. She wasn't a milk-toast kind of woman. But Rip could. Loathe as she would be to admit it aloud, she didn't stand a chance against him. He'd take her.

That thought prompted something wild and primitive from deep inside her, something she'd never experienced but was thrilled to. Whatever it was, it wanted to be taken, to be possessed and loved until she was drained.

Rip could smell her need, could feel it humming in her. It fueled a fire inside him that was threatening to blaze out of control. A need. To make her his. To brand her, stake a claim on her that couldn't be undone.

Her skin was damp with perspiration, hot to the touch. Despite the dismal lack of air conditioning in the room, he'd bet the heat had more to do with what was happening on the bed than the ambient temperature. He ran his tongue under her breast, moving up the side of the full mound. She arched her back as he flicked his tongue over her nipple, running small circles around the hardening nub. When he captured it between his teeth, Rayne moaned.

He knew he didn't have to be gentle and he wasn't. Inside of a minute she was writhing on him. Her sex rubbed along the length of his cock, her breath fast as she pressed forward, thrusting her breast against his mouth.

A battle raged inside him. Throw her on her back and sink his cock to the hilt, or delay and drive her even wilder with need. Make her want him even more. The need for her to want him more won.

Rip released her wrists and rolled her onto her back. Her groan of protest turned into a growl of pleasure when he ran his tongue down the center of her body, stopping at her clit.

Moving his hands up the sides of her legs to her hips and then beneath her, he gripped her ass tight and pulled her pussy to his face. Even her smell was erotic and dangerous. An odd blend of dark and light, musky yet sweet. Rayne moaned her encouragement, fisting his hair and pulling his head to her.

Her voice rose. He'd never heard it reach that note before. Ah. Ah. Ah.

"You want it?" he growled against her flesh.

"Yes..."

"Louder."

"Yes! Come on!"

Rip felt merciless and taunted her further, hovered over her sex but didn't touch it. She shivered. Her thighs cramped on either side of his face. She'd trap him there like a vise grip.

"Rip," she snarled. A warning.

Her clit was hard and ready when his tongue moved over it. Rayne gave a loud groan and gripped him tighter, arching toward him. He knew how to work her, how to build her to the point of release then ease her down. He indulged himself in that, sucking the hard nub into his mouth, circling the sensitive flesh with his tongue and feeling her body tense in preparation for climax.

He readied as well. Just as she'd gasp and start to shudder, he'd move his mouth away, only to start again. By the fourth time he'd used that maneuver she was shouting curses and pleas.

"Fuck. Don't stop. Rip, do me. Now!"

He stopped and stretched out on top of her, claiming her lips in a searing kiss, mixing the taste of her pussy with that of her mouth. Her body was humming, tight and primed, a sound in her throat making her chest rumble in a way that was primal, almost animalistic.

Rip recognized the sound on a purely primal male level. She'd moved beyond mere want into full-blown, must-have-it need. The fact he'd awakened such hunger had him hard as steel, his mind damn near going blank with the desire to fill her, hammer inside her. Make her scream and shudder until there was nothing left.

She ground against him, pressed his cock tight between them, panted into his mouth then broke the kiss and pushed him once more onto his back. He let her.

"Why didn't you take it," she growled, straddled his body. Her hands moved from a sharp tweak on his nipples to his cock. "Huh? Why didn't you?"

"I will. In time."

Oh, she didn't like that one bit.

He shivered when she ran one fingernail over the head of his cock, lubricating it with the pre-cum that beaded there. Christ. Neither of them was going to last long with so much built-up need. And he'd reached a point that his couldn't be ignored.

"You still want it?" he teased.

"Oh you—"

He moved hard and fast. She was on her back, his hands tight on her ass, lifting her up to press the head of his cock against her wet pussy. Gritting his teeth against the urge to pound, he tried to go slow. She clenched around him. He broke out in a sweat, stifled a groan.

Fuck. He yearned to pound into her, slake this thirst. It took all the control he could muster to hold back. Teeth clenched, breaths hissing between them and chest tight with effort, he fought for control that the movements of her hips was eroding by the second.

Blue eyes killing him in myriad ways, Rayne hissed a threat. "You better do this."

"My way, remember?" He didn't know how he could even think, let alone talk.

Sweat tickled his forehead. It stung his eyes as he hilted himself inside her then eased out almost completely, leaving only the head of his cock inside her. She yelled for more. He plunged back in.

"Rip," she cried out, lolled her head side to side. "Take it, take it, take it."

His rhythm increased in speed and intensity. Wanting to sink deeper, he grabbed behind her knees and lifted her legs in the air.

Rayne moaned a "yes" that lasted forever and stretched her arms up over her head, arching up against him and abandoning all control.

That shook him. It was a move so feminine and submissive—especially from the proud Valkyrie—that it almost sent him spiraling out of control. Primal need took over and he thrust hard and fast, her cries and gasps driving him faster and harder until he felt control fading like darkness in dawn.

He was at the edge. No way could he hold out much longer. He slowed the pace and lowered her legs to stretch out on her, feeling her breasts flatten beneath him, her skin slick and hot.

His lips sought hers in a kiss that was slow but passionate, matching the motion of his hips. Here it was. That illusive thing he'd searched for but could never find. That "fit". As corny as it might be, he wanted the moment to last, to be able to ensnare it and hold it forever. Nothing in his life had ever felt so right as this moment, and this woman.

Rayne moaned into his mouth, wrapped her legs around his waist and bucked against him. He drove himself into her wet core, feeling her push back against each thrust, driving him deeper into her. Her legs tightened around him as her body went into climax. Rip saw it clearly. Felt it, smelled it, tasted it.

"That's it," he whispered against her mouth.

Wetness poured between them, her pussy clenching around him, her belly contracting. Her head arched back, eyes closed. Rip slowed his movements, enjoying the feel of her orgasm. Rings of it tightening around his cock. God, there'd never be another Rayne in his life.

She went limp and stretched like a lazy cat, smiling up at him. His lips claimed hers as the remnants of her climax shook her, creating a shiver that traveled to her breasts, teasing her nipples as he moved slow and strong inside her. Just as another orgasm began to ripple through her body—shit, he could feel each frisson pass through him—he kicked it into high gear and hammered into her.

"Yes! Yes!"

Rayne screamed in pleasure, bucking against him, nails digging into the flesh of his back, teeth biting at his neck. Sweat poured from them, making their bodies slick against one another.

"Now!" she screamed. "Yes! Rip!"

He raised his head and their eyes locked. And together they took the freefall. Fever took him. Over his eyes, a red haze descended, hot and beating to the pulse of his heartbeat, to the rhythm of his cum as it jetted into her. His lover, his woman. Nothing would ever be the same again. Not ever.

When the storm passed, Rip sagged onto her, feeling the rapid pounding of her heart.

"Need air," she wheezed.

Not even Rayne was big enough to support the full weight of his body. Her relative frailty—he'd never tell her to her face though—renewed his pact with himself to make sure, make damn sure, they had a chance together. Their relationship might have hit a snag but there was a lot of road still ahead.

Rip moved off her so she could roll over onto her side, her face against his chest. So hot. He wrapped his arms around her, relaxing. He fought it, but it didn't take long for sleep to claim him.

Chapter Ten

Malcolm cursed as he crossed the tarmac to the waiting limo. He fucking hated Florida. The light was too bright, the air too hot and humid, and everything was too fucking flat.

James was waiting in the backseat. Malcolm had sent him down the day before to get a lead on Rayne and his merchandise. He was tired of waiting. Either she delivered the goods or he'd have her head on a plate. That fucking cow.

"Well?" he demanded as he collapsed against the leather seat.

"I've narrowed things down."

James put a DVD into the player and hit the play button. Malcolm watched as a news crew covered the scene of an accident. Something to do with a cluster balloon, an overturned truck of fish on its way to SeaWorld and a bunch of pissed-off people. Was he supposed to give a rat's ass about any of it?

"What the fuck is this?"

James leaned forward, as if waiting for something to pop out of the screen. "Just watch."

Malcolm sucked his teeth. He had half a mind of putting a bullet in loverboy's forehead just for fucking with his patience. There was no goddamn— What the hell was that on the screen? "A white alligator?" He looked at James. "*My* motherfucking white gator with *my* rocks in it? Gone?"

James nodded. "Not gone for good though. Apparently, Rayne and the owner of the carnival were seen chasing the alligator into the swamp around Lake Tohopekaliga."

"Tohoope—what?"

"Lake Toho," James replied. "Big lake in the middle of Kissimmee."

"Don't you fucking roll your eyes at me, you prissy fuck."

A lethal glint flashed in James' eyes and was gone the next second.

"And that helps us, how?" Malcolm went on, squinting at the screen.

"Because we know the old man from the carnival, Manny, chased after them with several men who were driving dark sedans with government plates."

"Fucking Feds?"

"Military."

"We've got to get that fucking crystal. Now. Call that cow."

"She's not answering."

“Motherfucker. I’m gonna slice her fucking tits off.”

James turned a deaf ear to Malcolm’s tirade. The truth was, he was weary to the bone of having to put up with the greasy-haired, beady-eyed thug in a suit, day in and day out.

“They were on foot, being chased, with nowhere to go,” he managed to put in edgewise when Malcolm paused to take a breath between two strings of curses. “The authorities have scoured the area looking for them, thinking they’re crash victims at best and on the run at worst. But they’re nowhere to be found. Which means —”

“For Pete’s sake, skip the details,” Malcolm roared.

James felt his blood pressure drop, as it usually did when rage overtook his polished exterior. “I believe I have located her.”

His partner’s eyes gleamed like those of a crazed hyena at the scent of fresh blood. “Then what the fuck are you waiting for? A goddamn invitation?”

“It will require renting an airboat. The place where she and the man from the carnival have taken refuge is accessible much quicker by boat.”

“Then *get* a fucking airboat. Christ, am I the only one who can do anything these days?”

James ignored the jib and pulled out his cell phone. Even though he already knew where to rent a boat, he went through the motions of locating a number via his internet connection before placing the call. Appearances were, after all, everything.

“They’ll have a boat fueled and waiting for us.”

“How long will it take to get there?”

“No more than ten minutes.”

Malcolm nodded and James gave the address to the driver. With luck, by day’s end he would not only have the crystal in his possession but be rid of Malcolm. Then he’d deal with Rayne Brogan. In his own way.

* * * * *

Rip was passed out cold. Snoring. Rayne lay awake, listening to him breathe. What happened between them had shaken her. She’d never had a man make love to her before and there was no doubt in her mind that what had happened between them was making love.

The question was, where did they go from here? They were a long way from being out of the woods. Not only was she going to have to deal with Malcolm and James, but they needed to know who Manny was dealing with.

As if cued by her thoughts, her cell phone vibrated on the nightstand. Sliding out of bed, careful not to wake Rip, she wrapped the discarded bedspread around her and eased outside.

"What?" she snarled under her breath.

"Do you have the package?" James' voice came over the line. Suave, polished. Yet something was different about it. Harder. Much, much colder.

"Yeah."

"Then bring it to me."

Me? Not *us*? What the hell was going on?

"Where?" she asked.

"The dock at the motel," he replied smoothly. "We're on our way now."

Fear spiked hard and fast.

No way she was letting those two anywhere near Rip. Not that he couldn't handle himself. He had and could. But she knew those two. They'd come armed for bear. And she wasn't about to take a chance with Rip's life. Not now. Not after... Damn she couldn't even say it to herself without quaking in her boots. Not after realizing that she *loved* him.

There. Said it. The L-word.

She hurried inside and, with a grimace, slid on the still-damp clothes she'd left discarded on the floor. God, what a stench. A wicked thought made her grin. She ought to hug James just for the sheer joy of getting some of this stinking shit on him.

Rayne started to pocket the package then stopped. Maybe there *was* a way to stall Beauty and the Beast...

Leaving the package where it was, she slipped back outside. It was near twilight and the sky was filled with dark clouds. Looked as if they were in for a storm. Rayne hurried to the dock barefoot. Keeping an eye on their "room" she slipped on her boots. Had she been the praying kind, she would've sent a small note upstairs to please keep Rip in bed, keep him out of harm's way.

It wasn't long before she heard the roar of an engine. The racket would wake him. Damn. She jumped on the spot a few times, adrenaline pumping through her veins. Fear did that.

A few seconds later a dark airboat came into view. The engine quieted to a deep rumble as it pulled up to the dock. James sat at the wheel with Malcolm hanging on to the passenger seat, his face pale despite the gloom.

"Where is it?" Malcolm barked.

Rayne made a shushing motion with her hand. "Keep it down. Someone will spot us. I'll take you to it."

"Get on."

She climbed aboard.

"Where to?" James asked.

"Across the lake," she said, and pointed. She had no idea where she was pointing, just as far away from the motel and Rip as possible. "I'll be able to spot it when we get there."

James started the boat and pulled away from the dock. In seconds they were racing across the dark lake. Rayne wished she could remember where Captain Bob had picked them up. Maybe she could lose Malcolm and James in the brush and find her way to the road. But every inch of the shore looked the same. Gnarled branches from stunted trees covered in moss and drooping across thick clumps of saw grass. Moonlight illuminated the scenery – gorgeous any other time but right now – in shades of blues and grays.

"Can you see it?" James yelled over the engine as they drew near the shore.

"There," Rayne pointed to a space where there seemed to be a small clearing. Maybe she could make a run for it. Malcolm would be able to neither catch up nor find her. But James...? She wasn't so sure the refined exterior didn't hide more. Much more.

James idled up to the shore and killed the engine. Silence seemed very loud. Not even the sound of insects or frogs to break the eerie stillness.

"You go first," Malcolm announced, and gestured for Rayne to disembark. And his request – more like order – had nothing to do with manners and everything to do with sending someone else to test the water. Chicken shit.

Rayne stepped off the boat and mired down knee-deep in the muck. Another step and she was on firmer footing. She turned to see James grimacing as he stepped off. No doubt worried about what microbes or bacteria lurked in the dark water. Malcolm plopped down and cursed as water and mud splashed up on him. "Goddamn sonuvabitch," he snarled.

What a pair. Why had she put up with their shit for so damn long?

Rayne led the way into the darkness, praying she wouldn't encounter anything that wanted to bite or eat her. She had no idea where she was going, but chose the worst path she could find. Brambles and thorny bush clung at her jeans and arms. Her tank top wouldn't take much of that so she made sure she cleared those branches at chest height.

"Would you wait a fucking minute," Malcolm complained behind her. "Where the fuck are you taking us?"

"I cut the package out of the gator," Rayne replied without looking back. "She escaped from a trailer this old dude had her in."

"Yes," James' voice floated from the rear. "We've seen your exploits on television. Quite the sight."

Heartened, Rayne laid it on thick. "Yeah, I hid it in a hole in a tree and marked it by tying my jacket around a branch so I could find it again."

There, not five feet in front of her, a thick copse of low-hanging trees in the gloom. Perfect cover for a dash to freedom. She'd reach the road, call Rip, tell him to get the

hell out of the motel and lay low. She'd make sure he was safe. Nothing else mattered. If she could make it to those trees. *Please, God, just let me make it there.*

"What the fuck ever," Malcolm barked. "Let's just get it and get the fuck outta here. It smells like a fucking sewage plant." He must have directed his next words to James because his voice came muffled to her ears. "This is all your fucking fault. If you'd kept Penelope —"

"I'm so utterly tired of you," James interrupted quietly.

The sound of gunshot exploded behind her like thunderclap. She whirled on the spot just in time to spot a wide-eyed Malcolm, a hole oozing black ink down the center of his forehead, toppling over and landing in the muck with a wet *splurt*. Two paces behind, James held his gun in front of him, an air of absolute menace on his handsome face.

"Would you care to recant your original story, Rayne?"

She knew she was fucked. "What makes you think I was lying?"

"Superior intellect and a propensity for accurately judging people."

She shrugged. "Okay, fine. I lied. But look at it this way. You're rid of the Beast."

"Yes, there is that." He looked at the body of his former partner as though it were a fallen tree and not a dead human being. One he had just killed. "Still, I must insist that you relinquish the package. I would hate to have to — damage you."

Rayne had no doubt that damage was exactly what he had in mind for her. She'd seen the aftermath of James' brand of damage and it made her flesh crawl. She might have made a mistake acting alone.

"So," James said, coming close enough for her to smell his expensive cologne. "Where is it?"

She sighed. One lie always needed another to cover it. *Ad vitam aeternam*. "It's still in the gator."

He cocked his blond head, silvery in the moonlight. "And where is the alligator?"

"At a wildlife refuge. I don't know where. Except it's on the lake."

"That's no problem, we'll find it with the GPS under zoos or something." James studied her for a few moments. "Give me your phone."

Rayne narrowed her eyes at him. So the whole while she'd thought Malcolm the more devious and sly of the two, it'd been James. It hadn't taken him long to connect the dots and figure out the quickest way to get what he wanted. She handed him the cell phone. He flipped it open and scrolled through the last numbers dialed.

"Ah yes." He smiled and hit the call button.

Rip woke to the sound of his cell phone ringing. Where the fuck was it? And where the fuck was Rayne? Rolling out of bed he searched around on the floor, finally locating the phone.

"Yeah?"

"Good evening, Mr. Knight."

"Who's this?"

"Someone who has a gun pointed at your lady friend's head."

"What lady friend?"

"I believe you know her as 'Betty'."

Rip's gut twisted. What the hell had Rayne done? "What do you want?"

"The alligator."

Rip's eyes went to the nightstand. The package was still there. So was the gun. Which meant Rayne hadn't told whoever had her they'd extracted the package. Good woman. Foolish woman. God, he loved her and hated her all at once. She'd taken risks with her life. Jesus, the thought of her getting hurt...

"I'm leaving now," he snapped. "I'll call you on this number as soon as I've secured transport and have the animal loaded."

"Please do not delay, Mr. Knight. I fear I'm a man of limited patience. I'd hate for your girlfriend to end up...damaged."

Rip's heart skipped at least one beat.

"I said I'd deliver," he replied with a voice that didn't sound his at all. Deeper, more gravelly. "You just make sure she stays *undamaged* or I promise you'll regret it."

"Very well, now that we've beaten our chests and pronounced our alpha status, what say you we tend to business? I'll await your call."

Rip flipped the cell phone closed, tapped it against his forehead a few times as he tried not to fly into a murderous rage. She never, ever, *ever* should've gone alone, without backup, without anyone knowing where she was. *Goddammit, woman.*

Package and cell phone in the front pocket of his jeans and gun in the back of his belt, Rip sprinted down the gentle incline toward the water. A starry night illuminated his way. Not two minutes later he was jumping into the Zodiac. Cool night wind whipped his face as he kept the throttle twisted all the way out, almost flying a few inches over the water. Yet he sat bent in half, wishing for the damn thing to go faster. The refuge wasn't far, a quarter mile, or so Captain Bob had said, but he had no idea if the man holding Rayne knew his way around the lake or not. He didn't sound local. But then again, neither was Rip.

Tufts of saw grass and marine vegetation looked greasy and blue in the moonlight. In fact, everything had a ghostly shade of cobalt to it. The sound of the motor barely drowned the noise in his ears from his frantic heart rate. *Swoosh, swoosh.* If something happened to Rayne... God help them all.

By the time he spotted the refuge and cut the motor, he was feeling the first tug of panic, worrying if Rayne was okay and if the jerk who had her was holding up his end and keeping his hands off her. If he'd hurt her... His blood pressure ratcheted up. *Stay cool, man, for Christ's sake.* He'd never acted this way, even if the present situation wasn't

the worst in which he'd been involved. But Rayne hadn't been part of his life back during his service years. She was now. And he intended to keep it that way.

Everything was quiet at the refuge except for a small light in one of the lakeside habitats. He ran up to the house. Rachel answered his fourth—louder—knock. She was hastily pulling on a sweatshirt over her pajamas when she wrenched open the door. "Well, hello. Ah, I didn't expect to see you so soon."

He tried for cool and collected but sounded the way he felt—in a hurry, agitated, pissed off. "I came to pick up the gator."

Rachel pursed her lips and crossed her arms over her ample chest. Shit. "I don't know if that's a good idea. Might be better to let her rest for another day or so. She's awake, but not in a great mood."

"I need to get her *now*." He cursed inwardly at the wasted time. "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing. Call it a favor."

"Can't do that." Rip pulled out his wallet and counted out two hundred dollars and handed it to her. As much to make up for the trouble he'd caused as to speed the argument. No time to waste. Damn.

"No, I can't."

Rip reached out and took her hand, put the money in it and closed her hand over the bills. "Please."

Rachel narrowed her eyes at him but tucked the money into her pajama pants pocket. "Bob's out back feeding the nocturnal critters. Come on." She stomped into a pair of rubber boots by the wall and ambled around the back of the house.

The narrow dirt path that ran along the water's edge ended with a boatshed in need of a coat of paint. Light filtered through the door, which stood ajar.

"Don't make noise, okay, they don't like that," Rachel murmured as she opened the door. Inside, Captain Bob, in jeans that hung well past the crack of his butt, was bending over a large tank and dropping scoopfuls of pellets from a burlap bag. He turned, grinned. "Where's your blonde goddess?"

"I need Sheila loaded and ready."

Captain Bob sucked his teeth. "You in trouble?"

Rachel crossed her arms again. "I thought I said I didn't want trouble."

Rip could've muscled his way through the situation, could've pulled the gun and forced them to help him load Sheila into Bob's airboat. Instead, what came out was the truth. If Bob was stunned, he didn't let it show. But Rachel, on the other hand, looked pissed off enough to kick his butt.

"Look," Rip began, ready to walk right back out and get Sheila himself if need be. They were wasting precious time. "There's no time. The man who has her wants the alligator because he thinks the package's still inside."

Rachel's eyes flashed in anger. "So you're just going to throw that poor beast into the hands of a smuggler?"

"Between Rayne and Sheila, who do you think —"

A distant rumble silenced both of them. Captain Bob turned in the direction of the sound. "Airboats. At least two or three."

No time to load Sheila now. Damn.

"You got a plan B?" Bob asked through a tilted grin. God, he was enjoying himself. Crazy bastard.

"Always do," Rip replied. He rushed for the door, stopped with his hand on the handle.

Rachel shrugged.

Had there been time, he would've rolled his eyes. "I won't give them Sheila. There's no time to get her loaded anyway. It doesn't mean I'm ready to toss in the towel."

Relief showed in her round face. "Good."

Both followed him outside. "You think I could borrow your airboat?"

Bob snorted a laugh. "Not a chance, boy."

"I need —"

To Rip's complete shock, Captain Bob passed him, rubbing his hands together. "You'll need someone to pilot the damn thing while you're kicking their asses, won't you?"

In the distance, the rumble grew in intensity. Rip looked over toward the sound but couldn't see anything yet. The city glowed unseen behind the tree line at the limit of his night vision.

"Come on," he said. "We don't have much time."

If something happened to Rayne, he'd never forgive himself.

* * * * *

Of the two, she'd always believed the volatile Malcolm would end up putting a bullet in his colleague's brain. Not the other way around. Not that James was a choir boy. Far from it. There was a smooth, sophisticated violence about him. Plus, she'd seen his handiwork as a clean-up gal and wouldn't want to be the recipient of it.

They backtracked to the rented airboat, its aft bobbing gently in the water while the fore rested solidly on the ground. In the bluish moonlight, its propeller resembled a steel daisy in a cage.

James passed her, gun in hand, sat in the first row of plastic seats. "You drive."

She didn't even know how to pilot the damn thing. After a few minutes trying to figure out the throttle from the tiller, she pushed the rotor startup button then cringed when a roar like a dragon buffeted her hair in her face. The craft lifted half a foot or so.

She cursed, held her flying hair in a fist while she climbed up in the pilot's seat. A glorified lifeguard chair bolted to the bottom. Didn't look solid one bit. Ugh.

She watched James thumb his cell phone screen. Even from where she sat, she could see the little screen filling with blue water split with a big red arrow. He'd found the refuge. Dammit. He pointed dead ahead. She had no choice but to comply.

After a few false starts and hair-raising close calls with tiny islands, she maneuvered the screaming banshee out of the little bay, turned around then aimed in the direction he pointed. He wanted her to drive? She'd give him a ride all right.

The first few words of a song came back to her. *I'm on the highway to hell*. Well, AC/DC had never been so right. She *was* on a highway leading straight to hell. And with any luck, she was going to bring a couple of jerks down with her, starting with James.

With moonlight giving the tranquil lake a surreal, ghostly effect, she revved the throttle and kept it twisted to the max. Acid Rayne, as James liked to call her, had two speeds—fast and faster. Hair whipping around her face in a mad dance, dirty tank top plastered to her chest as if it'd been painted on, Rayne scooted to the edge of her seat, feet wide apart. Left, right, she took turns that could peel the paint off the hull, sometimes tight enough that the back of their airboat sank into the water. James turned to glare a couple of times. But what could he do, really? He needed her alive and well to take him to Sheila. If it was a date with half a ton of gator he wanted, who was she to keep him from it?

Up ahead, between thick clusters of vegetation, light reflected off the lake. A collection of buildings. She aimed for it. Nothing else on that side of the lake anyway. It had to be the refuge. Still holding the cell in front of him, James nodded, as though agreeing with her heading. He kept the gun in his other hand. Maybe she could try to overpower him when he disembarked? *Yeah*, she thought licking her bottom lip. She'd take him down when they touched land.

Everything happened fast.

From their right, like a giant bullet, something cut in front of them not even five feet away. Another airboat. Rayne cursed, yanked the tiller to her, which sent the craft into a wide spin. Water frothed around them. The smell of a sushi bar made her grimace. Just beneath the sound of the rotor, she distinguished gunshots. Shit.

James yelled something she didn't hear. The other airboat executed a tight hairpin turn, came roaring back at them. More gunshots. A *lot* of them. Muzzle flashes everywhere. In the moonlight, she could make out three occupants. The airboat aimed at them. Dead on. Rayne bent as she kept the tiller against the outside of her thigh. Playing chicken? She could do that.

To his credit, instead of panicking, James threw himself into the bottom of the boat to let fly a few shots at their attackers. He must have hit something because the airboat veered away at the last possible nanosecond. Rayne grinned and cursed at them. Cowards.

"Fuck!"

When James cursed, this time she heard it loud and clear. From their left, not one but two airboats and another craft, some type of cigarette boat. Roaring in on them and whipping up ghostly black water behind them. They converged like seagulls on a single French fry. The airboat's speed and maneuverability, she could match. But the cigarette boat? Not even close.

"Lose them," James yelled.

Yeah, well, did he want to pilot this damn thing?

Rayne widened her stance, gripped the side of her seat then pushed the tiller far from her thigh, as far as she could. Their boat turned, turned tighter, offered its ass and the screeching rotor to the closest bad guys.

"Eat my spray, assholes!" Had to let steam out somehow.

With great frantic movements, James indicated she had to keep going for the refuge and to never mind the two airboats and the cigarette boat tag-teaming them. Shit, she wasn't some goddamn witch who could make a few thousand pounds of metal, turbine and propeller disappear.

Rayne leaned forward, aimed for the long wooden dock she could see sticking out of the tall grass. She recognized the place where Captain Bob had deposited them earlier, Sleeping Beauty in tow.

Here it is, Rayne Brogan. Highway straight to hell. She'd aim her boat there and not let up one damn bit. James was going down. No way she'd let him anywhere near Rip.

One airboat cut her off and served her a helping of her own sauce, angling its rotor right in their faces. Fish-smelling spray hit James and her. A split second later, the other craft appeared from the right. Only two people in this one. Both fired at her boat. Plus the one in front was still sending sheets of blinding water. The cigarette boat was somewhere she couldn't see. Shit.

To their right, the second boat grew closer still. What the fuck were they doing? Trying to board them?

Then it hit her—they didn't know who had the gator or the package or what the hell was going on. So they didn't want to take any chances and were trying to round folks up. Not kill them outright.

Big mistake, gents. Big mistake. Acid Rayne, she wasn't going down easy or alone.

James was busy firing his gun through the violent, horizontal rain coming from ahead. Smells of fuel reached her. Suddenly, white-hot light flared bright then dissolved into vertical tongues of amber and red. The boat ahead had caught fire!

For a split second, Rayne desperately tried to avoid the flaming missile as it grew larger. No time.

To her right, the second airboat sped right alongside hers. Barely six feet away despite her frantic piloting.

Hell could goddamn wait.

She didn't know how she did it. One second, she was standing with the tiller against her thigh, trying to avoid hitting a ticking bomb the size of a school bus and filled with jet fuel and the next...

Airborne.

Like a flying squirrel, she kicked off the seat's metal skeleton, arms out wide, legs at forty-five. By the corner of her eye, she spotted James, open-mouthed, following her mad leap of faith. More like despair.

You crazy bitch, he seemed to think.

She was so dead.

Spray hit her from the side, drilled into her ear, plastered her hair to her face. She hit the other airboat's aft portion hard enough to knock her teeth together. Its occupants had obviously not been prepared for her sudden arrival. The pilot left the tiller to try to grab her. The sudden deceleration destabilized his buddy, who frantically windmilled his arms before he fell into the lake. More like hit the surface as if he'd fallen off a speeding car. A geyser burst up where he landed.

Rayne had smacked the remaining occupant's gun from his hand when the burning airboat blew up. No way had James managed to clamber over four rows of seats to get to the pilot's chair. She'd barely managed to have enough time to jump.

Heat like the furnace of hell buffeted her. Using the diversion, she cocked her fist back. Under her knuckles, the man's nose crunched and his lips burst like overripe fruit. He collapsed without a sound. Just to be on the safe side, Rayne rolled him off the boat with her foot. He hit with only a bit less geyser action than his colleague had.

The bright ball of flame that had become the two airboats in front was coming at her. Fast. Rayne leaped over the last row of seats, floundered up the pilot seat and pushed the tiller just in time to avoid the burning, metal mess.

"Jesus Christ..."

That was when she spotted, near the lakeside, a third airboat, this one with a fancy paintjob she knew. Captain Bob. Before she could whoop and let him know who she was, the cigarette boat screeched past in the middle. Created a turbulent wake that choked her rotor. It sputtered, burped.

Then it died.

Despite Rayne's frenetic pulling on the cord, the damn thing wouldn't start again. Bobbing like a cork on a raging sea, she held on with one hand while she tried again and again. She didn't need to turn around to know the cigarette boat was coming back.

And her, sitting there like a duck.

Chapter Eleven

Rip's heart would surely give. He was torn between watching his Valkyrie decimate the bad guys with demented piloting—had anything ever been sexier than the sight of her on that chair, hair flying wild around her head?—and turning away from the coming carnage.

"Get me closer!" he roared to Bob, who nodded. He'd screwed his baseball cap down to the eyebrows. Long hair stuck out in greasy clumps.

If Rayne could hold her own as an airboat pilot, Captain Bob's skills were unmatched. He used every ripple to their advantage and cleaved a path to the crippled craft just as the cigarette boat was turning around and coming back. Its white hull resembled a blue rocket in the moonlight. Shots preceded the bullet-fast craft. There wouldn't be time to get to Rayne first.

Rip hunkered down against the side of the boat, made sure his elbows didn't touch the moving sides. Then he waited. Eye to the sight of his gun. A handgun wouldn't down a man at fifteen hundred paces the way his sniper rifle had, but he could make a nice little hole in a cigarette boat at two hundred without a problem.

To the right, at five hundred feet. Coming in fast. The cigarette boat.

To the left, at barely two hundred feet. Rayne, still yanking on that cord with the stubborn determination he'd come to expect. And to love.

He'd always been a good shot. Not the best, but pretty damn close. His specialty wasn't in firing a bullet in a man's head as he walked down the street. It was to put a bullet in a man's leg as he sat strapped in a chair. Patience had always been his chief virtue. Well, not necessarily virtue. But useful just the same. So with the years of training and practice, of sacrifices and hard choices, Rip waited until he had not a clear shot but the perfect shot. And it came. It always did.

He fired a single, economical bullet at the cigarette boat. Aimed and hit his intended target. The pilot went down.

When it was barely a hundred feet away, the craft suddenly veered hard enough to show almost half its hull, which glistened white against the dark water. Its turbine engines' roar died all of a sudden. Rip didn't wait.

"Go! Go!"

Captain Bob must have expected the order because he gunned it. The airboat practically lifted off. Wind slapped Rip's shirt against him. He hurriedly got rid of the hindrance. He put another shot as they neared the cigarette boat, downed another occupant. Bullets flew their way as well and *thunked* against Captain Bob's metal framework. Rip heard him yell curses. Left, right, Bob swerved around the cigarette

boat on his way to Rayne. He wasn't even within reach that Rip was already leaning over the side, ready to catch her and reel her in.

"Get in!" he roared above the rotor.

Rayne turned to him. Time seemed to stop. There she stood, the sexiest woman on Earth, with that tank top—dirty but still the best—proudly demanding *Are You Man Enough?* He was, goddammit. There was nothing more fearsome, who could bust doors and kneecaps like a man in love.

He planted the heel of his cowboy boot against the rope running along the side then stretched his hand out to her. Her grip was wet but firm when she clasped his wrist and hoisted herself over both sides and into Captain Bob's airboat. Hell, nothing had ever felt as right as her body pressing against his for a quick hug.

"Get down," Bob warned. Gunshots drowned what he said next.

Fire erupted on Rip's shoulder. He knew that feeling. He'd been shot. With a rough shove, he put Rayne behind him while he leveled his gun. Despite the poor light, he spotted three men standing behind the windshield. None of them was Manny. Where the hell was he?

It hit him like a ton of bricks.

"Where's Manny?" he yelled to be heard.

Rayne had time for a shrug before her face registered the same kind of shock that had hit him. She shook her head. "Oh no. Shit."

Rip whirled around, frantically motioned for Bob to turn the boat around. "The refuge. Hurry."

Bob shrugged as if to say "what's with you two now".

"They don't know the package's gone," Rip yelled. "They think it's still in the gator!"

Bob must have understood because his mouth opened in a perfect O.

Since they hadn't been that far to begin with, they made it there in record time, literally flying a couple inches over the water. Behind them, the cigarette boat tried to follow but couldn't navigate the dangerous islands sticking out irregularly and had to circumvent the obstacles, which would give Rip and Rayne some time. They hit the dock running as soon as Bob cut the engine and floated alongside.

"You've been shot," Rayne snarled as she spotted the blood coursing down his shoulder and arm.

"No time! Rachel! Sheila!"

Boots pounding, they devoured the narrow path leading to the habitats just in time to see two persons making their way there. One of them, a slight frame, turned. "If you got in mind to stop me, Rip, you should think again."

Rip skidded in the compacted dirt when Manny turned, holding Rachel by an arm. He held a gun to her belly. "For once, I'm happy to see your big ass," he said looking at Rayne. "Come over here and get the beast."

Rayne threw her hands up and cursed.

"Show me your hands," Manny went on, addressing Rip this time. "Who knew it'd come to this, huh?"

"You're turning on the code, spitting on everything we fought for. You're a thief."

"You're a good one to talk," his former commander snapped. "You're pussy-whipped by a cow in tight jeans and now you're giving me lectures on the code?"

Rayne didn't comment—but she did give the old man the visual version of the bird—as she passed Manny, both hands in the air to show she wasn't armed. She opened the door. As they trooped inside, amber light illuminated a sort of indoor pond, complete with moss and floating vegetation. Like a doggie door but for half a ton of gator, the bottom section of the wall facing the lake had been cut off. Cool night air filtered in. Near the doggie door, Sheila lounged on a large flat rock an inch underwater. After a long sniff, she raised her head and roared. In welcome or aggravation, Rip couldn't be sure.

As soon as Rayne neared her—no fence or anything, just a sort of divot separating the gator from them—Sheila swished her great tail and raised herself on her legs. "Hey, girlie," Rayne said with that sexy voice that could melt a guy's crotch. "Hey, Sheila, it's me. How you doing, honey?"

"For fuck's sake, would you just get on with it? I got a truck parked out front. Load her up and do it quick. No time to get the thing out of her here."

"How you plan on doing it then?" Rachel demanded.

"In the back of the truck at the airport." He patted his knife as his belt. "This should be enough."

"No anesthesia?"

"Not if she's dead."

Rip outflanked Manny so he could stand between the older man and the door. Someone wasn't coming out of this building alive and it sure as hell wouldn't be anyone he loved. Or himself.

"No one has to get hurt, Manny, okay. And no need to kill the beast," he added in case Rachel flew into a Dr. Doolittle rage.

"If you try any funny shit, Rip, I swear I'm putting a bullet in your bitch's head. I've been wanting to for damn long enough." He threw Rayne a venomous glare. "Lying slut."

"You watch it," Rip said. His voice, though calm, relayed his rage for all to hear. In the back of his mind, he hoped Bob had called the cops. Because if it came to violence, he wasn't going to allow Manny to live. Not after calling his woman a lying slut.

Manny indicated Rayne should get the harness from the wall. "Let's go. We haven't got all night—"

Rachel threw her arms up. "Why don't you just take the damn thing and leave us—"
"She clamped her mouth shut and looked away."

Manny eyed the vet and finally Rip. "How does she know about 'the damn thing'? Huh? It's not in the beast anymore, is it?" He pressed the gun harder into Rachel's side. Rip could see the tip of the muzzle digging into the plump woman. Her Disney sweatshirt a poignant contrast against the weapon.

"Let's take this easy, okay," he began, still showing his empty hands but creeping forward. One inch at a time.

"I'm sick of this shit," Manny said. He extended his arm and pointed his gun at Sheila.

Then two things happened. Could be three, they happened so fast. Both Rayne and Rachel reacted simultaneously. If the first went for the gun hand, the second went for Manny's crotch. He was punched and kneed at almost the same time. Rip only had to cock his fist back and send Manny sprawling on his ass.

Before anyone could react, Sheila roared in a way he'd never heard her before and charged forward. With a resounding *clap*, her wide-open maw snapped down on Manny's arm. She'd pulled him out with her by the doggie door before Rip could rush into the water to stop her. In the blink of an eye, her great white body disappeared into the depths of Lake Toho beyond the door. A couple of fireflies danced over the spot where she'd dived.

"Holy shit," Rayne breathed behind him. "Holy *shit*."

Rip couldn't find it in him to feel sorry for Manny. They'd been colleagues, had worked and fought and gotten piss-drunk together. Betrayal had a way of negating the past, of erasing even the strongest ties. Except for the woman slipping a hand into his to stand silently by his side. Nothing could erase his love for her.

* * * * *

"This is Debbie Rhodes for News 14." The reporter smiled one last time into the camera.

"Cut." The cameraman lowered the camera and the reporter turned to Rip and Rayne who stood beside her with special envoy from the Pentagon General Edmonston and the captain of the Orlando SWAT training facility. Captain Bob and Rachel stood at the end of the line.

"Thanks," she said, and stuck out her hand. "I'd be willing to bet that traffic to this refuge is going to pick up tremendously."

"Groovy," Captain Bob muttered under his breath, earning himself an elbow in the ribs from Rachel as the reporter hurried away, chatting with her cameraman.

Early morning sun reflecting in her silver hair, the general turned to Rip. "Sure we can't lure you back into active duty?"

Rayne felt Rip's hand tighten on hers. She knew he had to be tempted by the offer. But he shook his head and extended his hand to the general. "Not a chance, Ma'am."

"Then good luck to you, son. And again, our thanks."

"There's still time to change your mind," Rayne whispered to him as the general headed for her car. She was already being briefed on her next task by a pair of aides-de-camps who took multi-tasking to new levels. Busy with smartphones, they ushered the general into the back of the black SUV. Raising dust, the motorcade turned around and headed down the only road to the refuge.

"I know what I want," he said, looking her straight in the eyes.

If they'd been alone, that look would have had her jumping him then and there. What promises those eyes of his made. And damn if she wasn't eager as all get out to cash in on every one.

"Rip, I'm looking forward to working with you." The SWAT commander stepped up and offered his hand. "Two weeks?"

"Same here."

"And I think you're going to make the most interesting civilian consultant trainer in history," the commander went on, shaking Rayne's hand. "But you might want to reconsider the wording on the shirts."

Rayne laughed. Today her tank top read *Wanna try this without pants?*

"I'll keep that in mind. See ya soon."

He laughed and shook his head, and Rayne beamed back at him. What a trip these last few weeks had been. Seeing Rip being made a hero had been icing on her cake. Being made a heroine herself felt a bit odd. But nice. It was pretty cool being one of the guys in the white hats for a change. A position she fully intended to hold on to. Her days as a clean-up gal were over. Life had offered her a second chance and while she might not stand toe-to-toe with a rocket scientist—except the dim light who'd let Penelope steal the prototype—she sure as hell wasn't stupid.

Rip and she waited with Bob and Rachel, watching as the crowd departed. When the last of the cars pulled away and silence descended, they all just stood there. It was hard to find anything to say. Or even the desire to talk. The last few weeks had been a strain on all of them.

From the outdoors section of her giant pen, Sheila roared.

"She's getting hungry again?" Rip shook his head.

Rayne used her index finger to scratch a teasing course across his wide and hot hand. "Yeah, she's not the only one."

She swore she heard his teeth grinding.

Poor Sheila. She was some pissed off. Had been sulking since she'd been spotted sunbathing near the fairgrounds.

After she'd dragged Manny to his watery death—they'd found him across the lake, intact but very dead—the crooked General Marshall's men, or what was left of them, had returned. With Captain Bob's help they'd managed to capture two of them and tie them up in one of the animal pens. The police, who'd shown up minutes after, had

taken care of the rest. Everything was just a blur after that. Police questioning rooms. All of them beige or tan or sometimes a bold shade of gray.

"I'm glad that reporter's gone," Rachel said as she crossed her arms and kicked the dirt. "She was turning this into a three-ring circus."

Rayne shrugged. "Folks love to hear about beasties being rescued and the likes, and business has picked up quite a bit, no?"

"Yeah, sure," Captain Bob replied. He fished in the pocket of his denim shorts, pressed his wad of gum into the foil wrapper and pocketed it again. "We got schools lined from Kissimmee down to the next three counties. Everyone wants a chance to see that white gator."

Rip wrapped his arm around Rayne's shoulders. Nothing had ever felt so right. Need burned low in her belly. "And I'm sure she enjoys every second of her fame," he said after a kiss under her ear. Holy shit, call the fire brigade. "Especially since it involves a lot of chicken parts being tossed at her over the fence."

Rayne agreed with a nod and a surreptitious pinch to Rip's tight ass. She was getting inside those jeans and soon. "No 'don't feed the animals' sign around our Sheila."

"Keep your energy for your new job," Rip whispered in her ear.

Her new job. Ha. All the media attention to their "exploits" had garnered them the attention of the SWAT training facility, spitting distance from the fairgrounds, who'd offered them both jobs. She couldn't believe she'd be training cops how to deal with female "belligerents". Fancy word for troublemaker. Well, she'd teach them all right and they better keep their hands where she could see them.

At first, Rip didn't want the job. But Rayne had convinced him otherwise. They might both think they wanted to hunker down somewhere and live quiet lives, but the truth was they were both thrill junkies and sooner or later they'd get bored. Helping train the SWAT team would give them an outlet for the physical sides of their nature. They could rough it up on the job and maybe they wouldn't get the itch for action in their private lives. And then maybe she could tell her mom about her real job instead of lying. She'd been lying for so long, she feared for a second not knowing how to handle the truth. But with Rip, it'd turn out all right. In fact, he was Mr. Right, as corny as it sounded.

Plus, she didn't think there was a snowball's chance in hell that she'd ever lose her taste for the between-the-sheets action Rip was so skilled at providing.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but this old boy could use a beer or twelve and a steak about this thick." Bob held up one hand, his thumb and index finger about three inches apart.

"Sounds good to me," Rachel agreed. "Who wants to make a run to the store?"

"We'll do it," Rip offered, and tugged on Rayne's hand. "Come on."

As soon as they were in his truck, he turned to her. "Wanna run off to Mexico, sexy?"

"I'll run anywhere you want."

He smiled and reached across her to pull out a small cloth bag from the glove compartment.

"That isn't...?" She punched him on the shoulder. Damn, hitting a brick wall would be just as hard, if colder. "I thought I had *all* the diamonds when I met with that guy... You kept some?"

His smile notched up to a grin. "We couldn't give away *everything*. Suz and Claire have a bit to take over the carnival, Rachel and Bob got some too for the refuge. Only fair we keep some for both of us."

"Some of?"

"Huh?"

"The diamonds. You said keep 'some'? Where's the rest of our share?"

"There was one left." He pulled a jeweler's box from the pouch and opened it, facing her.

Inside was a ring. A wide platinum band with a domed top, fashioned much the same as a college class ring. Set in the center was an oval diamond. On either side of it were engraved stylized initials. RK.

Her heart beat hard and fast. "RK? Rip Knight."

"Partly. If I'm lucky it'll stand for Rip and Rayne Knight."

Her eyes shot up to his and this time his smile was the most-tender thing she'd ever seen. "I love you, Rayne. And there's nothing that would make me happier than you saying you'd marry me."

She threw her arms around him, for once not fighting the tears that sprang from her eyes. Whoever said there wasn't room in the world for second chances or dreams to come true? "Just try and stop me, stud. From now on I'm stuck to you like Velcro."

Rip laughed and hugged her tighter. God he felt good. Too good. Damn, how long had it been since they'd had a moment alone? Her hand wandered down to his crotch and found a nice hard package waiting.

"Yeah, baby," she whispered, and pulled out of the hug to kiss him.

Within seconds the truck was rocking as, locked in the kiss, they each struggled to get out of their clothes. When a bang came from the front of the truck they jumped apart, both tensed and ready for battle.

Captain Bob stood at the front bumper, his hand still on the hood. "Damn, ya'll. Get a room!"

Rayne howled with laughter as Bob walked away, shaking his head. Rip grabbed her by the legs and pulled her down on the seat. Who needed a room? She had everything she'd ever dreamed of and more. Right here.

About the Author

Nathalie Gray is a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school dropout, dog owner (or dog owned), half couch potato/half intermittent jogger, wannabe renovator and avid reader who watches too much television, sinks too much money in clothes, likes animals more than humans, recycles, wore braces, never downloads copyrighted stuff, was a nerd without the grades, has a belly laugh that turns heads in theaters, can't stand bullying, is mother hawk more than mother hen, votes even if candidates aren't that great and thinks formal education is highly overrated (probably because she has none).

Ciana Stone has been reading since the age of three, and wrote her first story at age five. Since then she has enjoyed writing as a solitary form of entertainment, and has just recently come out of the closet to share her stories with others. She holds several post graduate degrees and has often been referred to as a professional student. Her latest fields of interest are quantum mechanics and Taoism. When she is not writing (or studying) she enjoys painting (canvas, not walls), sculpting, running, hiking and yoga. She lives with her long-time lover in several locations in the United States.

The authors welcome comments from readers. You can find their websites and email addresses on their author bio pages at www.ellorascave.com.

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