

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



TEASE

Nathalie Gray

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Tease

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Acknowledgments

Hello, Reader,

Let me steal a minute of your time. I'll try to be as brief as a French Canadian can be...doubtful, I know. I have someone very special I'd like to thank. His name is Ryan and he rocks. He does. Simple as that. He's a professional performing artist and agreed to share his technical expertise with me, whose only gift is to smack villains and make spaceships explode—in my books, only in my books! He brought to this project discernment, integrity and good measure. Without Ryan's generosity and time, *Tease* wouldn't have been the same. I can't thank him enough! I invite you, dear Reader, to enjoy Ryan's performance in a famous all-male dance revue, his future innovation in the fitness industry, and his present and future appearances on the covers of romance novels. May they be plentiful!

Prologue

Established more than twelve years ago, Gentlemen Inc. is a global male escort agency that caters exclusively to a female clientele, offering a wide range of services at home and worldwide. At Gentlemen Inc., we understand some needs transcend the regular fare offered elsewhere, be it for a chic affair or a show of force.

Wish to make a splash at a corporate or social event?

Need a bodyguard on your travels?

Require someone to show a belligerent ex-flame the door?

All our escorts are multilingual, pleasing to the eye, cognizant in proper etiquette from various regions of the globe and well versed in martial arts or other close-protection protocols.

Give us a call. We at Gentlemen Inc. look forward to meeting your every need.

Chapter One

Archer only acknowledged his cell phone on the fourth beep, when it became clear he wouldn't be able to keep the tasty woman in his arms and would *have* to answer the damn thing. He released her nipple with a wet *pop*, licked his lips then winked.

"Keep that position, my dear, it's good for the abs."

She chuckled and stuck out her tongue – that wicked, wicked organ – at him as she made herself more comfortable on the red exercise mat covering his gym studio. More like a red and black dojo. Except for the six firemen's poles set in two rows of three. He doubted martial arts enthusiasts used *those*.

His dick bouncing like a dowsing rod looking for water and finding a whole ocean, Archer jogged to the stainless steel counter along the wall, grabbed the annoying little thing and mashed the "Show Me the Goddamn Message" button.

Oh. The boss.

A message from Adriano always meant lots of lady fun and lots of money. Two things Archer loved to mix, even if both already filled his life.

"I'm sorry, *ma belle*, I'm gonna have to take this one."

The "belle" in question, his star pupil – for this month anyway – shrugged and stood, her muscled legs twitching as she rubbed her belly with that satisfied grin women who'd had a good ride wore. The subtle half grin, the indolence darkening of their eyes. She gathered her few clothes strewn about the mat and passed him with a sound smack on the ass.

"See you next week, Archer. You owe me a free lesson."

He kissed the air in Raphaëlle's wake, enjoyed her scent for a few seconds and sighed as he accessed his cell to show Adriano's entire message. It'd be worth the intrusion and giving up on his enthusiastic sex partner. One of many. Adriano's messages were always worth much more than what they'd interrupted.

The small screen flickered acid green then displayed the message.

From: Adriano

To: Archer

Subject: Lady Joan Blair

Buongiorno, Archer,

It has come to my attention the Montreal police force is preparing a sting operation to raid a "private house" fronting as a discotheque in your region...

Archer shook his head. Adriano always had a way with words. "Private house." A brothel, dammit! A bordello. Didn't Italians have a word for those? Anyway.

If you accept the task, I will make contact with them, drop your name in the right ear. They intend to use one of their female officers, one named Joan Blair. They already managed to get her an audition on amateur night this Saturday. I have e-mailed you a file with the pertinent information on the Lady. Your task will be to ensure she is accepted at the club, get her inside to complete her mission. You will act as her manager.

I will make the appropriate deposit once you contact me with your decision.

Arrivederci.

AdL

While he read, he gradually lost his hard-on but chuckled in anticipation nonetheless. Things would get *interesting*. Not that being the only pole fitness instructor in town wasn't!

Ever since a guy with an Italian accent had contacted him last year with some crazy—or so he'd initially thought—proposition to become a member of Gentlemen Inc., the man's all-male escort agency, Archer had had a pretty good spike in his yearly income. But it wasn't a good deal only because of the money and mystique of working for a faceless, mysterious man only known to him as Adriano—or AdL—it was also the kind of tasks given to him that made Archer's adrenaline peak. He'd been tasked to escort women, Ladies—every instance of the word "Lady" came with a capital L in Adriano's messages—to social events he never would've known existed or been allowed to attend, despite his own connections and social status. As per Adriano's instructions, the Ladies in question never knew initially he'd been tasked to their "case" and only learned the truth when he gave them the golden card. Weird procedure, sure, but for the kind of fun and money Gentlemen Inc. generated, Archer would play along. Hell, for his last task about a month ago, Adriano had paid him ten thousand dollars just to show up at a wedding and pretend to be a certain woman's boyfriend. The ex, some arrogant hotshot lawyer, had nearly suffered an attack of apoplexy when he'd seen the two of them together. If at first she'd been stunned, upon seeing her ex's reaction, the Lady had played along with gusto. She'd also been very, very *grateful* afterward. So had Archer.

He had no idea why Adriano acted as a Don Juan, Robin Hood and Sherlock Holmes all rolled into one wacky affair. He must be *loaded*. All he knew was that Adriano was Italian, from the old country too, and sent his messages from Internet cafés all over Europe. His money wires came from Geneva, Switzerland, so untraceable. Archer's best friend, a tech-savvy forensic accountant, hadn't been able to pinpoint the elusive, rich, probably crackpot of a boss despite some pretty thorough research. It was still a sore spot with her. For when his officially recognized one-fifty-four IQ and all-round genius friend Mel set her scalpel-sharp mind on something, she never let go. She

still periodically asked him if he'd received any news from Adriano so she could start searching again. He'd make sure to send Mel an e-mail about this latest task. Hell, helping a cop infiltrate a private club. That'd be a riot! He'd make Mel's day.

Archer snorted a laugh as he thumbed the buttons in reply. His message to Adriano was characteristically short.

To: Adriano

From: Archer

Subject: Re: Lady Joan Blair

Same account number as usual.

* * * * *

"Goddammit," Joan muttered as she tried to keep the pyramid of cookie bags from dissolving into an episode of public embarrassment. Another.

Despite valiant grab-and-put-backs and some imaginative scooping using her elbow—both hands were already busy with her own stuff spilling out of her basket—Joan neatly destroyed another grocery store end-of-aisle pyramid. Her greatest skill. That and putting her size nine-and-a-half feet in her mouth. Sometimes both at once.

"It's okay, I'll get that," said a woman too old to work as a store stocker. Divorcée on her second career? Owner covering for a sick employee? Joan enjoyed trying to figure people out.

"Sorry," Joan replied through an apologetic grin. "The more I try to be careful, the quicker I knock these down." She pointed with her chin at the Mount Everest of chicken sandwich sauce cans across the aisle. The other woman smiled tightly.

Joan felt like comforting the woman and telling her she had no intention of getting anywhere near the fragile-looking building of canned goods. She offered a quick "Thanks" instead and hightailed it out of the aisle before she knocked something else over. At least it hadn't been glass jars.

At the cashier, a pair of good-looking dads or coaches in hockey jerseys exchanged amused looks as she deposited her basket on the conveyor belt and tried to disentangle the celery from the folding handles. Damn things.

Joan was still picking torn leaves out of the handle hinges when it was her turn to pay. She would've helped bag her things but both men looked very keen to do it for her so she let them. They did a better job than she would have anyway. Bread never looked the same when she was the one bagging. After depositing a buck in their decorated can, she smiled at them—oh, they were so laughing at her—and exited the store with the tight walk of someone who knows more than one pair of eyes is staring at them.

You're used to it by now, Murphy, it's nothing new. Pretend no one is watching. Or just keep telling yourself "Cute and cuddly, boys, cute and cuddly" like those mafiosi Madagascar penguins.

Her friends back at university had given her the nickname “Murphy” and it’d stuck, even now at thirty-one. It’d stuck because it still applied. If something could go wrong and Joan was near, it did. Nowadays, her colleagues called her either Murphy or Calamity Joan. She preferred the latter. At least it was a girl name. Wasn’t Murphy a guy? Um.

Of course the cell phone started playing the free download version of Pink’s latest track in all its mono glory. Joan cringed as she dropped one of her bags to retrieve the phone from her belt. She should splurge and get herself some ringtones instead. Pink just wasn’t the same through an Atari 2600 *Space Invaders* sound system.

“Blair.”

“We got it, Murphy,” Chantal said, her French Canadian accent twisting the moniker into something exotic and fruity. Mer-fay. “They went for it. Budget and all.”

After her partner’s announcement, Joan felt as though her heart had stopped for a full three seconds.

“They did?”

Damn, don’t make it sound as if it’s so surprising. Of course they went for it. Her plan made sense. Risky – outrageously risky in fact. And expensive too. But it made sense and it would work. It had to.

“They even found you a trainer. Some connection of a connection of the lieutenant’s. Long story. You start tonight. Want the address?”

“Whoa, whoa. What do you mean ‘I start tonight’? What trainer? Who’s my trainer anyway?”

Her partner of four years sighed in the phone. She must have been rolling her eyes again. She did that a lot.

“You think you can just knock on the club’s door, smile and say ‘*Allo*, let me in so I can slap some tie-wraps around your wrists, you villain?’ Come on, get a pen, I’ll give you the address. I hope he’s cute.”

“My trainer will be a *he*?”

Chantal’s laugh sounded ominous and way too delighted.

“I’ll be learning to shake my ass with a *guy*? What’s that word you say all the time again?”

“*Crisse*,” Chantal replied. Phonetically speaking, Joan logged it as “krreess”.

“Yeah, him and his twelve buddies too,” Joan groaned.

“Your ass is much nicer than mine and it was *your* plan, genius.”

“But I thought I’d be learning with a girl, not a guy. Ugh.”

“I feel your pain. Now I’ll give you the address so I can get ready for a hot date with my men. We’re going out for pizza then renting a movie. It’s a wild, wild night at the St-Pierres’, *bébé!* Try not to break a leg, okay? I don’t think your plan would work if I have to learn to be a stripper.”

Joan tried to imagine her short-fused, lanky, tomboy partner in a stripper outfit and came up blank. Her brain refused to entertain the notion. Joan would probably have to pour bleach into her eye sockets if Chantal ever decided to take her clothes off in public. Chantal St-Pierre was funny, an excellent cop with twelve years experience, and one smart cookie but cute she was not.

She noted the name George B. Archer and address on the back of a recipe card she'd torn from the pad near the vegetables section—of course she'd sent the rack tumbling down in a shower of little paper slips. The trainer lived in a nice neighborhood. Too nice for her cop's salary. *George*. Probably some perverted old fart in a basement plastered with posters of naked chicks with shiny fake boobs. That'd just be too much. Maybe her plan wasn't so hot.

I can do this, she said to herself as she picked up her bags and rushed to her old and beloved 1991 BMW. Her silver bullet.

Nice parking job, woman. Good thing she didn't own an SUV.

She stuffed the bags pell-mell into the trunk, slammed it shut too hard in her excitement then slid behind the wheel.

"I can do this," she repeated out loud, this time for extra moral support.

Her grandiose plan was setting up the sting op inside infamous prostitution kingpin and international human trafficker Claude Laramée's private club The Quicksilver. The bosses had gone for it. Of course they would. It made sense. *Desperation* had undoubtedly played a large part as well.

Laramée may have been one oily fish, but he had a weakness—women. After months of trying at his front door, so to speak, they'd discovered they could sneak in by a window. When established methods had failed, the Morality squad had had to come up with inventive ways to attempt an arrest on that particular crook. Half of her couldn't believe what she was about to do. And they treaded on thin ice too, with both INTERPOL and the federal government breathing down their necks. Should the Montreal police fail...it'd not only be her face in the unforgiving spotlight but her bosses' as well. Try explaining the monstrous cost of their little stunt to the Receiver General if they didn't get Laramée. Ouch.

Even if Joan had inherited none of her mother's grace, she'd at least received the good looks and her dad's height, so yes, she *was* fit enough to fake the part of an exotic dancer, at least for a night, and infiltrate Laramée's club, make a visual tag then wait for reinforcements. Her bosses had joked about her not being able to wear a wire for the mission unless it was taped to her thong. Har har. Chantal had laughed so hard she'd snorted pop all over the conference table.

But starting tonight? Dammit. Or as Chantal so aptly put it, *crisse*.

She drove home, took a shower, remembered to put the groceries into the fridge only when she was getting behind the wheel again to meet her "trainer". She'd decided to wear a gym suit. She probably wouldn't take anything off on the first lesson but would need to make a few moves, if only to stretch. Black yoga-style stretch pants, a hot

pink cami that stated *No Pain No Gain* in silver glitter across her boobs, seamless black thong—she suspected her ass would be weighed and measured and judged tonight. Panty lines just wouldn't do. Joan went for sports sandals since she wouldn't need running shoes to take off her clothes. Ha!

The idea of taking most of her clothes off at Laramée's club, in front of strangers and under subdued lighting, didn't affect her all that much. She'd never been shy. What scared her was she'd have to make a decent enough impression of a *dancer* to get accepted at the club's amateur night in the first place. And coordination wasn't exactly her strength. But she wanted this mission, she needed it actually, to not only boost her own self-worth and to convince the Powers That Be she could do undercover work but also to stop this callous pig.

Joan slowed when she neared her destination. *Westmount, man, whoa*. She couldn't even afford the garbage cans from this neighborhood. Well, it was officially a city since the merger. Neighborhood, city. Whatever. A native of Vancouver, Joan had never understood Montrealers' love-hate relationship with Westmount, part of its own collective. Chantal had once explained how it used to be an enclave of wealthy Anglophones among the poorer, French-speaking population. Joan still didn't get it.

She slowed then stopped in front of a stone house with twin half turrets and vines clinging to the gray façade and around the double garage doors. Her heart in her throat, she parked the car in the empty driveway, walked up to the front door but noticed a tiny brass plaque that read *Fitness Studio* with an elegantly carved arrow pointing left. So she backtracked, walked around the garage and spotted a gleaming wooden door partly hidden behind a massive rhododendron bush. Another plaque and a tiny, round doorbell. Very chic. Not at all "perv in a basement" style.

She pressed it, took a step back then crossed her hands behind her, rolling from the balls of her feet to her heels. After the standard ten-second wait, she was about to ring again when the door opened.

Whoa.

Was that a choir of angelic voices she heard in the bushes behind her? It must've been. That or she'd died and gone straight to heaven and god was one hot dude! Or maybe she was in hell and it was the devil she was looking at. God wouldn't look so...bad. Bad in a good sense. In a *great* sense. Bad as in *baaaaaaad*.

Hubba-hubba.

For there stood *GQ Magazine's* Mister Centerfold. Or so he could be if *GQ* had an imprint reserved for Bad Boys with both capital Bs. Six feet something of dark-haired—tousled just so—pale-eyed, lean-muscled badass with a two-day-old five o'clock shadow and black martial arts-like drawstring pants stood in the doorway looking at her. He was doing something with his mouth, as one would flicking a mint side to side, but there wasn't anything there other than one luscious set of lips that glistened like candy. He must have stepped right out of the shower and still smelled of soap. The best scent on a man. Just clean soap. His pale gaze slid down to her sandals.

“Mr. George B. Archer?”

A dark eyebrow arched while he extended his hand. “You must be Constable Blair.”

Her brain screamed, *Shake the damned hand, you fool*, but she couldn’t move anything except her eyeballs, which were plenty busy for the numb rest of her. But he was *gorgeous*. And he was *baaaad*. And *gorgeous*. So, so *gor*—

“That’s me,” she quipped, instantly wishing she had something against which to hit her forehead. “*That’s me.*” *Yeah, Murphy, rich, very rich.*

Did he eat his women out? was the first question that came to her back-flipping brain.

Of course he does! Look at that mouth, Murphy!

Was he the kind of lover women talked about in restrooms and hair salons? The kind a woman would keep to herself and become a hissy-throwing, snoop-through-the-e-mails kind of bitch just to keep him to herself? Would he mind if Joan tackled him down to the floor and speared herself over him?

Just shake the damn hand, wouldya?

The things she had to do for her job!

Chapter Two

Constable Blair continued staring at him while he waited there like an ass with his hand extended toward her. Even if he thought she wasn't making a very good first impression—she was supposed to act the part of a performer, staring around, looking like a dead fish wouldn't do—Archer couldn't help the jolt when a ping of sexual awareness registered on his Babe Radar. From the pic in Adriano's file, Archer had expected a looker but not this. She reminded him of that chick in the TV show *3rd Rock from the Sun* but in a darker shade of blonde. Man, she was hot!

He was used to women—not a single male student so far—expecting a female trainer and always enjoyed the look of shock or awkwardness or as right now with Constable Blair's less subtle expression of "Whew, man, he's hawt". Not that Archer didn't appreciate a woman's admiration. Unless she'd been expecting something else entirely. What kind of file had the police built on him? he wondered. No picture obviously. Too bad, he made excellent pictures. Unless she'd had a talk with the Morality, Alcohol and Narcotics Squad and they'd warned her against "men like him" who trained dancers. Maybe they'd told her he was a perv who made his living watching women shake their asses.

"You expected someone else?" he said more than asked.

Constable Blair blinked twice rapidly, nodded. Strands of hair spilled over her shoulder. The urge to tuck them back for her tickled his fingers.

Maybe I should, see what she'd do.

"You expected what exactly? A fat perv living in a dump?"

She laughed. Hard. A whole-body laugh, contagious if unladylike. "Not necessarily fat."

It was Archer's turn to grin. "Good one."

Constable Blair seemed to snap out of whatever mental trip she'd been engaging and grabbed his hand as if she meant to break it, shook then dropped it.

"Thanks for doing this on such short notice."

He looked at his hand, felt as if he ought to count his fingers or check the knuckles. She had some grip!

"Oh, don't mention it. They're paying me. Not well, but they're paying me. Come in, Constable Blair." He stepped sideways into the doorway to let her pass but not enough that he wouldn't touch her in passing. He'd always been an opportunistic prick.

"Call me Joan."

"That sounds like an order, Joan."

Instantly his dirty mind flashed a vision of her in a pretend-cop latex suit, zipped down, wielding a whip while she slapped pink fuzzy handcuffs on him because he'd be the bad guy of course. He loved to get a good spanking. He loved giving them even more!

Cops don't have whips.

So what?

"I didn't mean it that way. It's just...well, just call me Joan."

Ah, so she's a blusher? I love blushers! Good to know.

The heat of her arm warmed his when she stepped into the waiting room, grinned and turned to wait for him.

"So," he started, closed the door. "I'm to train you for some undercover work from what I understood. You need to nail that audition for amateur night this weekend, get inside The Quicksilver, that's it?"

The sparkling brown eyes turned serious all at once, so fast in fact, he started to wonder which of the two expressions had been real and which had been for his benefit.

"Yeah, before the bad guy goes back to Europe and we have to wait another two months to catch him in his club."

"What bad guy?"

Adriano had mentioned The Quicksilver—a newish, ultra-expensive club with ties to organized crime—but not who the police were after. Not that Archer cared. He'd get thirty thousand undeclared dollars from Adriano to play escort to "Lady Joan" while the police would shell out another couple of official grand to train her. Although just looking at her butt in those yoga pants would be payment enough. If he were very lucky, he might even get *inside* said pants. As a matter of fact, he'd endeavor to do just that as soon as he could.

Tonight would be perfect. Nothing on TV anyway.

"Sorry, Mr. Archer. I can't tell you that." She smiled as if to smooth the curt words.

"It's just Archer. Not mister and *don't* call me by my first name."

With a big grin, she nodded. "Sure. Just Archer. When do we start?"

"Right now. It's only seven-thirty. I have the studio set up and ready."

"Good. Show me some moves then."

She said this laughing but he could tell she worked hard not to let her nerves get the better of her. Someone with self-discipline then. Good, they always made the best performers.

She chuckled when they emerged into the studio itself, all black mostly soundproof walls except for the mural mirror, laminate floors around the edges and red exercise mat taking the entire floor in the middle. But he could tell the firemen's poles caught her attention. She turned back toward him, seemed to try to find something to say, shrugged then cracked her knuckles.

"It looks like a dojo," she remarked with a lopsided smile that made him want to slap her butt and nuzzle her neck. Whew, where had the oxygen gone? "But black and red."

Archer took a deep breath. "Ah, you've been in a dojo before? Which discipline?"

"No, but I've been in movie theaters before. They always look like that in movies, the dojos. Well..." She cleared her throat. "Except for the poles..." Quick megawatt smile. "Do you have a belt in something?"

A belt in something? No decorum at all, that one.

"Judo. Regional champion of ninety-one and two. I'm surprised you're not a martial arts person, being a cop and all."

She shrugged, which raised her breasts and his blood pressure. She looked behind him at the poles. "So *that's* where they grow firemen's poles."

He barked a quick laugh that caught him off guard. Except for Mel, who'd seen his best and worst sides, cleaned his after-party vomit once or twice back in his stupid years, he usually never let people see him this way, laughing unguardedly, preferring to let them wonder, keeping the sharp Bad Boy façade on so they wouldn't see the chewy inside. "Chewy inside", Mel's words, not his. She had a way with words, that gal. His female alpha geek friend.

"Yeah, that's where we grow them," he replied, smiling still.

Can I kiss you? Your lips look so good.

Instead of kissing her mouths—he loved kissing women's mouths, both of them—he marched to the CD player set on the stainless steel counter. "I chose some music for you. A few older tracks, a couple of recent ones. Just tell me which ones move you. I've come up with a choreography that's not too hard for a beginner but one that'll get you a spot at The Quicksilver. And believe me, you *will* get a spot at that club by the time I'm done with you."

Why did he need to strut his stuff this way? He never cared what people thought. When she didn't reply, he threw a quick glance into the mirror.

She was checking him out! And not even discreetly!

He could see her in the mirror smirking as she looked him up and down, settling in the middle and his extra-fine butt. Who cared about humility? Women had always enjoyed his butt.

Good genes, I guess.

He stared hard at her in the mirror, sending the message loud and clear. *Don't look if you don't mean it.* A blush rose to her cheeks but she didn't look away. Well, what do you know! Maybe she *did* mean it.

Definitely tonight. Good. It'll diffuse the tension.

"Do you like what you see?"

"What woman wouldn't?"

“Are you always so honest?”

“Always. I’m a cop.”

Archer couldn’t help the snort of laughter. “Yeah, okay.” Sobering, he lowered his chin, let his eyes do the talking. He knew women loved that look. “How *flexible* are you?”

She blushed again—and he was starting to suspect she didn’t blush out of shyness but excitement and, boy, did that ever boost his over-inflated male ego—when he hooked his index finger at her so she’d come take a look at the music selection.

“I’m flexible enough to make it fun.”

Archer’s dick twitched. It honest to god did! “Make *what* fun?”

Joan smiled widely as she approached, leaned an elbow on the counter. “Sex.”

“But that’s not why you’re here, is it?”

“Nope. Just here to learn how to use these things.” She pointed at the poles with her chin.

“*Things*”? And *cheeky* too.

Archer drew near her, close enough to let her feel the heat of his breath. “You think this will be easy?”

Can you hear the bear trap creaking open, Joan?

For some reason he couldn’t explain, he didn’t appreciate how she viewed his profession as easy or fluffy, irrationally wanting Joan Blair to realize and accept the effort and discipline required for his line of work. He was a fitness instructor, dammit, and it was hard! Try convincing people to hang upside down by a hand, once!

Archer realized his smile wasn’t terribly nice but couldn’t help it. Most people thought pole fitness was for strippers only, as if that made it easy or insignificant. He’d thought that too, before he set up shop. Well, yes, it’d been for dancers originally, but it no longer was and anyway, it was the hardest workout he’d ever done, even after years of judo and a regular gym regimen. He’d first thought of opening his own dojo, as many black belts did—he’d *never* work for someone else—but had quickly realized the big bucks were with women. *They* went to gyms the most assiduously, *they* shelled out the dollars in their pursuit of fitness and a toned body. So after a few hours of Internet investigating, he’d discovered the new craze. Pole fitness. Overhead costs had been laughable, part of his own house, a handful of poles, a mat, some mirrors. Women didn’t need nor want thousands of machines and loose weights. They knew what they wanted. To look good and have fun doing it. He provided that. And more...

Despite the fact he was crowding her, Joan didn’t seem intimidated and snorted another laugh. “The taking most of my clothes off part will be hard, but that,” she jerked her chin at the poles again. “How hard can it be? You hold on and twirl a few times.”

I guess you didn’t hear the bear trap then.

He leaned over. This time he saw a reaction when her pupils dilated. She looked up to meet his gaze. He was so close, he could've kissed her.

All in good time.

"Can you support your body weight with one hand?"

"T-To...um, to catch a bad guy?" she replied, probably going for offhand but sounding breathless instead. Her eyes narrowed, her lips thinned. Oh, she had guts, that one. "I'll support my own body weight *and* yours. I'm in shape, I'll manage."

Cheeky, gutsy *and* an overachiever.

I'm so gonna make you sweat, baby.

"I can't wait," he said, putting his hand on the counter, his thumb touching her elbow. He saw goose bumps appear where their skin met. "I can't wait to *train* you." He gave her his most lopsided smile. The one that had women fanning themselves or fisting his hair so he'd eat them more deeply. Activity he'd taken to Olympic-sport caliber.

A blonde eyebrow arched. "*Train* me?"

Oh, I have your attention now, do I?

"*Train* you."

"I'm not a dog."

Archer nearly puffed in laughter when a vision of them doing it doggy style flashed in his mind. *Well, they say guys think about it several times an hour. She's been here at least ten minutes.*

"No, but you're here to be *trained*, aren't you?" He let his gaze settle on her mouth. He couldn't resist it. He licked his.

Not only her eyes but her nostrils flared this time.

Before she could reply, and oh she looked as if she had good ones lined up from here to Vancouver, Archer straightened and walked away.

The proverb "quit while ahead" had been written by a guy who'd scored a good point against a cute and witty chick. He was sure of it.

"Take your sandals off. We'll stretch first then we'll start with the poles."

Fuck the music. He wanted to see her sweat at the poles, the cocky little shit.

She's not little. At least five-seven.

Cocky little shit just the same.

It quickly became apparent Joan Blair *was* flexible and *was* in good shape as she sat on the mat and grabbed her feet, lay on her legs then did a sort of leg-scissor thing to stretch the back of her thighs. Archer found he could barely concentrate on his own legs—he was too busy looking at hers. She had nice muscle tone under those yoga pants. Which reminded him...

“Next lesson, you’ll have to wear hot pants and maybe a swimsuit top. Or a bikini if you have it. You have to get used to some skin showing.” *Here, Miss I Can Do Anything, try that on for size.*

Archer wanted to pat himself on the shoulder when she snapped her gaze at him, opened her mouth to say something then nodded. He could watch her blush all day long.

Does she blush when she fucks with the lights on? It must be the cutest thing.

Archer rolled his ankles, shook out his hands and cupped his hips. “Okay. Let’s see. First, you’ll have to respect gravity. She’s relentless, she’s waiting for you to screw up and sometimes she’s a bitch. But she *always* has the last word, much like a woman in an argument. So let me show you a few basic holds. Like this one.”

While Joan’s eyes alternately flared and narrowed to slits, he grabbed the pole next to him with a hand at shoulder height and the other at hip level. Tucking his elbow in his side, he slowly, by small increments to show the perfect control he’d gained over the years of practice, rose until he hung perpendicular to the pole. As he rose higher, his legs at full extension, feet together and pointed, Joan’s face sagged, her mouth opened.

“I need to learn how to do *that*?”

Would a heartfelt “MWA HA HAA” be inappropriate right now?

“Yes,” he said without panting.

After a few seconds, he lowered his feet, pivoted until they faced the pole, parted his legs and “rode” it, each foot sliding on either side until his crotch touched the metal tube. He kept himself suspended thus for a few seconds. “And that one too.”

He was lying. Joan wouldn’t have to learn either of these but he wanted to *show* her, as simple as that. Men and their ego. His muscles burned with the strain but he’d walk around in acid-washed jeans before he let it show.

Lest he start to breathe hard and shake, he let his feet touch, straightened and smiled his big winning one. Those he reserved for his finishing move, right before his opponent at judo spars would hit the mat in a one-two, teeth-rattling thud.

“Your turn.”

Asshole.

Joan smiled despite the very real urge to kick his tight butt and grabbed the closest pole as he’d done, one hand near the shoulder, the other at hip level. With a grunt, she hopped so her feet would leave the mat but they came back right quick. Dammit! So she bounced up again, really put her all into this one and pulled with her upper arm. Shaking and groaning, she managed to keep her feet—oh what?—a foot off the floor.

A sad, sad display, Murphy.

Then something very embarrassing occurred. Her bottom hand, sweaty and growing numb, slipped on the pole. With a curse and a thud that reverberated along the metal tube, she twisted forward, hit the pole with her shoulder.

“*Crisse!*”

Chantal would’ve been proud of that one, it came out nice and hissy.

A smirk firmly planted on his delicious lips, Archer crossed his arms. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Joan rubbed her hands on her pants, tried the hold again and hopped a few times to get her legs straight.

“I didn’t know you spoke French.”

“I don’t,” she grunted through her teeth.

Pride. It was all about pride. To show she *was* in shape, dammit, she twisted as he’d done, “rode” the pole with much less grace but still, and was smiling when her bottom hand slipped again.

Uh-oh.

This time, she snapped forward hard, hanging with only her top hand, hit with her pubic bone—and if it didn’t just feel exactly like hitting her brother’s bicycle horizontal bar—and slid to the floor in a snarling heap.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch.”

She received a sympathetic groan from her instructor. He knelt by her side, patted her shoulder. “That hurts. Boys *and* girls.”

She stared guns at him, only drawing another smirk, and slowly knelt up on one leg. Her pussy throbbed and it wasn’t because of him. Well, it *had* been pulsating before since the guy was a sculpted work of art, especially watching him strain to keep the hold, but it pounded now.

Owie, shit.

He gave her his hand to help her up. She took it only because a small part of her really, really wanted to touch him again. A zap of adrenaline shot up her arm when she closed her hand over his—it was long and it was wickedly warm—and let him hoist her to her feet. She bent in half, took a few long breaths. She desperately wanted to rub her crotch but forced herself not to in front of him. There was a long hot bath in her future tonight.

“It’s not as easy as it looks,” Archer offered as he crouched by her side so he could look up into her eyes. His chiseled arm twitched when he used the pole for balance. “Trust me, that’s a small bump compared to the really nasty injuries you can get on these things. I ripped muscle and tendon in a shoulder last year. Had to have surgery.” He showed her a spot near his armpit. Joan could’ve stared at the fine, fine pec well past all bounds of propriety. A tiny pink scar glistened on his otherwise flawless skin.

And in that interlude of sublime visual adoration, all her brain could come up with was...

He totally waxes his chest.

“You have to show these things some respect.”

Joan nodded, gradually feeling like an ass for acting in such a macho way. “Yeah, I can see that. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

“Good. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

He smiled again, this time no attitude shone through and if that grin just didn’t make her heart pump twice as fast. His pale eyes narrowed when he smiled for real, as opposed to The Smirk, which only pulled his decadent lips sideways. Actually, she’d never seen eyes such as his and suspected for a second the color wasn’t natural, only funky lenses, but no, it was all his, that icy blue, and reminded her of the bottom of icebergs, the part just underneath the water. Well, according to *National Geographic’s* pictures anyway.

“We’ll start again, okay?” he said, standing.

She smiled, relieved he wouldn’t press the issue of her lesson well learned. “Sounds good to me.”

He crossed his arms, checked her out from head to toe. “We can’t go electronica because of your age—”

“My age?”

“You’re what, thirty, thirty-two? It’s not old but for what you want to do, for the kind of people who’ll run the audition, believe me, they’ll think you’re *ancient*. As dumb as it is. So we have to go with something a bit more mature for music. A nice rock song or some classic pop with good bass, right?”

Ancient. Mfft!

“I guess. Rock is what I prefer anyway.”

He nodded, which made a ribbon of black hair come down over his eye. It still looked damp in places. *Ohh please let me tuck it back. Or better yet, let me make it all messy.* A two-fisted comb! She loved guys with longish hair. It made one hell of a handle when they ate her out!

“Then go choose a piece and I’ll get us something to drink.”

She watched his glorious butt as he disappeared through the door leading to the waiting room. The *whoosh whoosh* of his black “karate” pants made her skin pebble. With a sigh, she walked *slowly*—her pubic bone hurt for real—to the CD player, sifted through the pile of cases there.

Then it happened.

Nooooooo, not here!

As she pulled one she enjoyed, her elbow accidentally knocked the expensive-looking CD player and in her haste to keep it from sliding off the stainless steel counter, she dropped the CD case, which knocked the pile. Despite some valiant juggling, she sent a few falling to the hard, unforgiving, laminate floor where they broke in the usual place—one of the hinges. Always one of the hinges. The noise made her cringe and desperately try to keep the rest from following, and in so doing, nudged the player

again and this time wasn't quick enough to catch it. As if in slow motion, it skidded over the smooth surface...

"Damn!"

Flinching, Joan was still clutching at CD cases, all pell-mell, when a pair of long hands deftly immobilized the player before it fell off, brought it back on the counter.

When she turned to Archer, she had time to see the mix of dismay and amusement in his expression before he put back on the smirking mask, pulled from her fingers the cases that seemed closest to destruction and set them on the counter. He also picked up the few she'd sent to the floor.

"So sorry. I'll buy them back for you. The broken ones, I mean."

"It's okay. It's just the cases. The CDs are fine."

Joan took a long breath. *Attagirl, Murphy.*

"You must be barred for life at domino championships," he remarked without meeting her gaze.

Har har.

Good thing he wasn't looking or he would've seen the hurt his words caused. Joan knew how expressive she was, mostly unable to keep her emotions from showing, even if sometimes she'd prefer keeping a bit of mystery around her. It'd always been her thing, make people laugh, act the fool, knock things over. For the first time, being a big goof wasn't all that funny. Not with him. Not when she was trying hard to look feminine and poised and...and...

And what?

Sexy, woman. You want to look sexy for that damn job.

For the job or for him?

Shit. Did that make her a pathetic, needy, weak sissy with no spine if she wanted Apollo to think her sexy?

"Look," she said as she aligned CDs on the counter. "That sting *has* to work, okay?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Because you're a woman and you need to prove yourself to your sexist boss?"

"My boss is a woman. No, I need, *we* need, to nail him because the guy we're after brings underage girls into the country to be prostitutes. Desperate kids from the old Eastern Bloc countries, some of them barely twelve. So we *have* to get him. That means I *have* to get inside The Quicksilver."

Archer gave her one of the water bottles he'd put on the counter before rescuing his CD player. "You will."

"Damn right."

A wicked half smile pulled his lips sideways. Oh? She hadn't seen that one yet and it gave her goose bumps. She knew her nipples must have shown through the *No Pain No Gain* cami. Did she care right now? Not a bit. After the initial flash of anger at

Laramée's odious enterprise, what remained was very much a nice healthy flush of sexual tension.

Archer must have felt the change too for he froze, his hand still on the cap of the bottle he'd given her while she hugged the bottom part. Their thumbs touched. Joan shivered.

She wanted to lick her bottom lip because it itched like hell but she didn't want to add to the tension coiling between them. He didn't seem to share any of her qualms for he tucked his bottom lip between his teeth—nice teeth too—and cocked his head to one side. That lock of hair fell over his eyebrow again.

Uh-oh.

When he released his lip, she watched the blood fill it back in and experienced one splendid series of tiny pulsations in her pussy, which tightened painfully with every beat of her frenetic heart. Even if a big neon sign flashed *TROUBLE* in bright red above his head, Joan still couldn't help the attraction. He was a beautiful man. A very, very—

"We have just four days." His voice was hoarse, deeper.

"Yeah, just four."

"That's not much."

"Just a quick taste."

"It's a tease really."

Joan felt her face lifting up toward his. He didn't move away. He should move away because it sure as taxes wouldn't come from her! Joan groaned inwardly. She'd just met the guy an hour ago.

How inappropriate.

How wicked.

Only easy women did that.

Or very lucky ones.

Shit.

Yum.

As if Archer shared whatever fever had just gripped her, his eyes narrowed, that wicked, wicked smirk rose to his lips. Oh, he knew exactly what he was doing. The tease.

"I love that stuff on your lips," he murmured. He did that thing with his mouth, played with the phantom mint. "Lip gloss?"

"Just...just lip balm."

A black eyebrow twitched. "Can I be brutally honest?"

"Sure."

"You have the most gorgeous lips I've ever seen. And I have a pretty damn good pool of samples to compare them." His breath warmed her cheeks and also destroyed all her mental faculties, one neuron at a time.

"Wow, you're just the humblest guy in the world, aren't you?"

"What? You thought I was a virgin?"

The thought of this bad boy being a virgin was so ludicrous, so far-fetched, Joan shook her head. "Ehh...no."

He reached for her arm, let his index finger trail down the length of it.

Whew! She'd be able to cut through glass with her nipples.

"I saw you looking at my butt. I think I forgot. Did you like what you saw?"

What an ass! With a nice ass!

"Very much so. But you already knew that. Do you like looking at mine?"

"Very much so. But you already knew that."

Luckily for her self-esteem, Archer smiled wide, a bit too triumphantly for her tastes, before releasing the bottle of water he still held in his hand. Of course by that time, her hold on it had become tenuous at best so it dropped and landed right on top of her foot.

"Ow!"

Lightning-quick, he bent, picked it up. "If you lose your grip this way on the pole, you're in for a nasty fall." He then marched back to "his" pole. "Your choreography will last three minutes and some change. It's a lot to remember. We should start now."

"Yeah, I guess we should."

Yeah, let's start now before I chew your clothes off, ride you hard right where you stand and spend the rest of the evening kissing every inch of you.

Where had the smooth ladies' man gone?

The same way his neurons had. He'd almost kissed her. And Joan hadn't looked about to push him away either. He'd only meant to tease her, what he did best. Only he'd ended up teasing himself and almost succumbing. Sure, he had sex with his students. All the time in fact. Why not? They were mature women, adults all of them. But he'd just met Joan.

That never stopped you before. Plus, she's hot and she wants you back. So where's the fucking problem?

It was different this time. *She* was different. She was a cop with an important mission to accomplish, a bad guy to catch. That pig had to be stopped and Archer would make sure he kept the image of a twelve-year-old prostitute firmly in mind next time he felt like getting a taste of this bombshell here.

Keep telling yourself you care about the bad guy getting caught.

Honestly, in the bottom of his cynical, privileged and socially connected heart, he didn't really care all that much. Bad guys were like mushrooms, cut one down and three will take his place. So no, it wasn't about the guy. Truth be told, it wasn't about saving a couple of kids either.

Wow, I am a charming man, aren't I?

Sure, as anybody else, he thought lying to and using teenagers as prostitutes should carry some form of highly painful punishment followed by prison. Or vice versa. He wasn't a pig. But he was a bit, let's say, self-centered. His needs always came first. Except in bed where he'd discovered that if he fulfilled his lady friend's needs first, his own would be met and *then* some. Altruism had never ranked high with him. And right now, even the revolting notion of underage sex slaves didn't alleviate the desire clawing at his every nerve ending. Each muscle screamed for the kind of workout he knew Joan would give. Ten fingers clamored to touch her. Hell, toes too! His dick was ready to explode. Good thing he wore boxer briefs underneath the exercise pants otherwise he'd look quite the ass. She probably suspected he was hard anyway.

Argh.

He shook himself out of his downward spiral, plastered on the usual smirk that had women fanning themselves and threw a slanted glance at Joan. "I'll show it to you, the whole thing, just to give you an idea. Then we'll do it together, slowly, hold by hold, move by move."

She nodded, approached her pole and leaned against it. A blush still darkened her cheeks. Man, she was *hot!*

Archer gritted his teeth, grabbed the pole two-handed and, counting the strokes in his head, executed the whole routine he'd prepared for her. It was simple but sharp and would show her nice long legs, with only one difficult move—a reverse knee spin, one leg extended, that'd blow them all away if she did it right.

Joan followed him with her eyes getting bigger and bigger. And boy did that make his day! Archer suspected that if he tried to walk out the door right now, his head would get stuck.

He landed on one foot, let himself slide down to the floor, jerked back to his feet "hiding" behind the pole, his hands around it down low in one hell of a phallic symbol, and by her gasp, he knew he'd given her a good jolt.

"That's my routine? All of that?" Joan asked, her voice tremulous and doing wonders to his ego. He was used to that sort of reaction and shouldn't feel so damn macho-man right now. But he did and that was that.

"Yeah," he said, panting a bit. "But because you're a woman, you'll have to point your feet until you get cramps and stick your butt up as high as it'll go."

"Yay for me."

"Yay for me too."

Joan chuckled, avoided his gaze as she wrapped a hand around her pole. He tried not to imagine her hand around another pole, this one pink and hot, hot, hot.

We have to at least get through the routine a couple of times. Then we'll get a treat for our hard work.

Oh shit! Condoms. He'd have to find an excuse to go get some from the house. He did *not* want to have to deal with another unwanted pregnancy. Not unwanted by him though.

His ex-flame's argument came slicing back in. "*It's my body. My decision.*"

Sure it'd been, and he'd respected it, even accompanied her to the clinic. It'd still broken his heart though.

So condoms. We need some condoms.

Maybe he should keep them inside the studio for impromptu trysts with hot lady cops? Unless she was on the Pill.

"Are you okay?"

Archer snapped back to the here and now. "Huh?"

"You look cranky all of a sudden," Joan replied with a tentative smile. The woman smiled all the time. "Everything all right?"

"Sure," he replied a bit too quickly to evade another arched eyebrow and inquisitive look. Well, she *was* a cop, so undoubtedly trained to recognize certain signs. Such as when a guy was lying through his teeth.

"Okay, together now. Face the mirror," Archer said, turning his back to her so he could face her in the mirror. Keep his distance that way. Add a layer of detachment. "Stand behind the pole."

Joan did as he instructed.

"Now look at yourself as if you meant to say 'Want some o' that? Nuh-uh, can't have it'. See? Like this."

Sweat glistened over his chest and arms when he stood behind his pole and looked into the mirror. But it wasn't at his reflection he stared, it was at *hers*. Only he wasn't saying "Want some o' that? Can't have it". It was more "Oooh baby, if you only knew what I have for you".

You're a pathetic moron.

Nipples the size of baby olives – perfect size – stood out where the dots on the pair of "I"s sparkled teasingly. *No Pain No Gain* her cami stated. Had the designer meant for that, to put both "I"s right where the nipples would be? Probably. Guys were like that.

His gaze on hers, he flexed his arms, dropped into a crouch then slowly stood straight again. His bare feet tingled, as did the rest of his legs. "Your turn."

With an awkward chuckle, Joan seized the pole, spread her feet wide, looked at herself, squatted then straightened. Only her expression wasn't teasing as much as saying, "Look at how I'm spending my education savings plan, Mom!"

Archer shook his head. "You'll have to look at them when you dance at that club. Talk to them with your eyes, call them to you but at the same time, let them know you'll break their teeth if they touch."

She laughed.

He did the same move—squatted, stood and put all the *ooh la la* he could into his eyes. The effect was instantaneous. The dots on her cami's "I"s tightened even more. She didn't laugh this time. If *he* had anything written on his underwear right now, it'd look as if someone had used another font altogether. Three times the size of the rest. He was so hard it hurt.

"You do it," he said with an encouraging hand gesture. "You look at your face and think to yourself, 'Want it? Nuh-uh, bad girl, can't have it.' Come on. You can do it."

She repeated the move.

"That was just..." He didn't say pathetic because it would've hurt her feelings and a woman with her feelings hurt only meant trouble for the guy causing said hurt. He may not be a rocket scientist, but he'd learned pretty damn quick to be careful with a woman's heart. If only to live a long happy life.

"Try again, Joan. But really put it all in your eyes. It's all in the eyes. It's making love with the lights on while someone is watching."

She shook her head, tried again. She looked more aggressive than teasing. As if she were saying to her reflection, "You touch and I break your arms!"

Arghhhhh. Bad on so many levels, he couldn't even begin to fix it. And after a few more times, he could tell she wasn't going to get it right unless he went there and helped.

Awww, you poor thing.

Archer couldn't help the small smile of satisfaction when he abandoned his pole, went to stand behind Joan, very, very close behind her, and gazed at their reflection. They looked good together. In fact, they looked pretty damn good together.

He put his hands on her waist, nice and light. "I'm gonna have to touch you a lot for this. If that's a problem with you, say so now."

"No problem," she replied through a fake smile.

"Good. Now start when I do, hold it then come up with me."

His gaze on hers, he unlocked his knees, kept his hands on her waist as he squatted, knees outward, torso straight—*don't forget dick erect.*

Just focus, you idiot!

To his thrill, Joan followed, spread her thighs wide, bent her knees while she kept her hands around the pole. Smells of her reached him, clouded his judgment enough to convince him it'd be okay to squeeze her waist a bit tighter, angle his chest a bit closer. His chin brushed against the back of her head.

Time seemed to stop.

Smells of her hair, nice and clean, scattered his neurons as effectively as the yoga pants had. Heat from her skin spread from his hands to his arms, his chest, triggered a painful cramp in his lower belly, which quivered as he imagined how she'd feel anchored beneath him. With thighs such as hers, she'd squeeze him nice and tight, he

was sure. As they reached the lowest point of the squat, her butt stuck up and pressed against his groin. Archer bit down hard.

Oh shit.

Later on, if he were allowed to speak in his own defense, he'd tell the judge, "That's when it happened, Your Honor. That's when someone unplugged my brain without my knowledge! That's when I kissed her the first time."

Chapter Three

Joan was so shocked she didn't even say anything when Archer kissed the back of her head. Fire spread to her whole body, not just because her muscles burned with the strain but because the tender brush of lips, even separated by her hair, sent a jolt of adrenaline through her. She froze halfway up the pole, used her hands to yank herself upright. Archer followed her, pressed himself behind her so that she was squeezed between the pole and him. A hard, hot mass pushed in her lower back.

Holy...

His hands still encircled her waist. One of his thumbs rubbed the skin that showed between cami and pants, each small circle the source of pleasure ripples widening and growing, tingling over her skin and enveloping her in a hot and quivering cocoon. The pole rubbed her mons. A sudden and fierce impulse to grind herself against each, pole and hard man behind her, made her thighs twitch.

Behind her, Archer stared into the mirror. His pale eyes above her head shone with a dangerous glint as one of his hands left her waist, traveled down her hip, covered the pole and slowly, *excruciatingly* slowly, rose back and stopped above hers. He added just a bit of pressure to his hands but the message was loud and it was oh-so clear. He could trap her hand beneath his and there wouldn't be a thing she could do about it.

Maybe she wouldn't *want* to do anything about it either.

Her quick, shallow breaths created foggy circles on the metal tube. His hand squeezed hers harder. Not enough to hurt. Just enough to electrify.

"That's how you look at the audience," he whispered. Each word stirred her hair. "You *pin* them."

Joan had never felt "pinned" by a guy's gaze before. Until now.

Because Archer had her trapped right against the pole, each breast swelled on either side. She couldn't help looking at them rise and fall quickly with each quivering inhalation, each tremulous exhalation.

"Then...then what do you do?" she asked. Was that squeaky voice hers? "When you have them pinned, I mean."

"You make them *pant*."

In the mirror, she watched how his shoulders stood out on either side of hers while his hips barely did. The guy was built. Not like a bodybuilder, more like a swimmer. All shoulders, narrow waist and hips, long, sculpted limbs.

He started moving behind her subtly, almost imperceptibly. In small rotations he gyrated his hips, each apex pressing her against the pole until her blood pressure went

south and pushed her IQ down into the single digits. As far as brainpower went right now, she probably ranked between a staple gun and a doorknob.

She had to have him. She had to have him *now*.

Their gazes met in the mirror and held for several seconds.

Oh, he wants you back.

Wasn't that a song?

"People think beauty is weak, that it's passive and delicate," Archer murmured in her ear. "But it's not any of those things. Do you know how powerful beauty is?"

Joan really *was* panting—his lesson worked great. And when he grabbed both her hands in one of his and raised them high on the pole so that she stood with her shaking fists tight around the tube, arms upward at full extension, her breathing nearly doubled. Her vision too!

"Beauty has the ability to make people do crazy, irrational things, just so they can keep it a bit longer, look at it a while longer. Beauty is power and desire, it's a tool and it's a weapon. Which are you, Joan?"

"It's good fortune. Just DNA."

He shook his head, rolled his hips forward hard, movement that pressed her belly and mons against the pole. Liquid heat spread high between her thighs.

"Someone can be born beautiful and still not make anything with it. Another will have humble DNA, as you say, and leave sighs in his or her wake. It's what you do with it that counts."

Well, that's a theory.

To have this gorgeous man grind himself against her while her hands were way high above her head, triggered all kinds of thrilling images. But frankly, the first thing that popped into her head? *Good thing I shaved.* Joan chuckled.

"Something funny, Constable Blair?" Archer asked with a pelvic tilt that made her stop breathing.

"Just thinking...fun things."

"If it's fun you want, you've come to the right place."

"Ah, so you make this a habit? Sleep with your students? Lots of notches on that pole, eh?" Why did she even ask? She didn't want to know. It didn't matter. Right?

Right?

He stopped, put his chin right over her shoulder. "Would it make a difference if I did?"

"No."

Liar.

"No, it's not a habit. I don't sleep with my students. No notches on that pole."

She held the sigh of relief and felt ashamed for even asking such a stupid question. Chantal wouldn't be very happy with her. "Don't ask when you don't want to know," she said often.

"I'm a responsible guy too," Archer went on, his hands alternating between hard and tender. "Are you on the Pill by any chance? I have condoms in the house if not."

"Better than the Pill, I'm on an implant."

"I can't wait 'til they get that stuff for guys. We always come last. Or first, but not in my case." He winked.

"Yeah," she replied through a "there, there" grimace. "You guys have it hard. Unlike us with periods and childbirths."

He froze behind her, looked hurt for a split second before the teasing gleam in his eyes returned. "Laugh all you want but it's hard to be a guy. Especially with a body like mine." He sighed theatrically.

"You're not a very humble man, are you?"

After a quick snort, Archer left her hands so he could run his down her arms, shoulders, sides and hips. A wave of frisson followed in the wake of his fingers.

"I'm gorgeous, dawlin'. Women, they like me."

"I'm sure they all do," she countered while trying to look nonchalant. Why did the notion of his having sex with other women bug her so much? Sex was just a fun bonus, right? What did it matter if he slept with a hundred women at once? He wasn't her boyfriend or anything. He wasn't hers.

"I haven't had complaints about my techniques so far."

"From your other students, you mean?" Why the hell was she spoiling the moment?

He was silent for a while, looking at her in the mirror. "Don't get a fat head but I never do this. Have sex with a student, I mean."

As shameful as it was, Joan felt a bit of relief knowing he didn't screw everything that walked into his studio. Chantal would quickly refer to her *Lame-O-Meter* for that one.

"You're a free man."

"And multi-skilled too. Speaking of skills, stay this way for a bit, okay?"

And she *did*.

Chantal will have my head.

Archer jogged to the door, locked it and flicked off two of the three switches so only the back row of tiny pot lights in the ceiling remained on. The amber light gave everything a rich, burnished finish. Without looking at it, he hit a button on the CD player.

She'd expected cardio-kick dance, techno beats. Or even jazz for the occasion. So she couldn't help the snort of laughter when the sound of a violin filled the studio. Classical had never sounded so decadent.

"Hadn't expected that, huh?" He took his place behind her, lopsided smile just begging to be kissed. "Where was I? Oh, that's right. *There.*"

His hands landed moth-light on her hips, traced her waist then slipped lower until he'd cupped her butt in two burning palms. "Very, very nice."

"Yours isn't bad either," she replied through a fake grin. She didn't feel like smiling but it'd always been her first line of defense. She wasn't quite sure against what she was trying to defend herself right now.

Insanity, woman, that's what. You're making out with your personal trainer whom you've met not two hours ago.

Chantal would definitely have her head. Because of course, Joan would spill every crunchy detail. She wouldn't be able to sit on this one and not wiggle! And Chantal, she could spot a wiggle a mile away.

Archer nodded. "I know. But thanks anyway."

They shared a quick grin.

"They say men think about sex several times an hour," Archer said as he raised her butt so he could press himself against her, flexed his long hands for a wider hold. "You've been here for two."

"Women too think about sex often."

His smile looked rapacious given the dim amber light and pools of shadow below his bangs. "Nature works in wonderful ways."

Joan closed her eyes when the violin trailed into a plaintive note. She wasn't big on classical, but with a man such as Archer pressed behind her and a firemen's pole keeping her there, violin had suddenly taken on quite the wicked trait!

"So you've been thinking about sex since I got here?" Not fishing for compliments or anything.

"Just as you have."

"True." She'd been admiring his butt nonstop since she'd stepped into the studio.

"Although it's more than sex I've been thinking about."

"Oh?"

"Anyone can have sex. Part A into part B. That's too easy. What I love is to make it a performance."

"Performance?"

"Exactly. You start with a look..." He stopped, squeezed her butt while he stared hard at her in the mirror.

The intensity of his gaze felt concrete, a physical thing, a feather brushing up her leg, a soft breath blowing on her nape. It was mesmerizing. While he continued staring at her, his hands traveled lower to her thighs then back up around her waist, one of them circling in front to encompass her lower belly. He had *long* hands. The heat of his palm triggered a quiver deep in her gut. He must have felt it for he nodded.

“That’s what you’ll have to do when you perform. Engage all of their senses—except touch.” Archer winked. “If they touch, I’ll break their arms.”

Joan’s chuckle died in her throat as Archer stood back from her, circled the pole so he was facing her while she watched his glorious physique in the mirror. His shoulders bulged when he reached to his waistband, slipped his thumbs inside and rolling his hips, pulled his pants down by tiny increments. Each left her mouth increasingly dryer.

First the waist then the dawn of his nice butt and—*oops, there it is*—a bit of crack before he lowered his pants and underwear over the finest set of cheeks she’d ever seen on a man, down his thighs twitching with loose strength and fluidity, finally letting them fall around his ankles. He kicked out of them, straightened and twisted his torso so he could check himself out.

“Nice, huh?”

This time, Joan laughed without reserve. “You’re such a tease!”

A wicked smile replaced the thoughtful expression as he studied his ass. “You have *no idea*.”

He knelt in front of her and Joan swore she saw a peek of his package dangling between his fine, fine thighs, despite the poor light and the fact she was so excited she could’ve fainted dead on the floor. Unlike women, who tended to kneel with their legs together, Archer did so with his knees at shoulders’ width, creating a sort of athletic, hourglass shape.

“Hey, I can’t feel my hands anymore,” she quipped, trying to suppress a nervous laugh.

“I’ll make it worth the discomfort.”

She had no doubt he would.

Before she knew what he was doing, he’d pulled on her yoga pants’ drawstring. “It’s much better when I can touch the skin.”

“*Touch all you want, baby*” is what she meant to say. Had to be cool, right? What came out was “Um”.

“You don’t want to?” Archer asked, looking up into her face. His eyes had grown serious. The smirk was gone.

“Of course I want to! You just took me by surprise. Resume.”

The naughty grin was back full force this time accompanied by a low rumble in his chest while he deftly slipped a hand past the waistband to help the pants down over her hips. Joan dipped one then the other. He soon lowered her pants down to the floor and flicked them out from underneath each foot. In the mirror her black seamless thong created a sharp contrast against her skin.

“Good brand. Comfortable yet sexy.”

She nudged him playfully in the shoulder with her knee. He just grinned wider.

So there she stood, hanging on a firemen’s pole in a gorgeous stranger’s fitness studio in only her cami and thong while he knelt naked in front of her...

Chantal, eat your heart out!

“Remember the part of the choreography where you hold the pole with one hand, squat quickly and spring back up?”

Joan nodded. She remembered perfectly. She’d have to do this half naked in front of however many people happened to be there the night she’d do her audition. She’d been told amateur nights at The Quicksilver were always packed. Great.

“Look at me and do it.”

“Now you’re the one giving orders.”

“I *am* your trainer, right?”

Yeah, well, pfft!

Slowly, she lowered her hands, which began to tingle when blood circulation resumed with a vengeance. When she trusted her grip again, she grabbed the pole at waist height, just how he’d shown her earlier, and widening her feet, squatted as fast as she could—rebounded really—and sprang back up. Her gaze never left his in the mirror. Well, except for a quick peek at his cock. It pointed up directly at her. What was a girl supposed to do!

After a few quick breaths, Archer bit his bottom lip. “You have no idea how good that is to a man. *That’s* power. *That’s* a weapon. Do it again and this time, look at yourself.”

Awkwardness didn’t begin to describe how Joan felt as she repeated the move, this time looking at herself in the mirror.

Don’t smile, you big goof!

Archer shook his head. “That was bad. You’re having fun, not teasing.”

He stood and came up behind her. His member bobbed enticingly. “That woman in the mirror isn’t Joan Blair. She’s that little devil on your shoulder, you know the one? She tells you to give a good kick at the vending machine for not giving you your chocolate bar, she’s the one whispering dirty things in your ear when you check out a man despite the fact he has a wedding band on his hand.” Archer stopped, reached around her and placed the tip of both middle fingers on each *I* of her *No Pain No Gain* cami. “She’s the one who bought that shirt and who’s letting me do this.”

Joan moaned unabashedly when he circled her nipples, hardening them, making them tight and tender.

“Now do it again, but this time, let your little devil come out and play with mine.”

For the life of her, Joan felt as though she’d just had an epiphany. She knew all about that little devil perched on her shoulder, only she’d never listened to her before, preferring to let her talk up a storm and still not listen to the temptations and urges. Urges such as checking out men with wedding bands on. Not that she’d do anything with a married man, but just the thought of looking at something forbidden, of imagining the hurried, intense, illicit sex had ruined more than one set of panties.

Let the little devil come out and play?

Why the hell not!

Joan seized the pole one-handed, stared at herself, gave herself no wiggle room and time to chicken out of something that could be very embarrassing or a total dud. With all the intensity, wickedness and little devil she could put into it, she unlocked her knees, bounced against her heels and snapped back to standing. The effect was immediate.

She'd just looked at herself as if she were someone else, someone watching, wanting, *craving* for a taste that she would deny. Courting with herself. It was a total turn-on!

And it must have been for Archer as well for he trapped her hips, whirled her around against the pole and pushed her back against it. Eyes narrowed, mouth glistening, he dove for hers.

She received his initial kiss with a gasp for the intensity stole her breath. It truly did! No man had ever looked as desperate to crush his mouth to hers. As though he'd been denying himself for years. She'd only just met him.

His tongue at times fierce and demanding, his lips and teeth even more so, Archer accentuated the pressure until Joan's mouth throbbed then he'd grow gentle, trace her chin, cheeks, and murmur things she couldn't understand. Hands made for it gripped her butt and dug in. Joan replied in kind, biting him, licking his throat, making a big mess of his glorious black hair, which she raked back, fisted, stroked, all the while keeping her pelvis tilted forward to receive more of his solid front. Hot and rock-hard, his cock pressed downward along her belly.

He kissed his way down, teased her nipples through the cami, even bit the fabric but not the skin underneath and pulled so he could let it snap back against her, and when he reached her thong, he bit the front of it, pulled it down a few inches. Joan reached back and slipped a thumb in to help Archer but he shook his head.

"You're robbing me of half the fun, Joan. Keep your hands to myself."

With a grin she knew must be silly – she didn't want to confirm her suspicion by looking in the mirror – Joan went back for his hair. Just glorious! And so much of it!

After some pretty imaginative tugging, Archer managed to get her thong down around her knees, which she twisted inward so the garment would fall loosely to the floor. He flicked it behind him.

"Joan," he murmured against her belly. "You're just...man, you're *hot*."

"Mmm, thanks."

He knelt again. "Spread your legs wide then go down along the pole."

The rebel in her demanded he curb the commanding tone of voice but that little devil just kicked the other's ass and told her to shut the hell up!

While she still stood with her back against the pole, Archer reached between her legs, grabbed it with both hands and provided support as she lowered herself, almost

sitting on his corded forearms. Showing impressive strength, he widened his arms so he could approach her, effectively spreading her thighs even wider.

"It's just selfish of me, but I *have* to get a little taste."

He began by kissing her sex as he would a mouth. Wet sounds could be heard between the music's louder passages. A fever spread to her belly and legs. Joan held on to the pole above her head, muscles screaming for reprieve, a reprieve she couldn't give. If he stopped, she'd go crazy!

"Roll your hips," he said against the inside of her thigh. "Roll."

She did, gyrated her pelvis against his face while he licked her vulva in long, unhurried passes.

"Harder, make it wide. Yeah, that's it. Use those abs."

Tingling began at the base of her spine, swelled to encompass her whole back and shoulders, her arms, which cramped, as did her legs and feet. But roll she did! She threw a quick glance at the mirror and curled her upper lip. Almost like looking at other people having sex. What a buzz!

She'd always managed to come with her lovers, through their skills or her own, their fingers or hers, their cocks or her acrylic companions, and she knew the signs well. They would usually start with a tingle at the base of her spine – as had just happened – then she'd have to work hard not to lose it, keep the fire stoked, the cadence, the pressure. After the tingle would come the heat – on her skin, in her muscles, her gut. Her vagina would spasm, her thighs too. Then she would slide. That's what she called it. A slide. An inexorable descent into a whirl of colors and sensations where there wouldn't be anything important except to come, to reach the all-important climax that would cure all the ills in the world and make her a goddess to be worshipped and fucked and hand-fed grapes.

Whew, damn, woman! Here it goes!

But not with Archer.

She went from warm tingle to screaming-like-a-banshee "*If you stop I'll kill you*" climax, the kind where sanity was a curious, foreign concept better relegated to moments when her body's temperature didn't reach delirium peaks, her mind chasm-deep crashes. She'd go totally, utterly nuts! His tongue proved a magnificent escort to the sharpest climax ever to register on her scale. She didn't come. She *exploded*.

While she still spun in a vortex of euphoria – that feeling after a few glasses of wine, the superhero complex, the "get out of my face" attitude, *that* sort of euphoria – Archer lowered his arms and stood between her legs. He grabbed the pole right behind her neck, tilted his hips forward and *literally* scooped her up with his cock. It glided in, that glorious rod, long and smooth and so hot, with ease and practice that it left Joan on the brink of another brutal dive into Climaxdom.

"Ohhh! Fuck! Yeah!"

Was that me? Holy...

He had his bottom lip tucked in hard—she could see, despite the mini-suns bursting in her vision, that his teeth dug in deep and stopped blood flow. Pecs bulged when he encircled her waist with his other arm and rodeoed her up higher on the pole. The skin on her lower back squeaked in protest. Who cared?!

“Mmm.” The sound rumbled in his chest as he rocked underneath her. “Mmm! Man. Joan. You’re. Incre. Dible. Ah.” He punctuated each word with a forceful buck.

Her abs burned as if acid had been poured on her. Did she give a damn? Did she slow down? Hell no! Using every shred of muscle she could muster, Joan held on to the pole above her head, ignored how it dug painfully between her shoulder blades, and wrapped her legs around his hips while he pounded away, hanging by a hand, never letting his other loosen from around her waist.

“Give it to me,” she snarled, fought the urge to giggle. *Give it to me?*

A wicked gleam in his eyes made her hold on even tighter. “Oh, not good enough, huh? How about this?”

Instead of a piston action, Archer began to move like a crazy top would, ‘round and ‘round but never in the same spot, forcing her up another notch against the pole, detaching her lower back from it yet keeping her suspended against him.

“Is that better?” he snarled before drowning her reply with a deep and unyielding kiss.

She’d been about to say, “*Oh baby!*”

Screw it!

Without a stitch of shame, Joan let him hear it. Yes, dammit, he was good, and he was gorgeous and the biggest tease. But the thing was...he could deliver too.

“Archer, yes, *yesss. Ahhhh.*”

She’d come again! Damn!

Sweat now linked them, rendered her grip on the metal tube slippery and dangerous. His must have been too for he scooted upward several times as he thrust ever harder into her. He seemed to be close to orgasm for his face tightened, his breathing accelerated. He grunted her name through his teeth.

Joan thought she heard something.

What was that? A doorbell?

Yes, a doorbell rang somewhere, followed by a woman’s voice announcing, “That Italian left a ping on my radar this time! He’s soooo busted!”

And when the door unexpectedly opened—hadn’t he locked the damned thing?—and the lights switched full-on, both Archer and she went tumbling from the pole and thudded on the mat in a snarl of limbs.

Three voices simultaneously rose in the studio.

Joan scooted from Archer. “*Arghhhhhhh!*”

Archer punched the mat. “*Arghhhhhhh!*”

A dark-haired woman—the epitome of geek girls the world over, right down to askew ponytail and funky upturned eyeglasses—dropped something to the floor and hid her eyes with both hands. “Arghhhhhh!”

Chapter Four

"How the hell was I supposed to know that...that...you were *busy*?" Mel hissed under her breath. A harsh shout for anyone else. "You weren't at home, yet the car's in your garage. And it's late, you never give lessons this late." Keeping her gaze averted, she bent, pawed around the floor for her gizmo and retrieved it.

"Don't you take a listen before barging into people's homes?" Archer demanded, wrestling with his pants. He fished inside, tossed the boxer briefs in a wad across the studio then shoved a leg into the twisted garment. He didn't know if he should keep his butt to his friend or his lover. "For Pete's sake, next time *wait*, Mel."

He threw a quick glance at Joan, who similarly struggled with garment issues but who enjoyed a bit more success than he did. She stood, thong, pants and sandals back on, and crossed her arms while she eyed Mel with a mix of bewilderment, amusement and just a hint of aggravation. A healthy glow flushed her cheeks. He could see it clearly since the lights were fucking ON!

Thanks, Mel.

"Sorry," Mel offered with a lopsided grin. She waved at Joan, shrugged sheepishly. "Hello. I'm Mélanie Girard, since Archer is too rude to introduce us. Call me Mel."

To his surprise, Joan grinned and nodded. "Hi, Mel. You're like me, you have the gift of great timing."

They shared a chuckle.

Something snapped into place in his heart and Archer had no idea what. Only that it felt good. Like a plush bear. Or a really good blowjob.

"Oooh, er, I'm a *friend*," Mel was quick to add. "Not girlfriend, you know, just, like, a good friend."

"And I'm..." Joan stopped, arched her blonde eyebrow at him. "A student, I guess."

"Oh, you're the lady cop Archer has to train for..." Mel stopped abruptly when Archer narrowed his eyes at her. "Oops?"

A Mexican standoff!

Joan was scowling at him.

He was scowling at Mel.

Mel was...just Mel. Looking confused, ready to burst out laughing and wearing the wrong shoes for her outfit. Pink sneakers, even from a topnotch brand such as Diesel, did *not* go with an asymmetrical black jeans skirt. Jeez, woman.

"All right, ladies, you two just make friends. I'll go put on an apron and cook us something."

Mel looked elated. “Really?”

“NO!”

Joan cleared her throat—and it sounded suspiciously as if she’d just covered a chuckle—and inched toward the door. “Well, I guess I should go. When do you want me back tomorrow?”

“Yeah, Archer, when do you *want* her back?” Mel echoed above her eyeglasses rim.

He just avoided looking at either woman. He heard the snorts and “pfft”. They must have been separated at birth, these two. How could he not have seen it earlier? Although physically they looked nothing alike. Joan was all athletic blonde bombshell while Mel was the petite nerd with too much hair. He’d never seen his friend looking so jovial at interrupting him. She usually made him feel like shit. Which she *was* doing, come to think of it. Only not in the usual way.

He sighed. “In the morning. Seven-thirty sound good?”

“Perfect. See you then,” Constable Blair replied. “Nice meeting you, Mel.”

And then she was gone.

He heard her car’s engine rumbling to life before the sound receded to a pleasant tingle in his balls.

He hadn’t even come.

“Damn, Mel.”

She looked down at her most prized possession—her PDA—and just shrugged. “I said ‘sorry’ already. But I was sitting on something I think you’ll want to see. I couldn’t help it.”

“You were blabbering about something when you crashed my party. What was it again?”

“Adriano. I think I’ve narrowed the search parameters.”

Search parameters?

She sounded like Data again, her “Most Favorite Person”. Archer had wasted a lot of saliva over the years trying to remind her “Mr. Data” was a fictional character from a losers-only television show and that he represented an android. Not a person by any stretch of the imagination. Not one to be considered “sexy in a synthetically flawless kinda way”. Brr. That was usually when she’d pull a rocket-scientist joke on him and debate about metaphysical something and artificial life and a bunch of other things he never understood because he was busy rolling his eyes.

“You found out where he lives?”

The grin evaporated. “No. I said I’ve nar—”

“Yeah, yeah. So you don’t have anything new. You’ve interrupted something very, very good for, well, nothing. Basically.”

"I *do* have something new," she countered, waving her Pocket Life, as she called it. "He sent this message from Rome. That's the third message he's sent from there. That means it's either close to where he lives or a place he frequents a lot."

"Or it means you need a life," Archer snapped. "And stop poking at my boss. I don't want him to drop me from the agency."

Mel grinned wide. "Ah, yes, The Agency. '*Give us a call. We, at Gentlemen Inc., look forward to meeting your every need.*' Pfft!"

"Har har."

"It's just funny. That business card makes me want to laugh every time."

As part of his "welcome package", Adriano had sent Archer a bunch of business cards to leave with each Lady he was tasked to help. Each had taken the card as if he'd just given them a gold bar. He tried to imagine himself giving one of the gold cards to Joan and the vision shattered.

Fuck.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"No. What? And don't say 'nothing' to me. I've seen you puke. I know you inside out."

"Is that a pun geniuses would laugh at?"

Mel shook her head. "What's wrong? I found where Adriano might live. That's good, no?"

"I don't care where he lives. As long as he pays me for my services..."

"Services." It sounded so businesslike.

That's because it is.

It was all about business. From Adriano's point of view and from the Montreal police. Both paid him to do a job.

But then again, it didn't really make a difference. It wasn't as if he owed Joan and wanted to have anything to do with her once the job was done. He enjoyed her body, true, but she was a cop and he...well, wasn't. Plus, his undeclared revenues kind of put him in the same basket as other crooks. Cops didn't go out with crooks. And with liars. Archer shook his head. Why had he lied about his involvement with other students? What difference did it make if he fucked everyone right at the door? He was an adult, single, willing and oh-so able.

Why did that make him want to scrub himself with pine-scented detergent and a wire brush?

His best friend must have caught on to his chain of thought, even if he wasn't too sure what it entailed—he was still shaking from his encounter with Joan—and made a face. "You like her."

"Joan?"

“No. The queen of England! Yes, Joan. You like Joan.”

“Yeah, so. It doesn’t change anything. She’ll be gone in a few days.”

“Not if you two start dating.”

“Dating a cop? Me?” Archer snorted.

“Well, you like her, so why not date a cop?”

He shook his head.

“Hypothetically speaking, if you started, let’s say, dating a cop, would you tell her? I mean, about Adriano and the rest of it?” She rubbed her index finger and thumb together to indicate the money issue.

“Hypothetically speaking, I’d tell a cop I’m being paid under the table by some mysterious Italian guy? She’s with the Morality squad if she goes after this pig who brings kids into Canada to be sex slaves, so she basically arrests the people in my social spheres.”

“Maybe she doesn’t...” Mel didn’t sound nor look convinced.

“Yeah, sure, I’ll tell her that my lifestyle includes but is not limited to fiscal fraud, training exotic dancers—people she arrests on a daily basis, remember—and being an undercover escort who has sex with his clients? I’m sure she’ll understand. Are you nuts? No!”

“You’re such a drama queen.” Mel rolled her eyes. She slipped the PDA in her skirt pocket, now bulging with the cell phone on one side and the thin, expensive piece of hardware in the other. When would the woman get a purse? “So you like her. What’s the big deal?”

“Not that I’m admitting anything more with regard to Joan, but remember what happened the last time I ‘liked’ a woman?”

“That was almost two years ago, Archer,” Mel said gently, crossing the studio to pat his elbow. “You have to let that one go. It’s only hurting you because you won’t let it go.”

“I *wanted* to be a father.”

Whoa.

That had come out all of a sudden. He never talked about it so openly and readily. A sappy movie and a few drinks were usually needed to loosen him up first. He swallowed, crossed his arms and took a big breath. Archer thought that for the first time maybe he should’ve kept his dick in his pants instead of getting all tangled in his own two feet. Or better yet. Keep screwing with the hot lady cop but break everything off as soon as her job was done. The thought of not seeing her again pissed him off for some strange reason. Man, what a mind fuck. He was losing his edge.

Cool mountain brook, cool mountain brook.

Fuck cool mountain brook. Raging, destructive avalanche rolling down the fucking mountain.

Mel lowered her gaze. "I know."

* * * * *

"And then what happened?" Chantal asked, eyes twinkling over her colorful cup of coffee. Daffy Duck stared at Joan from across both their desks. It too wanted to know what had happened at Archer's.

"His girl friend walked in."

Chantal cringed. "Oy! Did you have to hurt her?" She made a hand-chop motion directed at the desk lamp.

"Not his girlfriend, his girl friend, lady friend. And no, I didn't have to. She was funny. The look on his face!" Joan spun in her chair, did her Austin Powers Surprised Double-take Look then leaned her elbows on the desk. Dust floated down from behind Chantal's computer screen. "He was *pissed*."

"Well, if the guy didn't even have time to co—"

"Soooo," a gravelly male voice interrupted Chantal and made her sit up straighter. "Constable Blair, how did the first lesson go yesterday?"

Joan turned to face Sergeant-detective Luc Sauvageau, a huge but warm and bearish police officer who'd once taken a bullet for a dog. Or so the story went.

"It went great. My trainer is the best. Very *flexible*."

Behind Sauvageau's back, Chantal licked her upper lip and winked.

"Good. I'll go with you tomorrow. That'll be your third day, you should have something to show for it and I need to brief him for Saturday."

"You're not going to come see me do my routine, are you?"

The sergeant-detective shivered. "It'd be like watching my daughter. Brr. No, I'll just come in before you guys start, talk to the both of you together then I'll leave you to the shaking and grinding." He hooked his thumb at the lieutenant's office in the corner, still empty. "I'll brief her when I come back. She's not too keen on letting a civilian in there with you."

The three of them were alone in the office. Chantal's husband, a bus driver with not enough seniority and required to work "the crazy shift", had dropped her off early while Sauvageau always came in before anybody else so he could play Solitaire on his computer. His wife didn't want a computer in the house.

"We had no choice, Sarge, you know that. They won't let one of you gents inside. You all look like cops."

Sauvageau grinned. "I look like a cop?" He rubbed his thumb and middle finger down his thick brown mustache. "It's still not common procedure. She's only letting it slide because it's Laramée we're after." The friendly look evaporated and a deep scowl replaced it. "I never thought I'd have a good thing to say about INTERPOL, but I'm glad they kept us in the loop. That scumbag. When I get my hands on him..." He did a

flexing motion of his bear paw as if he were lifting a cantaloupe and squeezing it for freshness.

"It's going to hurt," Chantal put in, her French accent only slightly thicker than Sauvageau's. "I'll hold him down while you introduce him to the phonebook, okay?"

They shared a grin.

Joan checked her watch, cringed and pushed herself from the desk. She misjudged and sent her desk blotter skimming across the surface instead, effectively spreading all her yellow stick-on notes and various bits in a wide arc.

"Calm down, Murphy, or you'll cause a catastrophe," Sauvageau said as he bent to retrieve one of the pieces of paper. He put it back on her desk.

Chantal, who was used to Joan's klutziness better than anyone, casually stopped the blotter when it pushed against her keyboard.

"It's almost six-thirty."

Joan stood, brushed her wind pants down around her thighs. She wore cyclist shorts underneath, the closest thing she owned to "hot pants". They kept riding up. "I have to go. We're starting at seven-thirty."

Chantal made a whipping noise and flicked her wrist. "Slave driver. Keep me posted. Details, Joan. Don't forget the details."

"What?" Sauvageau asked through a smile. "He's cute?"

Joan felt herself flush beet red. "Yeah, but he's too expensive for me. You should see his house. It's in Westmount."

Both Chantal and the sergeant-detective exchanged a disgusted glance. "*Les maudits anglais.*"

Those damned English.

"Bah, don't waste your time on him, he's probably a homosexual," Sauvageau put in before walking away.

Both Chantal and Joan smiled wide.

Her partner's smile abruptly turned upside down. "Or he's a slut."

Heat spread out from Joan's collar. "Don't call him that."

Chantal's eyebrows couldn't possibly have gone any higher. "Don't be a dweeb, Murphy. You can't commit to a guy like him. I'm all for having fun but I hope you realize he's probably pollinating half the mayor's flowers, if you know what I mean..."

"*And I think you do,*" both said in unison.

Joan smiled a fake one. "I know. Stay away from Casanova types. It's just that I like being around him, you know. He's funny in his own way."

"You like being around him, eh? You've known him..." Chantal stopped, checked her watch. "Oh what? For several *hours*?"

What was there to answer to that? Still, she did like being around Archer and that was that.

“Just make sure I don’t have to go hurt him or anything,” Chantal said, using her gruff voice.

Joan knew she meant well and went with it. “Yeah, I’ll be careful around him.”

Down in the police station locker room, panic seized Joan. What if something happened between the two of them again? What if nothing did?

In a way, she hoped nothing would happen because it’d mean he was over her, which was good as she had a crook to catch and developing a liking in her fitness instructor would get in the way. Especially since he’d have to watch her do her “thing” at the club on Saturday. If she fell for him, even a little, it’d complicate things. It was better this way. Professional detachment. Chantal was right. She’d only known him for a matter of hours and couldn’t possibly get attached to a man like him, too hot for his own good. She liked his body, that was all.

You’re such a big fat liar!

Her head half on the sting and half somewhere that would make her partner bitch, Joan rushed to the underground garage, spotted her little silver car and after she slid behind the wheel, slammed the door too hard in her excitement.

“Oooh, sorry, baby,” she said with a little pat to the dashboard.

Should she bring coffee? Donuts? Would he make a cop-donut joke if she did? He probably didn’t eat them anyway with a body such as his. Frothed into a near panic, Joan didn’t bring anything but street clothes and her gym water bottle, packed with ice. She’d probably need to run it under her cami two minutes after meeting Archer. Man, she was soooo nervous.

It’s a whole iceberg I need!

She was pulling into his driveway at seven-thirty sharp when she caught sight of him in the backyard, just standing there with his back to her and wearing another pair of “karate” pants, but paler, medium gray, and nothing else but leather sandals. Large lilac bushes hid the corner of the house and as she walked around them, neared the studio’s highly polished wooden door, Archer must have heard her for he turned around. A crooked smile pulled his cheek. He was doing that thing with his mouth again, switching the invisible toothpick corner to corner with his tongue. Maybe he had a mint in there. It was so sexy!

“Morning!”

“Good morning. Are you ready to sweat?”

His laugh sounded tight to the extreme. Joan cradled her water bottle as she watched him walk past her. The set of his jaw looked tense, as did his shoulders. He opened the door, held it for her then stepped inside, flicking one sandal off then the other.

“Good thing I put on lots of deodorant,” she quipped to lighten the mood. “But you know, they say ‘no white residue’. I mean, how can the stuff be white on the stick but

not on you? If you just pretend you put some on, sure, make a pass or two. But if you go back and forth seven, eight times like everybody does then, my ass, no white residue."

Archer cocked his head at her. "You make *seven* passes?"

"Don't you?"

He seemed to be struggling with something to say but snapped his mouth shut. After a while, he shook his head, sighed. "Life must never be dull around you."

"You have no idea. At work, they call me Calamity Joan. Or Murphy. For Murphy's Law."

"I wonder why..."

"Hey."

"Anyway," Archer said, clearly not in the mood to be perked up by her cheeky personality. "After you left last night, I went on the Net and downloaded this song. I think it'll be perfect."

"Isn't that illegal, downloading songs?"

He threw her a dark look. "I'm sure the artists won't mind a cop dancing half naked to their song if it puts a crook in jail."

Ouch. Joan shrugged to hide her unease.

He crossed the studio, turned the CD player on and waited until the trays had clicked into place. At once, a plaintive bass filled the room with a slow beat that pulsated in Joan's gut. A woman's voice rose, floating with an eerie, ghostly cadence. A rip of electric guitar wailed and wept then raged to a jagged peak. The chorus's last line left Joan with her mouth opened.

"Give me a reason to be...eee, a woman. I just want to be, a woman..."

Archer stared at her while the song played and when it ended, when the last shred of bass had drifted away, Joan shook her head in wonder.

"I don't know who that is, but I've heard it before."

"It's Portishead," he replied, his nostrils dilated, eyes narrowed. "It's a shorter remix of the original, I'm sure it's an illegal copy too, and it'll be perfect for you." He eyed her down. His pale eyes were hard and made Joan uncomfortable. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, pulled her wind pants off to fold them in half while still trying to find the man from the night before. Was this his evil twin or something?

While a selection of "gym music" played, mostly electronica, they stretched in silence, he, hard gaze riveted to his reflection, she, glancing at him then at her feet. Was he mad about the night before? She hadn't done anything! He'd been the one getting all hot and sexy first. Not that she'd complain!

It was all Mel's fault!

Then he gave her the workout of a lifetime.

Impossibly difficult stretches, prolonged holds, one-handed then two-handed. She was obviously expected to follow his rhythm as he didn't slow a single time, even after he'd totally lost her during some sort of twist with one leg wrapped around the pole and the other at full extension while spinning *backward* down the length of it. Her thigh squeaked on the unforgiving metal tube and burned like a bitch.

Goddammit!

Archer didn't even look at her when she grunted, stumbled back on her ass instead of landing gracefully then clawed back into place. When she threw him an affronted look, he ignored her. His naked torso glistened with sweat by the time they'd gone through the routine a dozen times. Joan was panting hard. He looked winded too. A small comfort.

"You're gonna need heels," he remarked out of the blue. Standing, he rolled his head, grimaced.

Joan snapped out of her dark musings, which involved a lot of Archer butt kicking and other enjoyable activities. What a prick. She'd no idea. Chantal was so right.

"I don't have any," she snapped.

"Get some."

"No."

"You want this thing to work or not?" he demanded, planting his fists on his hips.

"I'm not used to heels," she retorted, also putting her fists on her hips. "It'll show if I try to dance in them. I'll go barefoot or something. But *no heels*."

"Fine. Don't take my word for it. I'm just the only pole fitness instructor in Montreal and only the best dancers can afford my training. But what do I know?!"

"Why are you so bitchy today? Is it about last night?"

Yeah, why was he so damned bitchy? She hadn't done anything wrong.

Mel.

Although to be fair, he probably would've felt worse if they'd been allowed to go on their merry way last night and not been interrupted. He was lying to her on top of doing something that could get him in jail – try explaining Gentlemen Inc. and its juicy undeclared revenues to the taxman. Tax evasion meant jail. He knew she'd never go out with a guy like him – he downloaded pirated stuff, send him to the gallows! All she knew was that the police had hired him to train her. Having sex was a bonus. She didn't seem to have problems with that. What she might have problems with was the fact he'd slept with most of his students and clients, from the studio biz and the escort thing. He really didn't want to tell her that not just the police had paid him to train her, but another entity had also hired him to be her escort. Archer didn't want to take the chance she'd look at him differently. She'd think, as an escort, that he slept with her as a *de facto* thing when he wasn't. Well, he *had* amassed quite a few "notches" on his pole. But

it didn't mean she didn't matter. In fact, it meant nothing. Or everything. What a fucking mess.

So yeah, he was cranky. *Sue me.*

"You'll need heels and you'll need a costume. Do you have one?"

Joan shifted from foot to foot.

"You don't even have a clue what to wear, huh?"

The crossing of her arms confirmed it.

"What were you planning to wear?"

"Bikini...?"

She didn't sound sure. "You're not sure if it's a bikini or you're not sure if you should wear it?"

"It *is* a bikini."

"Good start. What kind?"

"The string kind, you know, that ties on the sides. Black. It's nice."

A sheepish grin floated at the corners of her mouth. He so wanted to kiss her right now. It was burning his balls. Just like lying to her about the number of notches on his pole.

"A normal bikini won't do, Joan. You need something *tinier.*"

She sighed. "Thong?"

"Not necessarily. I know a good place for that sort of stuff. I'll give you their card. They're on the Net too, if you want to look at the things they have."

"What should I look for?" Joan asked, drawing near.

A faint scent of lotion reached him. Something fruity and sweet. It was hard to think after that. Maybe not thinking around her would be better. Or it would make it all a lot worse. *Argh, Christ.*

"Mmm? Oh, er, look for something shiny," he replied, taking a step back and leaning against the pole. "So they're busy looking at that and not the rest of you."

"Oh? What's wrong with the rest of me?"

He grinned, knew the bad boy was creeping back to the forefront where he ought to have been in the first place. No more mind screws about hot lady cops. She was a trainee. He'd get her inside The Quicksilver, get paid twice and that'd be it. Screw the taxman and screw his budding conscience.

"There's nothing wrong with the rest of you, believe me. But you don't *look* like an exotic dancer. You smile too much for starters, and you won't have heels. So we'll have to work your attributes. You have energy, charisma, we'll go there. Something shiny to draw the eye, maybe those Turkish penny belts."

"Oh, I've seen those. Like a belly dancer?"

He nodded. "It'll go with the barefoot thing. They have bras too. Maybe even foot jewelry. We'll see what works."

"You're coming with me?"

"You don't have a clue what you need. So yeah, I'm coming with you."

"When are we leaving?"

"Got any plans for now?"

"Your car or mine?"

Archer raked his hair back, knowing he'd just made a serious mistake. He was looking forward to spending more time with Constable Blair after he'd gone on and on with Mel about how he needed to keep his distance, how he couldn't get close to a woman, a *cop*, with his lifestyle and the money on the side and oh yeah, his little lie about not boinking his students. Keeping his distance would be best. He wouldn't let his heart be ripped out again.

So much for his resolutions.

"You cop types get reimbursed for gas, right? Let's take yours."

Chapter Five

“So,” Archer asked as he buckled the seat belt. “What year is this thing?”

Joan couldn’t help but stare at his thighs when he shifted in the seat. Whew. He’d gone into the home portion to put on a pair of jeans and a white shirt while she’d changed into her street clothes in the studio. He hadn’t invited her in either.

The guy is allowed to keep his life separate from his work, woman. Lighten up.

It still stung. Chantal would have something to say about that. Rightly so. Joan reminded herself yet again she wasn’t dating the guy, just learning how to shake her ass so she could do her part in the sting, that nothing was personal...except the great sex.

Yeah, Murphy, just focus on the sex and don’t think about the thousand-and-one chicks the guy has stashed around his house.

“It’s a 325i model, 1991. Original interior, exterior paint barely touched up and not quite one hundred and fifty Ks on the odo. I store it during winters and drive a renter.”

“Nice.”

“Not into cars?”

“Only those with a big backseat.”

Joan shook her head. “I don’t get the backseat attraction. Never have. Why bother? It’s way too small and was never intended for two people having sex.”

“You’ve never been in the backseat of a 1971 Charger...” Archer turned toward her and bounced his eyebrows.

“And you have loads of times, I guess, eh?” And why does that burn so much?

He didn’t reply, only indicated she should turn right at the light, which had turned dark yellow – red, for most people. Joan stepped on the accelerator and turned anyway. A hiss escaped him when she took the corner a bit faster than she should have, downshifting abruptly while her sharp yank on the steering wheel brought the little BMW barely a foot behind a bus, which had stopped to pick up passengers. Above the large bumper was a poster for a life insurance company depicting a smiling man oblivious to the pallet of bricks hanging overhead.

“I know how he feels,” Archer grumbled as he sat deeper in his seat. A quick adjustment to his seat belt made her smile wider.

Joan passed the bus – again a bit too quickly, but she *had* lived in Montreal, home of Canada’s craziest drivers, for a few years now and picked up the local habits – drove down almost the length of Rue Saint-Jacques, maneuvering her car amidst the thick downtown traffic. Beside her, Archer sat so deeply in his seat his knees stuck out.

“It’s on the corner of Sainte-Catherine,” he said, pointing to a building across the busy street. “Above that club there.”

Joan’s first “nighttime” experience in Montreal had been to do what the locals called “*La Tournée des Grands Ducs*”. She hadn’t seen any grand dukes on that tour, but she’d had a riot of a good time pub-crawling! There were more nightclubs and discotheques packed in downtown Montreal than there were pawn shops and strip bars. And there were a lot of *those*.

“Shit!”

Archer’s shout brought Joan back to reality a mere second away from driving right into the curb. She swerved at the last second, waved to the guy behind who’d decided to sit on his horn and executed a book-perfect J-turn—perfect for Security Driving 101 that is—right into a narrow street indicating free parking. A rare find in this city! With a brusque jerk, she put the handbrake on and unclipped her seat belt.

Her passenger was already clawing out of the car and scowling at her by the time she’d opened her door and stepped out.

“What?”

He put both splayed hands on the roof of her car—*argh, jeez, fingerprints*—and stared at her with those pale chips of ice for eyes. He wasn’t smiling. “I’m taking the subway home.”

With a shooping gesture, Joan shook her head and laughed. “Nah! I’ll drive you home. It’s no problem at all.” With her doors locked, she turned back toward the corner, adjusted her low-rider jeans and lifted her chin. “Above that club over there? Number 859?”

After a bit of mumbling, Archer joined her and they crossed the busy street together, avoiding cars, motorcycles, pedestrians, buses and pigeons. None of them necessarily in their right places either. She loved Montreal’s chaotic beauty and energy! So much better than her native rainy old Vancouver.

A narrow black door sandwiched between the nightclub with its purple bricks and dormant neon signs and a tiny sushi bar gleamed with the wet quality of black marble when they approached. Without hesitation Archer pushed down the brass ducktail doorknob and let Joan pass. Narrow stairs of solid oak—she could recognize solid oak a mile away—glistened up into near darkness. Heat from his body transferred to her when she squeezed by. His hip brushed hers. Their eyes met.

“You come here often?”

Arghhhhhhhhhhhhh! Joan Blair, you did not say that!

Smirk rising to new heights, he cocked his head. “Did you just ask me if I come here often?”

Joan felt her cheeks flush and could just imagine the shade of red they’d get. “I meant...you know, you—it’s not very obvious, that door...so I thought... You must’ve been here before...” She sighed.

"I've come here a few times," Archer replied with the magnanimous air of someone who'll put a wounded horse out of its misery and just shoot it. "But I hope that's not part of your material to get guys. 'You come here often?' Pfft! Even *we* have standards."

"Ha. Ha. Ha."

She climbed the darkened stairs without a backward glance. Each step creaked a different tone.

Seventeen creaks later, Joan reached another door, this one open and leading to a cute little mezzanine with a potted lemon tree under a long narrow window that opened out onto the street below. To her left was a narrow corridor that must have led to the back of the place. The word *feminine* came to Joan. Everything was decorated, stenciled, pochoired or sponged, sometimes all at once, in reds and ambers with the occasional black accents here and there. It definitely could've been tacky to the highest degree. But all in all, she found it very nice, very Old World. A gilded ceramic plaque reading *Chez Frou Frou* glimmered in the soft light coming in from the window. Not at all the sexy lingerie boutique she'd expected. No novelty toys, no see-through black lace teddies, no boxer briefs with logos of shiny chili peppers on the front. Joan turned toward Archer and caught him staring at her intently.

"So?"

"Well, it's..." She looked around again, smiled. "Very nice actually."

"*Merci*," a woman said from down the hall to Joan's left. The old wooden floor's *creak, creak, creak* preceded a tall, dark-skinned woman with the most glorious body Joan had ever seen. Toned. She was *toned*.

"*Bonjour, ma belle*," Archer said, presenting each cheek in turn.

Joan hadn't been in Montreal long enough to develop the two-cheek salute and just stuck her hand out to the woman, who took it with a smile and a gauging look. Not hostile but penetrating just the same. Joan raised her chin, smiled wide.

"*Bonjour*. Nice to meet you."

"Raphaëlle, this is Joan. Joan, Raphaëlle. She trains at my studio."

Raphaëlle nodded, released Joan's hand. "And you still owe me a free lesson."

Oh?

Archer's face, which Joan had come to view as a perfectly polished mask, twitched. His pale eyes narrowed while he cleared his throat.

Heat flared out of Joan's T-shirt at the woman's comment. Or more aptly, at what she'd left unsaid. His claim that he never slept with his students came to jab her again. Was he really not sleeping with other students? Even a looker like Raphaëlle? And what sort of woman would train around Archer and not send a few tentacles out to test the waters? She would. But then again, she was the kind of loser who wondered if a guy she wasn't dating was having sex with other women. As if it concerned her. Man, was she *jealous*? Her? Nahhh!

A free lesson in thanks for *what* though?

“We need to get an outfit for a performance this Saturday,” Archer began, smiled with his mouth but not his eyes. “Something exotic. Like those Turkish dancer penny belts.”

Raphaëlle nodded. “We have that. Come with me.”

She led them back the way she’d come, each floor plank greeting Joan with a different tune, held a blood-red velvet curtain aside so her customers could follow and escorted them to the far end of a narrow room filled with overflowing clothes racks from floor to ceiling. A three-tiered privacy panel made of darkly stained bamboo blocked off a section of the room near the window. They must have made alterations on the spot too for there was a sewing machine in a corner with a pouting mannequin – not an old-fashioned one with the conical boobs and grotesquely narrow waist. This one must have come from a boutique catering to punks, complete with acrylic flattop and nightclub makeup in vivid colors. A wide window gave the room natural light and a very modish feel. Joan felt the girly-girl in her clapping her hands excitedly. All those shiny, shiny clothes! Oooh, and shoes too!

Archer smiled wide. “You have the best inventory in town.”

A lopsided grin pulled Raphaëlle’s luscious mouth to one side. “You’re such a gentleman, Archer.”

For some reason she couldn’t explain, he blushed beet red, cleared his throat. “Yeah, don’t tell everyone. I have a reputation to protect.”

After a quick laugh that sounded like crystal bells, the owner nodded. “I’ll leave you to it.” Raphaëlle backed away. “I have another client in the next room. Just come get me if you can’t find what you’re looking for.”

When she turned, Joan couldn’t help but admire the woman’s gorgeous ass in those frayed, low-riding jeans. The turquoise top she wore had no back except for tiny strings. No bra either.

So those boobs, they were hanging up there all by themselves? Whoo damn!

“I think I’ve already found what I’m looking for,” Archer replied, staring straight at Joan.

As a heat wave rose to her neck and cheeks, Joan watched him approach then walk *right by her*.

Um.

She felt like a Chihuahua puppy about to be adopted but then the mean two-leg just kept on walking to pat a vile poodle on the head. What had she hoped for anyway? That he’d come give her a hug and talk about marriage? Of course he’d meant the outfit and not her. He hadn’t been looking for anything as far as she was concerned. Neither had she. She shouldn’t expect from him or from herself to invest anything more than friendly sex for a couple of days. Then it’d be over. He’d go back to his world and she to hers.

She attempted to ignore the blade of disappointment trying to find a weak spot in her armor and turned to watch him reaching for a particular piece amidst the rest and pulling it out gently. Small beads dangled from a pair of black thong and matching bra.

Archer turned, eyebrow arched. "This is nice. You like?"

She tried to stifle the long sigh, partly succeeded. "Yeah. Sure."

"Try it on. I'll get other pieces while you change."

So for the next half-hour Joan stood behind the privacy panel and tried everything from the black-beaded ensemble that didn't "hang right" according to him, to something fit for *Xena, Warrior Princess*, and oh, let's not forget the silver getup Barbarina Empress of Galaxy Zorx would wear. Uncomfortable didn't begin to describe each piece. Some of them rode so far up her ass she was afraid she would require the Jaws of Life to pull them out again. She made sure all of them had the hygienic sticker in the crotch even if she tried them over her own underwear. No thong today, just plain old sports panties.

She heard Archer exclaim and was about to peek over the panel when he burst into her "corner", brandishing something glittery and metallic.

"Argh, not another Xena outfit."

Archer froze as he watched her standing there in her sports panties with red serpent-skin thong over it, a tiny, *tiiiiny* bra barely covering the essentials. Joan's first reaction was to shoo him off. She forced her hands down, breathed semi-normally as she put up a brave front.

You've had brain-melting sex with the guy. Just breathe.

She looked down at herself, cringe-smiled. "So? Is this better?"

"No. It's not—"

He stopped. His gaze riveted to hers then slid below, triggered a frisson as if his eyes had suddenly become ray beams. She felt her nipples harden against the faux leather.

After swallowing hard, he shoved the mass of metal discs into her hands and left. "Try this on. I think it's the one," she heard from beyond the panel.

What's up with him now? Moody men.

She took the red cobra off, slipped it back on the hanger and spent a full minute figuring the golden set of bra and skirt-shawl. Both were obviously handmade and embellished with tiny discs that really did look like new pennies, only golden. Gorgeous. For an intimate party with a lover, not to wear in public at a club. Ugh.

As soon as she slipped the bra on, Joan nodded. Yup. Perfect fit. The belt-thing, if she could call it that, followed and fit snugly over her hips. Good. She didn't want any "wardrobe malfunction" during her routine. It was enough that she'd be half naked. She didn't want to pull a full frontal on the audience. For some reason, she suddenly felt self-conscious about coming out from behind the privacy panel. She'd never been a shy girl. And she'd already had sex—against a firemen's pole too—with Archer and so

couldn't explain the sudden feeling of awkwardness, the reticence she presently experienced about showing him this outfit. Maybe because he'd looked annoyed. Or stressed. Or whatever other reason had made him act all tensed and huffy.

Maybe he's just sick of passing clothes back and forth.

Actually, he'd been very good. Had seemed to be having fun even. So why the sudden temper flare?

Joan poked her head beside the panel, caught him staring expectantly in her direction.

"It fits well. Comfortable too. Surprising, considering I'm wearing miniature CDs held together with fishing line."

"Come out so I can see you." He hadn't laughed at her joke.

Trying to regulate her breathing proved a waste of time so Joan slowly stepped out from behind the bamboo panel, kept a hand nonchalantly hooked over the top edge and shook a leg so the belt-thing would jingle.

"Ho, ho, ho."

He didn't laugh at that joke either.

His gaze just *devouring* her, Archer crossed his arms over his chest, ran his tongue quickly over his bottom lip. "Move a bit."

Joan bounced once on the balls of her feet, looking down at herself to see how the thing fit when she moved. Not bad. She caught him still looking at her like a tiger would a gazelle.

"And?"

"Do the bounce. You know the one? If you hang on to the panel, it should feel pretty close."

She couldn't even keep her gaze on his when she bent her knees, bounced on her heels once then snapped back up with a fun little jingle to accentuate the move. Joan snorted a laugh that quickly died in her throat when Archer shook his head. His eyes flashed.

"Don't make this a joke," he said through his teeth. "You have to tease the audience, share yourself with them. Fill the place with your energy. When you laugh, you burst the bubble and all your hard work is wasted."

She rolled her eyes, shook her head. "Ah, come on. It's shaking your ass to music."

Archer left his spot and drew near. Not threateningly in the least, his hands at his sides, yet he charged the air between them with energy crackling, coiling, pulsating outward with each of his steps to encompass the tiny room. His gaze never left hers. And when he stopped in front of her, all Joan could look at was him.

He wore *all* his clothes—a crisp white shirt tucked just so into stone-washed, straight-cut jeans—and there was *no* music either.

Just shaking your ass to music, eh, genius?

“See what I mean?” he murmured.

Behind her, sunlight stabbed through the window and hit his pale eyes at an angle, casting half of his face in amber shadow that played with his chiseled features, underlined his aristocratic nose and perfect mouth.

He leaned into her, very close. She could feel his breath. “Now do it again, and *pin* me to the goddamn wall.”

He retreated by a couple of steps and waited.

For the first time since, hell, in her life, Joan couldn't think of a funny thing to say. There'd be no hiding behind her sense of humor, there'd be no goofing around. She'd have to come out and do this thing. Fill the place with her energy, as he'd said. But how could she do that? She wasn't drop-dead gorgeous, not like he was! She was a big kook, a walking disaster. Murphy's Law come to life. She could question a suspect and make him tell her all his secrets just by buying him lunch and coming up with a few jokes, could defuse a situation with her wit and oftentimes silly ways but had never once used her body to “speak” to people. Not seriously anyway.

Pin me to the goddamn wall.

'Kayyy.

She planted her gaze on him, put it all out there through her eyes and stance. All her energy, all of herself. She opened her body to him, her audience of one, faced him squarely.

And then it happened. Just like that. It only lasted a split second but she felt the difference.

Joan bounced once on her heels, snapped back up, legs straight and parted shoulders' width. Her gaze never left his. She felt *it* as acutely as if she'd physically framed his face with her hands and held him there.

She'd *pinned* him.

The effect was immediate. He stopped doing that thing with his mouth, which parted on a silent gasp while his eyes flared. A wicked, wicked grin pulled his lips to one side. The pennies on her bra and belt-skirt-thing still jingled when Archer strode up to her. But Joan pressed her palm against his chest to keep him at arm's length.

“Whoa, there. I'm not done.”

He wanted her to pin him? She would. And she'd make damn sure he'd remember it too.

Archer swore he was having a heart attack! His chest felt tight, as did his throat. His jaws wanted to lock together. A drop of sweat rolled down his spine, followed a teasing course right into the waist of his jeans. He shuddered. Hot damn!

Despite the very real urge to get his hands and mouth all full of the hot goofy chick with the Turkish penny belt over her gray sports underwear, Archer stopped pressing

his chest against her hand and took a step back to let her do whatever she'd decided to do. He didn't care as long as he got to watch.

And did he ever!

She executed all of the moves from the routine he'd created for her. Those she could do without a pole anyway. Archer recognized the reverse knee spin for what it was when she rose on the ball of one foot and spun backward once, one hand up to simulate an overhead hold and one near her waist for "counterbalance". Perfect poise. Perfect eye contact. The rest of the moves were a bit conservative, a tad too quick but fuck if he cared! And those little *cling, cling, clings* from the glorious outfit just about made him want to tear out of his clothes and start her dancing on *his* personal pole.

She didn't pin him. She *blinded* him.

Joan was all he could see, all he wanted to look at. When she finished the last move—a two-foot "Cabaret" stance with her butt sticking up defiantly while she held the panel's edge as she would a pole, hands together in front of her lower belly—Archer's blood pressure hit an all-time high. He had crossed the distance and plastered himself against her and that little glittery number that cost a fortune before his brain had screamed, "You break it—you buy it."

"Joan," he murmured through her hair, grabbing her shoulders and pulling her to him. "Joan, Joan, Joan. You hot thing you!"

She chuckled while he kissed her neck, her denuded shoulders. "So I guess it worked?"

"Did it ever. Now I'm horny as hell. Gotta do something about *that*." He pressed his hips forward so she'd get the hint.

Behind her, the window called to him. He knew his smile to be more predatory than nice but Joan didn't seem to care and let him back-walk her against the wall.

"Look at them," he whispered, turning her around so she could see people going by below their feet, across the street, carrying on their daily business. "They're your audience. Right there."

She spent a while looking out the window as he kissed her nape, pulled her hair out of the way and licked the shells of her ears. A frisson visibly stiffened her nipples. He wanted a taste of those bad enough to beg.

"They *are* my audience," she murmured, nodding. "People like them will watch me do my thing."

He slipped a hand inside the halter bra, under the triangles of crocheted ribbon holding the pennies in place. With a collection of heart-stopping little clinks, it slipped over a breast, revealed the glorious nipple underneath, and if the sight of that pink candy didn't deck him in the next two seconds, he didn't know what would.

"I want to do things to you, Joan," he murmured in her ear. Cupping her exposed breast, he weighed it gently. "You have no idea."

She cocked her head. "Oh, I think I have *some* idea."

"No," he countered, "you really don't. I want to do *things* to you I've never wanted to do before. I want to make love to you here and now, right in front of that window for all to see. I want you quick and dirty, slow and tender." A faint pelvic thrust in her lower back made her gasp. Such sweet music to his manly ego.

"Having sex in a public place is illegal."

"No, it's not," Archer replied, hooking his index finger in the string of her halter bra to denude her other breast. "Getting caught is."

"You're bad."

"You have no idea."

"Again, I think I'm getting a *pretty* good idea," Joan replied then sighed when he cupped both breasts. So warm, so soft.

"Do you enjoy it when a man talks sexy as he's making love to you?"

A grin lifted her cheek against his. "Like how he's going to fuck me right into the carpet?"

What?

"That's what a man has said to you? Fuck you right into the carpet?" He couldn't believe this. Into. The. Carpet. What an idiot.

Joan nodded as she lifted her hand and wrapped it behind his neck. "Didn't do much more than make me laugh. I don't think he was going for that response."

"Guys are idiots," Archer sighed, shaking his head. "No, what I'm talking about when I say 'sexy talk' has nothing to do with *what* I'll do but *how* I'll do it. And *why*."

"Why?"

"Mmm. Why. For example, 'I'll caress those gorgeous breasts of yours'. That's not bad but it won't make you gasp. Any guy with half a brain can come up with that. But *how* I'll do it, now that's the interesting part, that's stimulating. So. I'll caress your breasts with my hands, with my mouth, and treat them like the juiciest fruits I've ever tasted. Much better. No?"

She nodded once quickly.

Good. Phase Two.

"And the why is this. Because I want to watch your skin blush right here." He pressed an index finger between her breasts. "I want to watch goose bumps rise here." His finger traveled to her shoulder, brushed down her biceps. "And I want to taste some of that right there." He made his finger as light as he could down her belly, followed the natural curve and cupped her mons. The tiny discs clinked when he pressed his palm there. "Ulterior motives. Call me an opportunistic prick. But that's my goal."

Joan chuckled and began to turn toward him but he stopped her by pressing his hand harder over her mons while he squeezed a leg between hers. "You never turn your back on the audience. You keep yourself open to them. Facing them. That's stage presence and it's what makes or kills a show."

She *mmm-ed*. "But I'm not giving a show right now."

"You're always giving a show. Everyone is."

Archer used his hands as he would shawls, ran them in quick and long passes over her belly and sides, her hips, her thighs, while his mouth brushed against the little vertebra jutting at the base of her neck. He loved that spot on a woman. A tiny bump for the more slender women or a smooth curve for the bodacious ones. He could—and had—done this all day, all night. Just kiss the back of a woman's neck. With lips and breath alone, and whispers too. Or with his tongue and teeth for the more eager moments. And Joan's was just perfect. Not too bony and not hidden.

Mmm.

She really *was* perfect for his tastes.

With the angle, he knew some people down in the street would eventually notice. He banked on it. Not that he wanted to share Joan with any other man, but the thought of someone watching her and him together made him hard and eager.

Not want to share a woman? When did that happen?

He'd never been the jealous, possessive type. He'd always shared his lovers and they'd returned the favor. He loved how a former flame would sometimes float back to him with new skills or tastes or wants. Nothing more exciting than a woman who knew what she wanted and how to get it! Especially if she'd enjoyed some new thing with another lover and Archer was lucky enough to try to raise the bar and "beat" that guy at his own game.

You've always been a competitive asshole, Archer.

All part of his charm!

She shivered, looked left and right then back over her shoulder at him. A blonde eyebrow was raised high.

"I've kissed both your mouths, Joan, you're not getting shy on me, are you?"

"No but someone will see us." She didn't sound overly worried, just stating a fact.

"It's good practice for Saturday."

"What if it's someone I know? What if it's another cop? My precinct isn't that far."

"You think people you know, men or women, haven't already undressed you in their heads? We all do it, we all look at someone beautiful or alluring or interesting and think 'Mmm, I wonder how she looks under those clothes?' It's the best part of imagination. Wondering and guessing. And when you're lucky enough to test your theory for real, well, that's just...*rawr*."

"Rawr?"

Archer laughed, shocked he'd act in such a silly way. She must have been rubbing off on him.

"Yeah, well, don't quote me or anything. But this, you *can* take to the show."

With one hand against her hip and the other pressed against her mons, he began to rotate his hips, slowly, letting her find her own rhythm, her own technique, while he'd provide the *ooh la la* factor from behind.

Joan gyrated those lovely hips in small circles at first then must have found her natural measure because she accentuated the move, the reach of each rotation, until she was curving her butt up into him with each roll. Enough so that Archer seriously considered throwing all that Feng Shui shit "be one with your thong...you have to *be* the thong, to *be* the thong" out the window and pushing her against the wall for a disorderly coupling backseat-of-a-1971-Charger style. Hot damn!

He followed her, let her take the lead, kept his hands light on her so she'd have freedom of movement. Something told him he'd be well rewarded.

"How's that?" she murmured after linking both her hands behind his neck.

"Perfect, just perfect."

"Do you think someone's watching?"

"Someone always is."

And Joan couldn't think of anything more titillating than the thought of someone, somewhere, watching what she was doing with Archer, watching them grind against one another, watching his hands on her breasts—and both of which he'd popped out of her top too—her butt pressed back against his hard-on. Watch them up in the window of a lingerie boutique on the second floor of a Montreal downtown building. She never would've guessed she was the exhibitionistic type.

Who'da thunk it?

While Archer's fine, fine hands slipped underneath her penny belt and converged over her pubic bone, caused a veritable surge of juices to slick her, the heat from his palms seeped in through the double layer of sports panties. She'd have to get some metallic gold thong or something. Man, she wanted her panties off like yesterday!

He accompanied her hip rotations, didn't try to impose his rhythm, just followed hers. Quicker she went. Undulation, gyration, a bit of hip popping on one side. Behind her, his breathing accelerated. She felt so powerful, so in control.

When he abruptly released her so he could pull her panties down around her ankles, Joan gasped but didn't try to stop him. He stood behind her again. She felt him fiddle with the closure of his jeans. To help, she reached for the penny belt and meant to untie it.

"Don't you dare! Keep it on."

She felt his jeans crumple around his legs, brushing the back of hers and triggering a series of shivers. Who knew denim could do that! Instincts forced her butt harder and higher against him to espouse his firm belly and the rock-hard cock pressing downward into the juncture of her cheeks. Little clicks from her garment provided perfect musical

accompaniment when Joan felt him tilt his hips. She parted her legs a bit wider, held on to the window frame with one hand.

“Do you feel *bad*?” he asked. “Bad in a good way?”

“I feel very, very bad. Bad in a *great* way.”

“Attagirl.”

“Are you just going to ta—”

Then Archer was inside her.

“Mmmm.”

Smooth, so smooth and silky, his entrance pulled a long sigh out of her.

“Are you still watching your audience, Joan?” he whispered in her ear, rising into her sex, unfolding her around him.

She nodded for indeed her gaze was still turned outward and down, followed a man crossing the street, his raincoat opened in front. He wore dress pants cut just right. She left this man to set her gaze on another who looked Mediterranean with wavy black hair glossed back on his skull and talking animatedly on a cell phone she couldn't see. He flicked it shut against his thigh and leaned on the wrought iron garbage can to adjust his shoe. His gaze traveled up. Across the street. Up at her. Their gazes met.

Strangely, she felt as if he'd been looking *for* her not just *at* her.

“Do you see him? With the pink T-shirt?” Archer asked as he started pulling away. “He's looking at you. Make him part of your show. Share yourself with him.”

Joan knew the Mediterranean man could see what was going on, if only for the rising grin on his lips. He straightened, his eyes still turned to her, accepting her gift, watching her show. She'd *pinned* him.

Archer pulled out almost completely then pushed back in. Joan wanted to close her eyes, loll her head but did neither. It'd mean breaking eye contact. She couldn't do that. She didn't want to. The man on the street expected a show. She'd give him one.

Archer put his chin on her shoulder, seemed to be watching the man across the street as well. “Tell him you enjoy his watching. Thank him for accepting your gift.”

Joan nodded to herself, to Archer, but also to the man on the street below, who'd lost the smile and watched intently as she used her free hand to touch her breast, weigh it as one would a purse full of change before releasing it and grabbing the other side of the window frame.

Archer's thrusts accentuated, lifted her heels off the floor. Still she watched the man. And he watched her.

“Harder,” she murmured for her lover's benefit. Or hers. Or that of the audience.

“Make him feel it,” Archer whispered hoarsely. *Thrust, thrust, thrust.* “Bring him in with us. Take him.”

Heat radiated down along her thighs, up her back. Archer's muscled legs moved like pistons, one almost between hers, the other pressed behind, his hands secured

around her waist, the safe enclosure of his arms sheltering her from everyone and everything, even if she did offer a view. No one would touch. Not with Archer.

Sounds from the street below reached her muffled and dimmed, as did everything else except the man in the pink T-shirt across the street. She saw him lick his lip. Both hands hung at his sides while he stood perfectly immobile, seemingly unsurprised a couple was going at it across the street from him. As though he'd known all along she'd be here, known what would happen. Strange.

"Watch him," Archer panted. "See? He's all...yours."

"Mine," she repeated through her teeth.

"I'm taking...you." Archer swallowed hard, huffed a curse before letting out a tight grunt. "And...you're...taking...*him*."

It was like having two men at once.

Archer's breaths came harshly now, quickly. Into herself, she took him. Deep. Welcomed him, the best lover she'd ever had. She was getting close. Shivers tightened her neck, spread downward to encompass her whole body. Deep and slow penetrations now, the entire length of him, every inch and every ounce. Slowly. Profoundly. Joan bit her bottom lip.

"He's waiting...the finale," he panted in her ear. "Give it to him."

Joan *ahh-ed* when Archer did a sort of figure eight once he'd reached the end of her pussy, retreated to his glans and pushed straight upward.

"Ohhh."

"Give it to him," he whispered. "He's been good."

With a moan, Joan kicked one foot out of her panties and spread her legs wider, grabbed the windowsill harder and rose on the balls of her feet. Pelvis tilted to make her cleft that much more accessible, she threw her head back, rode Archer's measured drives. Fire in widening rings spread from her distended pussy. She cried out. Came like a bomb.

Across the street, the man in the hot pink T-shirt put a hand to his chest, stepped back by a pace.

Joan let her head fall to her chest, hair partly obscuring her vision of her "audience". Behind her, Archer huffed and puffed while he kept his arms encircled tightly around her waist, his chin pressed against her shoulder. Each breath ruffled her hair.

When she looked back up, the man in the pink T-shirt was gone.

Chapter Six

"I'm hungry enough to eat lettuce," Joan announced with a grin as she paid Raphaëlle. "Worked up some appetite, whoo."

His star pupil was much too smooth to take the bait but she did raise an eyebrow. Joan, obviously satisfied with herself, pocketed the change – another woman in need of a purse – grabbed the bag and slung it over her shoulder. She must have misjudged for it hit something behind her.

Of course she misjudged. It's Joan.

A rack of long Mardi Gras bead necklaces teetered dangerously for the half second it took Joan to whip around and catch it. With a tight smile and her cheeks darkening to a charming rose, she set it right.

"Oops."

Raphaëlle just seemed to be glad the pair left when Archer opened the door for his sexy companion and followed her down the stairs.

"Do you want to eat something?" she asked, turning around before she'd reached the last step. "There's a little place not far. It's cute."

Damn. That grin could power half the city.

"Be care –"

Arms flailing, Joan missed the last step, thudded hard on her heels and only remained upright because Archer had leaped the last three and grabbed the back of her belt. Fear squeezed his balls as if he'd been dunked in ice-cold water. She was going to give him a heart attack!

"Shit, Joan, fais attention!"

Man, he was sweating and shaking too. And why the sudden anger? It wasn't as though she'd come close to killing herself, just maybe injuring an ankle or her pride. Yet the fear had all but made him leap down the steps to catch her. She was going to get *him* killed, never mind herself.

"I got the first word," she replied through an awkward smile while yanking herself upright. "But not the rest. It didn't sound very friendly."

He rolled his eyes, took a deep breath. "I said to be careful."

"Yeah, that too I'm sure."

"It's *all* I said. 'Shit, be careful', verbatim."

"Yeah, yeah."

Ah, for crying out loud!

"You're stubborn, aren't you?"

“Part of my charm.”

Isn't that my line?

Outside, sunlight hit roofs of parked cars. Wait, these weren't parked. Just stalled in traffic. Why didn't people use the goddamn metro? Oh shit. She was going to drive again.

“So?” she asked, turning to him. “Want to eat something?”

“If we walk there, sure.”

A mumbled reply he didn't get made him grin. Teasing her was so much fun!

A pair of women walked by—sashayed by more aptly—gave him the once-over and the cocky grin and the hip salute and everything. Signs he usually accepted with his own special smile and a raised eyebrow, the one that made women want to fan themselves, buy him a drink and have him fuck their lights out. An offer he always refused. The drink-paying part anyway. Because he was such a *gentleman*. A Gentleman. Ha!

“You must get that a lot.”

He shook his head, refocused on his companion. She was grinning. Again. Man, she was hot and she had a sense of humor too! Although he could detect a bit of unease on her part and wondered why.

“Get what?”

Oh, but he knew exactly what she was talking about.

Yeah, but I just want to hear it. So sue me.

“You know exactly what I'm talking about, Archer.”

There you go. No fooling her.

“Ladies' attention, you mean?” he asked innocently. Did it bother her, he wondered, in a way hoping it did while the rest of him recoiled at the implications.

“Attention? Is that what it's called, the look they gave you?”

For some reason needing to adjust himself, Archer pumped his chest, winked at Joan and slipped one panel of his shirt in his jeans. Only one. *Vogue* had been very clear on that. Fall required a *laissez aller* attitude. Beige was the new black. Bling was in. So was cologne. But there was no way in hell, all however many levels of it according to Dante, he'd be caught dead in leggings. Guys! In cropped *leggings*, for fuck's sake! No wonder sects thought the end of the world was nigh.

“Are you *jealous*?” He threw her a quick glance in case she tried to hide it.

A bout of hearty laughter settled it. And pissed him off. Not even a little bit jealous? Unless she was acting.

Hey! You're the one always wanting to share your lovers. You've just shared Joan with some guy across the street. She can share you with chicks who only walked by. Plus, she's not yours and you're not hers. Settle down.

“...sushi makes a big mess...”

"Huh? *Pardon?*"

"Where were you?"

Joan's eyes sparkled like brown gemstones. Hottie-hot-hottie!

"I was proposing places," she replied, doing a one-eyebrow frown he thought was the sexiest thing since lip gloss. "Pizza. Fries. Sushi, but it makes a big mess. For me it does anyway."

"I'm *sure* it does."

"Hey."

"Sorry."

They had lunch at a smoked meat sandwich place—well, it was Montreal—ate and drank their pops, root beer for her, diet cola for him. They argued over the bill. She won. He let her. She drove him home. He nearly died of fright and thought for sure he'd lose his life on the northbound Boulevard Décarie when she passed a truck that decided it wasn't going to take that exit but the one right after, swerving back into the flow of traffic, nearly ramming the tiny, tiny BMW 325i in the side. Passenger side. His.

I should've taken the metro.

Back in his studio, they practiced until it was clear Joan couldn't hold on to the pole anymore so they called it a day, made a date for the next morning at seven. Their last day of practice. All in all, he'd had the best day he could remember. Joan was funny, knowledgeable, dedicated. And one hot chick!

* * * * *

"So why do you feel like shit then?" Mel demanded as she crossed her legs on the sofa and leaned her pointy chin on her fist. She hit the mute on the remote and interrupted the news anchor just as he was about to announce the following day's weather. Joan had been right. They had great timing, the two of them. How the hell would he know what to wear now?

Archer shrugged, stretched his legs while he watched the man with the calcified toupee pointing to a digital rendition of the province, complete with tacky sun charts and fluffy clouds. Low-tech crap. Why did he insist on paying for that channel when he could watch some hot babe in a tight suit purring the day's meteorological goodies on another?

"Search me. I don't know. But I do feel shitty, so watch your mouth."

"You *know* why."

"Fine. Tell me what's wrong then, O Enlightened Female."

She gave him the Spock salute, followed by the single-finger one then twisted her wrist back and forth, alternating the two gestures as if it were a flashing sign. *Live Long and Prosper...Kiss My Ass...Live Long and Prosper...Kiss My Ass...*

"You like her."

“Are we having this conversation again? I already admitted I liked her then I followed with a very logical explanation of why it wouldn’t work. Remember? Me fraudster, her cop. Me escort, her...oh, wait, let me see. *Cop!* From the Morality squad on top of things.”

“If you could just get your head out of your ass, you’d probably notice she wouldn’t mind your extracurricular activities and probably doesn’t give a shit about the state of your income tax.”

“She does, believe me, it’s in her. She was all ‘isn’t downloading songs illegal’ this morning—”

Mel rolled her eyes. “That is so *lame*, even from you.”

“I can’t tell her. She wouldn’t understand...”

Perhaps it was the tone or the way he sighed the last syllable but something must have caught Mel’s scalpel-sharp antennas for she sat straight up, put both hands over her mouth. “Oh...you really do like her and you’re afraid she’ll reject you.” Her voice sounded muffled.

“Pfft!”

Yet the remark snuck under his carapace and readily found a weak spot to bury itself. Was that it? Was he afraid Joan wouldn’t accept him? He’d already lied to her once about his supposedly not having sex with his students—or not often anyway, when the truth was he slept with pretty much every single cute woman who walked in and looked willing. Surely that little lie wouldn’t paint him a jerk worth kicking out.

But you’re not even in, genius. You just had sex with Joan. Nothing more.

Unfortunately.

“What did you do?” Mel asked with that tone of voice he hated. The one that told him either he came clean or spent hours being prodded and poked.

So he told her.

She seemed to require a bit of time to formulate her comment. Her eyes closed, she pinched the bridge of her nose. “*Why* did you say that? It’s not true, like not even a little.”

“See? You’re like her, all truth and virtue and shit. I panicked. I didn’t want to make her feel as if she’s one of many, just another notch.”

“Isn’t she?”

“You always have a way with words,” he snarled, sitting deeper into his leather sofa. “Of course she’s not. I like her, remember, Miss 154 IQ?”

The flat screen flashed with a commercial about some type of dishwasher that supposedly left one’s dishes so sparkling one needed sunglasses to empty the machine. He wanted sound, dammit.

“Give me the remote.”

“She’ll understand. Just ask her if she’d like to take things further, you know, start dating. If she says yes, then come clean right away. Tell her you’ve dated other students before, I dunno. But make sure to tell her she’s special.”

“She is.”

“Then there’s no problem.”

Oh, but there is.

He was afraid to lose his heart in the deal again. Afraid to reach out then stand there like an ass. Alone.

The thought made him abandon all pretense. He *did* like Joan enough to worry about his careless words and there’d be no denying it. Not with Mel anyway. Everybody else, he kept at arm’s length. But not her. And anyway, she wouldn’t *stay* away. His best friend could be as bad as the proverbial spaghetti stain—when one thought one had gotten rid of it, it came back at the least opportune moment. He should know. Hadn’t she caught him making love to his hot lady cop against one of the poles?

Mel nodded, her argument gathering steam with every second of his silence. “Tell her about the other students you dated and about Gentlemen Inc. too. You have to. Or I will.”

“Don’t. You. *Dare*, Mel. I’m serious. It’s none of your business.”

Mel grinned wide. “Oh, getting all hissy, are we? That’s good. It means you’re in love.”

The L-word.

She hit the mute button again and seemed to become instantly engrossed in a quick science spot about some new plankton life form they’d found south of Don’t-Give-a-Shit Island.

Archer let the narrator’s boring voice wash over him as he considered Mel’s dire words. He’d fallen for a lady cop.

No, I haven’t. We’ve had incredibly hot and satisfying sex. Twice. In two days.

Liar.

He liked her. He liked being around her, liked that she made him laugh. He hadn’t laughed that often and that unguardedly since...

Yeah. Remember Vickie?

He’d sworn it’d never happen again. Never. So he sure as hell wasn’t getting into a relationship with a hot lady cop who had to pretend she was a pole dancer and sneak into a nightclub owned and operated by organized crime. Only hurt there.

Stay away, screamed his brain.

Invite her over, screamed his dick.

His heart didn’t say a thing. Chickenshit. Maybe he just didn’t have one.

He wouldn’t take the chance she’d reject him for that one stupid lie and his escort status. Plus, she had her career. He had his. They didn’t mix well since her colleagues

tended to harass his. If not arrest them outright when they came down on a nightclub, for whatever reason *du jour* they happened to have. He probably knew by face some of her coworkers. Like that big dumb brute from the Morality squad with the brush under his nose. Archer had been arrested twice in those “raids”, detained for part of the night then released without charge. Why? Because he was having a drink with a hot girl who wore nice shiny boots. *Only* nice shiny boots.

So it'll never work out with Joan.

He felt Mel's stare on him and turned toward her, putting on his most lethal glare.

“Are you trying to convince yourself it wouldn't work?”

“Stay out of my fu—”

“You are *so* doing it! I can't believe you! She's fun and cute and there you go, you make sure to sabotage yourself!”

“Mel, shit! What the—” He shook his head, cursed. “You have a probe in my brain or what? Stay out of my head, okay? And while you're at it, stay out of my house too!”

She froze looking at him. Then Mel stood, dusted her lap and put the remote on the coffee table. Without a word or backward glance, she left the living room.

Jesus fucking Christ!

He heard her soft tread as she walked down the corridor. She must have been passing the gilded mirror, his mother's favorite piece in the whole house. It was too posh and big for him alone, but he'd promised to keep it in the family after she'd died, not even a year preceding her husband's own death. He'd lost both of them to the same disease, lung cancer. It'd only been his father who'd smoked though. Problem was, Archer was *it* as far as family went. No brother or sister. Cousins, those he preferred to keep far from his affairs. No wife. No kids. And now he'd just kicked his best friend out the door too.

Great going, George Berthold Archer.

The front door closed. It didn't slam. Mel was a door-slammer. Especially when she was angry.

You've hurt your only friend, you jackass.

Archer instantly reached for the cell phone to leave her a message for when she'd get to her own house but changed his mind. It was too pathetic. Even for a guy.

Not thinking things through—*full of surprises, are we, these days*—he rushed out of his house barefoot and wearing only a pajama bottoms, sprinted down the driveway and waved frantically for Mel to stop the old Subaru Outback her big brother had passed down to her when he'd bought himself a new set of wheels. And a new wife.

She stopped barely a foot from his shins. Through the windshield, he spotted Mel's face, tight and hard. She avoided his gaze. He heard the gearshift *tunk* in reverse.

“Wait! Mélanie!!” He ran to the side of the car and opened it. Mel never locked her car doors despite years of his constant admonitions. Didn't she realize a bad guy could pick her up with one hand and yank her out of her car?

Being the softie she was, Mel abruptly stopped the car, which rattled as it settled on its busted suspension. "What?!"

Archer crouched by her leg, put his hand on her lap. "*J'suis un trou d'cul.*"

"An asshole *and* a genius. Wow."

Whoa. Sarcasm. She really was pissed. And hurt. He could see the pain plainly in her dark eyes. He was such an asshole.

"I'm sorry, okay. I don't know what to do. I dug myself a hole. If I tell her about all the other women, she might take it the wrong way. And if I don't and we start dating, she's bound to find out eventually. And then there's Adriano..."

"You can't *not* tell her, especially since you like Joan."

It came to him suddenly. He hadn't even thought of it, not that he could tell anyway.

Mel's eyes flared.

"I'm going to quit Gentlemen Inc."

"What? You can't. Adriano already wired you the money. It'd be like stealing."

"Not like stealing, it'd *be* stealing. So what? I'll just give him his money back."

"How? We can't even trace it closer than a country and now maybe a city. You can't give him his money back."

"I'll contact him and leave him a message. That I don't want to do this job. Maybe he'll give me another."

"You know that's not true. It's in your contract. You refuse to finish a job you started, you're out. Simple as that." Mel shook her head. "Why don't you wait until after Joan's job? Let her do her thing, catch the bad guy *then* tell Adriano you quit. Nice and easy."

But that'd mean facing Joan for the next two days while the back of his head burned with the urge to tell her he hadn't been one hundred percent truthful, that he *did* tend to have sex with his students, that she wasn't the only one, that he didn't think she'd understand his lifestyle, her being a cop and all. Tell her that he was an escort who'd been paid thirty thousand undeclared dollars by an anonymous guy living in Italy. She'd think he was with the mob or something! She'd think he was doing it all for the money. Which he was. Only not with her. She'd never believe *that*.

For fuck's sake!

He closed his eyes, breathed in and out slowly. "What if she thinks I'm a loser for pretending to be something I'm not? What if she can't deal with Gentlemen Inc.?"

"You have to take that chance."

Archer didn't like the idea of gambling Joan's affection. He wanted it. Needed it. The sex was good but he wanted more. He wanted her to like him in return. What if she pushed him away instead when he came clean?

He tried to smile, probably cringed instead. "She might even kick my ass."

“But you enjoy that,” Mel replied deadpan.

He caught the look of satisfaction on her face and wondered for a second if he hadn’t been manipulated all along. He was such a *guy*.

“After the job,” he said, more to himself than to his best friend. That scheming little witch! “After the job, I’ll tell Joan everything and let her decide if I’m good enough to keep around.” Fear twisted his inside. Where was his macho pride when he needed it?

“I bet she’s going to kick your ass something fierce.”

Archer couldn’t help the wicked grin. “Mmm.”

* * * * *

The brutish cop with the paintbrush under his nose. Well, shit!

When he entered his studio, Joan on his heels, Officer Brute extended his bear paw of a hand and squeezed Archer’s way too hard for polite society.

Weren’t you the provincial judo champion George Berthold Archer or were you not? Hell yeah!

With just a bit of wrist action, Archer buckled the man’s arm and walked into his “bubble”.

“That’s a good handshake you have there, Constable,” he snarled through a smile. By his side, Joan emitted a sort of squeak that would’ve made him laugh had he not been wading knee-deep in testosterone. “But a bit weak on the wrist, eh?”

His face becoming blotchy right away, Officer Brute nodded once quickly. Pain did that to people. Made them all nice and polite.

“Pas pire,” he murmured through his moustache.

Not bad? Ha!

To preserve the man’s dignity – and to show Joan he wasn’t a total asshole – Archer released the man’s hand and stepped back, his smirk taking flight. “So? You’re staying to watch your colleague’s work, are you?”

You goddamn sleaze.

Joan crossed her arms and shook her head. “Sergeant-detective Sauvageau is just here to brief you about tomorrow.”

The big man nodded and suddenly, the way he looked at Joan, all paternal and kind, calmed Archer considerably. So he wasn’t so bad after all. Just brutish.

“Constable Blair already ‘briefed’ me twice actually.”

That’s a nice blush right there, Archer congratulated himself. He felt a good snigger was in order but held it in. She was rubbing off on him, that big kook.

Sauvageau’s eyebrows twitched. Clearly, he wasn’t getting it. Poor man. “Yeah, okay, so. You need to know a few of the protocols we have since you’re a civilian and all.”

Archer timed him. Took the large man seventeen minutes to basically tell him two things. One, if he messed up and got Joan hurt, he'd be a dead guy. Two, he was a civilian, therefore expected to mess up, but if it got Joan hurt, he'd be a dead guy. Oh, and maybe a third thing as well. The Big Boss at the station thought this was all a bad, bad idea. But they were desperate to pin the bad guy, whoever that was, before he left the country. So time was of the essence here. But he if messed up and got Joan hurt...

As if I'd let her down. Jeez.

By the time Sauvageau had finished with his "briefing", Archer knew his smirk must have reached biblical proportions. It was all he could do not to shake his head and just laugh. Man, the "sergeant-detective" enjoyed repeating himself.

"Okay? Got all that?"

Archer nodded. "Wear the wire. Stay close to Joan. Act gay. Got it."

"Arghhhhh, Archer!" Joan snapped, eyes flashing.

Sauvageau's laugh was as large and overpowering as his presence. And his mustache. He nodded. "Good one, Mr. Archer. Not that I have anything against...er...alternative lifestyles."

"It's okay," Archer replied, in the mood to taunt the guy a little, poke the bear with a sharp stick. "I don't have anything against polyester and facial hair. So there you go."

Sauvageau's grin crystallized a bit at the edges but he took the shot and rolled with it. He meant to shake Archer's hand, seemed to rethink that and just snapped his chin at him instead.

"It's dangerous work, getting close to that asshole, Mr. Archer. Just ask one of INTERPOL's informants. He's dead. So we don't want any surprises, okay? Laramée makes his living selling girls to pimps and 'private collectors'." He offered a protective glance to Joan, who just rolled her eyes and shooed the large man out the door. She said something to him. But Archer didn't hear anything else, too busy digesting the bad guy's name.

Laramée. As in Claude Laramée?

Shit.

As soon as the door closed over Sauvageau's wide back, Archer threw his hands up. "Laramée?! Joan, man, that's way too dangerous."

He realized he'd stepped over a line without realizing it. The jovial expression flipped abruptly to frustration, even anger.

"Of course he's a dangerous man. We wouldn't go after him if he weren't, we wouldn't be that...desperate. But *too* dangerous? *Too* dangerous for what? For me?"

"For two people, I meant," Archer replied quickly before the firestorm of "you're just a male chauvinist pig" hit. "Why don't you cops just raid the place? You do it often enough in other clubs."

Why did that come out all petulant and whiny? When had his Cool Factor flatlined?

Joan crossed her arms. "If we could just 'raid the place' to catch him, don't you think we would've done it already? He's like smoke, that guy. Even INTERPOL, with their long arm and the network of informants, couldn't catch him when he was on their turf. So now that he's back here, we need to make sure he stays put until my guys come in and slap a pair of handcuffs on him. And not the pink fuzzy kind."

Had she just seen in his head? He'd been fantasizing about that a lot lately. Joan slapping pink fuzzy cuffs on him and spanking his ass because he'd been a bad, baaaad boy. Mmm!

"So they're using you as bait, a diversion. Just like— What? What did I say?"

Joan's cheeks had just turned a "you're in so much shit your kids will stink" shade of red. She advanced on him, pointed an index finger in his chest. "I've never disrespected you or your work. I never made one remark about what you do for a living, the kind of friends you have. I'm the vanguard. The one on the inside who has to pin the tail on the donkey, okay? Laramée may be slimy, but he's not unbeatable, okay? He has his weakness. From what we know of him, he likes women. So we're hoping he won't see this one coming until it's too late. But don't call what I do baiting. I'm not *bait*."

He huffed and puffed for a reply but soon gave up. "Look, I didn't mean it that way," he began, took a long breath, let it out through his nose. *Mel, this is all your fault.* "I'm just worried backup won't get there quickly enough if things turn to shit. That's all. Nothing to do with your abilities or guts or anything. Okay?"

Her grumbled reply didn't sit well with him so he approached, cupped her chin and angled it to him. "Okay? I'm just worried. It's built into us—males—the worry gene, the 'step away from my female' thing. We hide it, play cool cats, but it's there all the same."

And it'd been there while he held his girlfriend's hand as the docs did their thing two years ago, took from her what he'd put there, took his heart in the process as well.

Large brown eyes riveted him to the spot. The gay sparkle returned right away. "*Your female?*"

You dumb ass, you stupid, moronic, reckless fool of a macho— Shit.

Archer kissed her so he wouldn't have to answer.

Chapter Seven

Joan was sure she'd gone up in flames when Archer leaned into her and pressed his lips to hers, his hand still cupped around her chin. He'd never kissed her this way before. Tenderly – without the wicked grin preceding it. Her hands hurriedly clamped around his neck as she pressed herself into him, his firm and fit body, the way they almost clicked with the quiet but satisfying *snap* of puzzle pieces. Liquid heat spread to her pussy right away. Maybe they ought to finish what Mel had interrupted? Just as Joan was starting to lower her hands in search of glorious skin to touch, Archer pulled away, sighed then put the smirk back on.

"If we don't practice, you won't make the audition for amateur night." His wicked, wicked tongue did that thing, brushed against the back of his teeth with a tantalizing glimmer.

"You always do that," Joan replied, still not letting go of him. "With your mouth."

"Enjoy it?"

Would grinning like a loon answer that?

It must have for Archer chuckled, kissed her hard but quickly pulled away again. "Practice. Now."

Joan gasped when he slapped her butt before marching for the CD player and putting her song on. At once, the bass thumped slow and erotic. How was she supposed to practice now? Horny and hot and...*rawr*, as he'd said.

Archer grabbed his pole – nark, nark – threw a slanted look at her until she'd taken her clothes off except for her pink *No Pain No Gain* cami, sports underwear and the penny belt.

They started with the first few moves, a combination of simple holds and leg extensions, followed by more complicated leg work that involved a lot of pointing and twisting around the pole, and finally hit the spot where, as the song reached a crescendo of electric guitar, Joan was supposed to do the dreaded Reverse Knee Spin. She landed on her ass, bit her cheek and let a good curse out.

Archer shook his head, looked at the ceiling. "Let's do it again."

They did. Joan holding on to the pole with all the grip she had. Her palms squeaked when she bounced on her heels, snapped up, kicked high with one foot, to right away switch hands and wrap her other leg around the pole. Here it was again. Using all her focus, keeping the toned back of Archer in sight, she grabbed the pole high with her right hand, low with her left, kicked herself backward while simultaneously releasing her grip in tiny increments so as to gradually slip down to the ground. She twisted a

full rotation around the pole, one leg bent other extended, slid down to the ground just as the last *twang* of the electric guitar struck. Perfect timing. She grinned wide.

Archer whirled on the spot, marched for her and picked her up in his arms. "Wow! That was perfect, babe!"

They shared a quick laugh while he let her feet touch the ground again.

"Again," Archer said, pushing back, still grinning wide.

They practiced her routine for the next four hours, doing it slowly, quickly, in segments, several times in one stretch. When lunchtime came around, Joan could barely close her shaking hands.

Archer cringed when Joan's grip failed, sending her backpedaling several steps for the force of the momentum. She didn't fall, didn't know why either because her legs felt like jelly. Bent in half, she took several deep breaths.

"That's enough for today," he announced as he hit the stop button on the CD player. "You have to be in shape to melt their faces tomorrow."

"I think it's my thighs that are going to melt," she replied, checking the inside of her right thigh. A long red mark shone there from the many spins. "I'll have to hide that somehow." She straightened, caught the look of pride in his eyes and that swelled her ego as nothing else, though she instantly felt silly for letting it get to her. "Hey, should I get some baby oil or something? Get me all nice and shiny?"

He visibly shuddered. "What year is this? 1980? Performers don't use baby oil anymore. They use cocoa butter or other kinds of body butters. Anyway, the quickest way to the hospital is to grease yourself up then go pole dancing. I have some, you can borrow it for tomorrow."

"Oooh, sorry, I didn't know skin moisturizing was an exact science."

Archer laughed. A good-natured, open laugh. Where had the smirking, cocky man gone? She enjoyed this one much better. Even if he still was very much a Bad Boy with both capital Bs, hair tousled just so, five o'clock shadow and low-riding pants that allowed her a fine view of every single muscle on his fine belly.

Sigh.

"Is it tested on animals, that stuff?"

Archer solemnly shook his head. "I may eat our furry friends and smother their dead carcasses in pepper sauce, but I don't condone spraying cosmetics in their eyes."

Had Sauvageau been here, he would've had a theory about that and "alternative lifestyles". Which reminded her, she'd never seen someone straight-arm their way out of her boss' Special Handshake. She'd wanted to hide in shame when Sauvageau had held on to Archer's hand when it was obvious the handshake was over. Yet Archer had broken it with no apparent effort. The look of Sauvageau's face! Joan would make sure to share every detail with Chantal. Oh, what fun in the office!

"Do you have the rest of the outfit?" Archer suddenly asked, pulling her out of her gleeful "let's tease the sarge" campaign.

"It's in my gym bag in the car. Why?"

Heat wafted to her cheeks and it had nothing to do with exertion. Well, okay, a little. She was beat. Did he want a repeat of the prior day's performance?

"Why don't you have lunch here?" he offered, crossing the distance. "Something light so we can practice a bit more afterward. But this time, make it a dress rehearsal—outfit, cream, music. The works."

"Yeah, but I reek to the high heaven. I need a shower."

"I'm sure we'll find a way to take care of *that*. Come on, I'll walk with you."

Feeling buoyed for no good reason except she was finally going to see inside his house—and *isn't that just pathetic*—Joan followed him out after quickly pulling her wind pants back over her penny belt and underwear. What would the rich neighbors say? Ha.

After she retrieved her gym bag from the backseat, which made Archer smirk and make a comment she didn't hear, she followed him up to the porch. He fished a key from behind the brass mailbox, bounced his eyebrows at her then unlocked the thick oak door, cleated and polished to a high glimmer.

"That's not very safe, keeping a key outside this way," she commented. "And now I know where it is." She wondered how many other women also knew about Archer's key behind the mailbox.

Archer shrugged. "I trust you."

The urge to give him a bone-crushing hug was strong but she resisted it in the spirit of not dissolving into a puddle of Liquid Loser. She had to be cool. Stay focused. Not stare at his butt. Yet the notion of his trusting her enough to show her where he put the key to his house enveloped her in a nice, warm cocoon of denial. He didn't think of her as anything more than a fun fuck partner. Yet it was nice to pretend for a few seconds. But he wasn't a slut as Chantal suspected, just a very, very good lover and a cocky, funny guy—despite the asperities of his Bad-Boy personality.

Sex, woman. This is about sex. Nothing more.

Unfortunately.

As soon as she stepped inside, she knew he lived alone. Her cop's sense of observation told her that. Single everything. To her right on a gleaming mahogany table was set a small ceramic bowl with one set of keys, one wallet and one pair of shades. Nice wallet too. Brown leather, worn smooth at the corners and etched with *G.B.A.* in cursive letters. Her bosses hadn't told her what the *B* stood for. She'd have to take a look at his file, see what kind of background his check had revealed. It must've been clean if the lieutenant had received his name. Joan didn't know the lieutenant well enough to ask for the informant's name but promised to ask Chantal, who knew everything about everyone.

"Wow, that's nice," Joan said as she walked past a tall gilded mirror placed at the end of the lobby, right over a thick vase filled with straight, thin branches. *Very...what's the word again? Asian stuff.*

Archer stopped to look at the mirror. "It was my mom's prized possession. She would've sold me before that thing."

Joan didn't know how to reply and so just shut her mouth. Would his mom really...?

He turned to her, smirk full-on. "Man, you're gullible. She wouldn't have sold me to keep it. Maybe just rent me out."

She was so glad he'd been teasing her—what mom would value a mirror so much?—that she laughed a bit too hard for the situation.

You're such a moron, Murphy. Settle down.

"Your parents don't live here anymore?"

"They died a while back and left me the house."

"Oh. That's very smart of me, running my mouth that way. Sorry." She meant to walk up to him, kicked up the runner in the process and stumbled a few steps.

Archer's gaze flicked to the mirror, his face tight and worried. Joan wanted to laugh.

"I'll stay clear of it. Don't worry."

He took her through a living room that could've been pulled right out of a magazine. He had the Old English pub thing going on in his home, leather couch, brass lamps with the green-glass shades, wood moldings and thick bookshelves all along one side. She kept expecting to see one of those huge globes that hid a bar inside if one only lifted the northern hemisphere. Except for the mammoth flat-screen television set inside one of the bookshelves. It must've been fifty inches across!

"This is a nice house, Archer. Wow."

He shrugged but looked delighted anyway. "Both Mom and Dad were real estate agents. I had no chance."

Speaking of which, she spotted a thick frame that served as a bookend on one of the shelves. A laughing woman held a man almost in a headlock, his black wavy hair brushed back over his high forehead. So Archer had inherited his mom's pale eyes and grin but his father's dark hair and good looks. The mother wouldn't have stopped traffic with her looks, yet there was something irresistible, something kind about her, in the way her eyes smiled and sparkled, despite the obvious age of the picture.

She winked at him when she caught him looking. "Your parents were hot!"

They shared a quick grin as he took her to the kitchen beyond a swinging latticed door. It wasn't at all modern as she'd expected, even a bit tired but charming just the same. Old-fashioned wood cabinets and tiled countertops in shades of reds and oranges made her want to sit and chat. So homey! And her cluttered house in tones of Creamy Dull.

“Here,” he said, offering her a stool set against the breakfast counter. “I’ll make sandwiches so it’s not too heavy.”

Joan watched him work around his kitchen, admired the way he treated everything with a mix of manly economy of movement and culinary proficiency. He was probably a great chef. She could – and had – made water stick to the pan.

After they’d shared a tasty ham sandwich with Dijon mustard and dill pickles, iced tea and chocolate chip cookies, she helped him put everything back in order, fussed with him over the dishes – “that’s what machines are for, Joan” – and followed him to the bathroom so he could show her around.

“So,” he asked, leaning against the doorjamb of the bathroom. His biceps twitched when he looked at her from head to toe. “Together or one after the other?”

Joan snorted a laugh – damn that instinct to laugh first and ask questions after! “Oh, you’re serious? I thought you said we’d *practice* today.”

He nodded slowly. Oh, and he began doing that thing with his mouth, as though he played with a mint in there. She wouldn’t mind getting her hands on a mint herself actually.

Anyway, back to the sex god with the wicked mouth please.

“Who says practice can’t be fun? And anyway, what I said was you’d do a dress rehearsal. So you’ll only do the routine once.”

She couldn’t even speak when he stepped fully inside and closed the door behind him.

“Steam sets the smoke alarms off,” he remarked, his chin dipping low, his eyes narrowing while he studied her.

Had anyone anywhere in the history of the world made those two boring words – smoke alarms – sound so damned sexy?

“You have to be the hottest woman I’ve ever seen, Joan. Truly. I get cramps just looking at you.”

“Cramps? Mmm, sexy.”

He arched an eyebrow. “That’s the highest form of compliment a guy can give. When your balls cramp up just by looking at a woman, you know she’s special.”

She cleared her throat to subdue the laughter. “*Ball* cramps?”

Special. She liked that, being special to Archer even if she couldn’t help suspecting he’d sung that tune to countless others before.

He nodded. And when he licked his lips, kept the bottom one tucked in afterward, Joan’s ability to speak, nah, think even, was dramatically reduced. She watched him get closer, the tips of his fingers gently running along the black countertop, closer still until he stood directly in front of her, his breath brushing the skin of her face and neck and sending shivers right down to the soles of her naked feet. Speaking of which, when she peeked down, she noticed the impressive bulge tenting his pants. Whoa!

“You’re turning me on, it’s not even funny. Did you know that?”

She swallowed hard. Her gaze was riveted to his. "Shouldn't we wait until after the dress rehearsal?"

"Do you *want* to wait?"

"Um. Well." She grinned.

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

He reached over her shoulder and pulled the glass door open. "Shower, *ma belle*. And hurry if you don't want to pick my fainted ass off the floor or perform CPR on me."

From a distance, Joan suspected the scene must have looked as though an explosion of clothes had gone off in the large modern bathroom. The *No Pain No Gain* cami went flying, as did the wind pants, sports panties and penny belt. Archer was just as quick getting rid of his clothes since the "karate" pants dropped to the slate tiles nice and quick. Before he took them off, Joan had half a second to admire the black boxer briefs hugging his nice tight hips and muscled thighs. Then those went flying too and landed on the counter.

Naked, aroused—and not just a little judging by the size of cock he presently pointed at her—she let him back-walk her to the corner of the shower and waited with her hands pressed against the wall behind her while he fisted the brushed nickel knob. Glacial water rained down on them from three spigots in the ceiling. Whoa. A gasp left her.

"Cold!"

Archer grinned what had to be the most decadent, lascivious smile on the planet, even bared his teeth as he cupped the back of her neck and pulled her close. She didn't lose a single precious second and filled her hands with his glorious male body. All those sinewy muscles, so hard and inviting!

"Touch me," she whispered against his shoulder. The urge to bite *hard* nearly overwhelmed her.

"Don't worry, I'll touch you in places you didn't know had nerve endings."

Well, the smug, cocky—WHEW!

The water turned hot just as Archer's hand closed over a breast and gave a quick, teasing squeeze.

His cock poked her in the belly when he closed the gap between them.

"You know," she said against his mouth, which he kept a hair's breath away from hers yet didn't kiss her. "We've been together twice and I still haven't had a taste of this." She closed a fist around his shaft.

Arched hissed something that resembled remarkably what Chantal said when she was getting ready for a fight.

"What was that?" she asked, teasing. Another squeeze.

He closed his eyes, swallowed. "If you kill me, you won't get inside The Quicksilver, you know that."

She grinned then kissed a trail down his hard belly to his equally stiff cock filling her hand. Both hands!

While he pressed his palms against the wall, she nudged his feet wider so she could kneel in between them, dark rosy glans, so smooth and shiny and now dripping wet, pressed against her cheek. She kissed the base of it. Archer's abs, so sculpted and showing big veins leading down to the playground, twitched, pulled on his penis and made it bob enticingly.

A two-fisted approach would be perfect for him.

"Are you ready?"

Archer cursed. "You big tease!"

Half growling, half chuckling, Joan angled him downward to her mouth and wrapped her lips around that glorious rod, worked her jaws to accommodate his thickness. Each vein, she made sure to kiss and lick. Each ridge, she teased with the tip of her tongue. Around and around his glans. She explored every angle of him, down under the base, his balls that contracted with each breath. Ball cramps. Ha.

On the spur of the moment, she joined her hands along his penis and began to rub the tip of it with the pads of both her thumbs. Archer shook violently.

"Oh, you enjoy that, do you?"

"Mmm."

Then she stuffed him down her throat again, pressed her forehead against his lower belly and made rumbling sounds in her chest to show her appetite, her enthusiasm, while she stretched the skin back as hard as she dared go. He was so smooth. Rolling her eyes up to his face, she caught him staring at her, anticipation and thrill etched on his handsome face. So she gave him a show he wasn't about to forget.

Joan sucked hard and loud. With great pulls, she tugged on his cock then took him down deep, repeated the process. Archer's hand closed over her hair, fisted it. Because she was kneeling facing him, it proved easy to up the ante. He wanted her to pin him? She would. Joan leaned the back of her head against the wall, braced her heels and looked up at him, mouth wide. He'd get the hint.

After a quick look down, Archer's eyes flared. Planting both palms against the wall, he curved his hips until his penis rested against her bottom lip then slowly, as he would her pussy, he penetrated her. Gently, smoothly. Joan made room for him, stuck her chin out. Man, she wanted to bite down hard! In and out he slid. When his eyes closed, Joan knew he was nearing his peak. He pulled out completely, angled his hips away and came.

Moaning under her breath, Joan cupped his burning semen in her hand, worked it back around his shaft, rubbing and rubbing to her heart's content and letting water rinse it all off.

"Joan," he murmured looking down at her. A grin tugged at his lips. He looked so much younger this way without the cockiness and the smirk.

“Do you need a break?”

He snorted. “I’ll make you pay for asking me that.”

Joan whooped when he leaned over and trapped her mouth under his while both his hands held her by the back of the neck. She had nowhere to go when he slipped a foot between her knees, nudged her sex until the top of his ankle pressed directly on her pussy, which throbbed demandingly.

His tongue flicked and whipped, his teeth pinched and trapped, and despite the occasional sharp twinge of near pain, Joan wouldn’t change a thing in the world. A moan left her when he suctioned her tongue out, bit it then began to suck it as she’d done his cock. Black hair came down in thick ribbons over his eyes, yet he still managed to stare down at her with those twin chips of ice for eyes. So intense!

He abruptly pulled away. Her mouth pulsed from the force of his kiss. Such a skilled tongue!

Water made rivulets on either side of his neck. He reached over to the corner shelf and retrieved a tube, from which he squeezed some gel into his hand. He frothed thick lather that he let roll down along his leg, between hers. After a little flick of his foot that corded the muscles and parted her sex, he smiled wickedly. “Roll your hips.”

Joan did. She ground herself unabashedly against his ankle rendered smooth with the creamy soap. Because her eyes were closed, she didn’t see Archer go for her hands until he’d gripped them and brought them high over her head so he could pin them against the wall. Kneeling at the foot—on the foot—of a lover, her hands trapped up high with steaming hot water all over. She had such a hard life.

“I want you to roll your hips, *ma belle*,” he said, bending over so he could put his face almost right over hers. She opened her eyes and could only watch when he bared his teeth, licked his upper lip. “Roll them nice and wide for me.”

Joan arched her lower back off the wall and began to gyrate her hips, each rotation mashing her vulva against the top of his ankle, which was stiff and oh-so smooth. He helped by raising his foot every time she’d reach the front of her roll, raise his foot to bring her that much closer to the full-blown orgasm that peeked around the corner. Each twist was pure torture. She wanted that big cock hanging right by her face. She wanted it in her cunt! Right now! Not his goddamn *foot*.

Then it hit.

“Ahhhh.”

Archer’s wicked grin announced he was damn proud of himself. “Keep going,” he urged, her hands still trapped in his. “Show me what you got.”

Show him what...

Oh man!

Joan couldn’t withstand the fiery wave without a moan and a sharp thrust against his foot. Figure eights proved even better and she went at it with a vengeance.

“*C’est ça, ma belle*. That’s it,” he said through his teeth. “That’s it, Joan, give it.”

So she'd crush her pussy harder against his foot, Joan spread her knees. They chafed on the rough tiled floor. Did she care? Not one bit! In brisk passes now, she brought herself right on the edge. Just as she was about to give the potentially finishing touch on her orgasm, Archer slipped his foot out.

"Hey!"

She barely had time to gasp when he dropped to his knees, released her hands so he could encircle her waist and tilt his hips right against hers. Their teeth connected when their mouths collided for a fierce kiss. Making room for him, she welcomed Archer into her, cock sliding in effortlessly.

Archer threw his head back. "Ah, goddamn...ahhhh."

On the verge of coming and doing it hard and loud, Joan gripped his ass and crushed him to her. If he messed up, she was going to get some DNA under her nails, dammit!

"Come on," she urged between frantic kisses and neck bites. "Come on, come on, come on!"

Like a snake, Archer undulated until she felt as if he were using his abs to whip himself into her deeper than she'd ever had it done before. Man, he was good! Better than good. The best. For a split second, Joan wished they could see each other again after her thing was over, after Laramée was behind bars. A particularly potent thrust brought her moaning back to the here and now. She came. Boy, did she ever!

Each shove punctuated by a grunt, Archer must have been using every shred of muscle in his body for he was really but really giving it to her, which tore from her a swelling cried of ecstasy, until she was filling the shower with her voice, his as a counter beat.

"Archer," she kept repeating to his obvious delight for he grinned, made the motion of biting her shoulder but didn't.

"Don't want to mark you for your big show, huh?" he murmured after he licked her neck. "Come on. Level Two."

"What?!"

Without waiting for her response, he leaned back, pulled out and lay supine, cock a pink flagpole. Or a dancer's pole. The analogy made her smile, despite the very real urge to smack his ass for leaving her while she was still climaxing.

He fisted himself, pumped once. "Come on. We don't want to let it cool."

"Let it cool, eh? I'll show you cool."

Joan threw herself at him, mounted him facing his feet and picked up right where he'd left her, right as she'd been about to explode and make a complete, incoherent fool of herself.

And there you go, woman...riiiiiiiiiiiiiight...NOW!

She fisted him with her pussy as she pulled upward then spiraled down the length of him, hips rolling. If she could judge by his sharp yelp, she'd done good work.

“Joan! Ooh man, that’s just, whew!”

She did it again. Then again.

Muscles burned with the exertion, her thighs cramped. Still she rode him. And when his hands clamped around her hips, his fingernails digging in brutally, she knew she had him. Her eyes closed against the monstrous wave surging over her, she climaxed just as tiny jets of liquid fire shot up inside her. Violent twitches squeezed his muscular thighs. He practically lifted her off the floor when he came. Again?!

Both their voices rose, dipped, filled the shower then lowered to whispered and incoherent ramblings, promises and revelations. Joan collapsed onto his legs to rest her forehead against his shins. Behind her, Archer rubbed her butt cheeks ‘round and ‘round.

“You know –” he said after a while.

She turned to look at him when he didn’t finish.

Archer was looking back at her. Water still ran and was getting increasingly cooler. It hit his face and body, made a playing ground of rolling droplets and satiny rivulets. He smiled at her. Unguardedly. Affectionately.

“Yeah?” Joan asked, unsure if she wanted to hear it or not.

“You’re a good person. We need more people like you to compensate for those like me.”

“Wow, er, thanks,” she stammered. “You’re a great guy too, why do you say that?”

He shrugged.

“I think we need more people like *you*, free spirits you know, where it doesn’t feel as if there’s all kinds of dust bunnies hiding under the rugs.”

His face tightened and Joan wondered why. With a tap on her hip, he indicated he wanted to get up.

Joan rolled off him. They washed in silence. After he checked to see if she was done, he fisted the control. Water suddenly stopping created a strange void and burst the happy bubble as effectively as if either one of them had said something incredibly embarrassing. Just as she was close to doing. She liked her fitness instructor, that spoiled-rotten, bad boy of a George B. Archer. She liked him a lot.

Chapter Eight

Archer swore inwardly. He'd been about to spill his gust at her feet. What the hell was wrong with him? It was no goddamn time to tell her about Gentlemen Inc. Not right now. He had to wait until after the job, to make sure that if she were pissed off, it wouldn't reflect in her performance and keep her from doing her job. That'd mess everything up. Already he could sense she felt a bit awkward as she dried herself. He hated himself for it but he'd hate himself even more if—when—he'd tell her the sort of guy he was. If Adriano expected Archer to give Joan one of the golden cards, he could take a plane and come do it himself. Archer would probably be busy dodging bullets. Hers.

After he retrieved the tub of cocoa butter from underneath the vanity, he wrapped a towel around his waist so he could give her a bit of time to prepare. "Here," he tapped the orange tub. "Slap it on. Where's your gym bag?"

"In the kitchen by the breakfast counter."

He smiled. His real estate agents of parents would've appreciated a girlfriend who knew what stuff was called in a house. But then again, she wasn't his girlfriend, was she? No, she was only one of Adriano's Ladies. A contract.

Talk about pissing in my own Rice Krispies.

The mood definitely back to a more platonic level, he retrieved her bag, passed it to her without meeting her gaze and announced he'd wait for her at the studio. He didn't think he was strong enough yet to look at her and not start drooling and humping her leg. Although *she* had humped *his*. Ha.

He left her in the bathroom, went to his own room—he should've taken her there instead of the shower, but he hadn't had a girlfriend in his bedroom since Vickie—pulled frayed jeans and a T-shirt on and padded barefoot to the front door. When he opened it, Mel was there, her face white as chalk, holding her PDA facing him. She looked ready to stab him in the belly with her key.

Archer jumped back by a step.

"Man! It's *really* not a good timing." He couldn't help it. Whispering seemed *de rigueur* right now with Joan getting ready to do her dress rehearsal. She didn't need Mel's presence. Nor did he. But he wouldn't tell her. He still felt awful for hurting her feelings the day before. She seemed back to her usual carefree self. Women.

"Is she here?" Mel asked, raising her petite frame on the toes of her feet so she could look over his shoulder. She wore sandals and jeans with one of those ghastly manga tank tops. Again. "It's about her actually."

"Yeah, so be quick," he snarled through his teeth. Quickly, he closed the door and escorted Mel back to her car parked behind Joan's silver death-mobile. Although to be fair, she had a nice little car. Only problem was the driver.

"What's going on?"

Mel held her PDA, showed it to him. "He's been trying to contact you. Where's your cell?" She looked at his waist where his cell usually hung.

He patted his waist, cursed. "It's in the house. Why?"

"Adriano, he's totally *on* to me." She said this with a mix of awe and thrill in her pointy face. "He sent *me* an e-mail when he couldn't get to you. To *me*. So he knows who I am and how to reach me. It's...it's very *Twilight Zone*. Anyway, he said...well, you read it."

She shoved the slim PDA at him.

A mere look was all it took. Archer swore his legs would've buckled had he been alone to read this.

"Goddamn son of a bitch."

"Precisely."

"Why? Did he say?"

Mel shook her head. "That's the one message he sent me, I just uploaded it to my Pocket Life. So you know as much as I do. One thing is for sure, it's not safe so you have to pull out now. She'll want to know why. You'll have to tell her."

"Like hell I have to. No way." The thought chilled him to the bones. "I'm going and that's the end of it."

"Adriano was very clear. It's too dangerous. Plus, maybe we *should* tell her, maybe she needs to know stuff like —"

"I don't care what that bored rich guy says. I'm not withdrawing from the case. I'm going with Joan and if that means getting dropped from the agency, then that's it, that's all. I was gonna quit anyway."

He couldn't believe that guy! Asking him to withdraw right in the middle of a case! What kind of eccentric, rich Italian was he anyway?! Weren't Italians supposed to be those reckless, proud, macho guys? Pfffft! So what if Adriano had received urgent news that something big was about to go down at The Quicksilver? So what if Adriano had decided it was too dangerous for Archer to go with Joan? He couldn't very well let her go alone, now could he?

It's not what bothers you the most though.

True. Not going would mean he'd have to give her a reason. He didn't think he could lie to her face again without his guilt showing — who knew he had that in him. He couldn't tell her about this news without having to cough up Adriano then the Gentlemen Inc. thing would come out, his escort status, the money he was getting under the table to train her. She'd want to know more — women always did — would start questioning everything he'd done or said, would probably look at him as if he

were a crook. Which wouldn't be far from the truth. He'd probably lose her affection. And obviously her trust. Archer sighed. He wasn't willing to risk it. Chickenshit, yes, gambler, no. So he basically had one choice. Go on anyway despite Adriano's warning that should he refuse to withdraw from the case, he'd be dropped from the agency.

"You have to tell her *now*, Archer," Mel whispered in her usual way. A harsh yell for anyone else. "She's going to be soooo pissed that you messed up her job." She shook her hand as if she'd burned it. "Oooh!"

"I didn't mess up her job! I'm going with her, aren't I?"

"You shouldn't," she retorted. "Maybe—"

"Yeah, thanks, Mel. That makes me feel a whole lot better." Then remembering to lower his tone, he *shooshed* her to her car, opened the door and made an imperious motion of his index finger. "Thanks for letting me know. But I'm going with Joan."

Mel looked at him for a long while before nodding. Why was there a smirk?

"Okay, spill it."

With a grin, his best friend since kindergarten ducked under his arm, slid in her seat and closed the door softly. It didn't click so Archer bumped his hip against the panel. She would've driven off this way.

After rolling down the window, she leaned over the door, her large black eyes sparkling. "You're in love with Joan," she whispered in a singsong that just about made him lose it.

The L-word again. Ugh.

She drove off before he could vent. Oh, and did he have good ones lined up for her!

Archer rushed to the studio, flicked on only one of the lights to simulate nightclub ambiance and retrieved a folding chair from the small locker in the corner. He sat about fifteen feet away from the "master pole" and waited.

"Goddamn."

Why was he getting so worked up over this? It was bound to happen, that one of the Ladies—Joan, for fuck's sake, she was called Joan—would find out before he could finish the task. Why did it have to be her? Why couldn't he have kept going on his merry, detached way, do the job, give the golden card, wait for Adriano's next task?

Nooooo, instead I have to fall for a hot lady cop who's going to get my ass fired off a—

When Joan stepped into the studio, Archer thought someone had snuffed out his world for a second or two. If he'd thought of her as a hottie-hot-hottie, she nearly bowled him over as she strode into the studio wearing nothing underneath the Turkish dancer costume. She'd come out of the house like this?! Hot damn! Each little golden disc called to him with its little siren song.

Come, Archer, coooooome and touch the goodnesssss.

"Joan...you're..."

She smiled, popped her hip once to shake the penny belt. Her hair was still wet but that was more than okay by him. Added to the raw, exotic look actually.

“And?”

He took a deep breath. “I’m gonna have to sit in the crowd and make sure they don’t charge the stage when you come on.” He heard his voice, even if he had no idea how he could speak when he could barely breathe. “You’re just *breathtaking*.”

She smiled wider, shrugged as if saying “Aww, shucks”.

“Oh, let me get the music on.”

He jogged to the CD player, never taking his eyes off her, and fiddled clumsily with the buttons. Man, where had the smooth Archer gone? He was acting like a teenager with a bad case of teacher crush! Finally he chose the right tray, pressed Play and rushed back to his spot. With a hand, he urged her to take her position at his pole.

She did, her smile sliding down to be replaced by the most luscious, intense look of predatory female power he’d ever seen. If that was the look she’d give to the audience at the audition tomorrow, she’d melt the house down. Damn, he loved his job!

Adriano’s message replayed in his mind and for a second he couldn’t bear to meet her gaze. But in case she thought he was avoiding looking at her because she sucked at the choreography, Archer forced himself to look her in the eye, lend his support while he could because he knew when she found out about his little affairs on the side, when she saw all those dust bunnies under his rug, she’d never have anything to do with him again. And if the thought of not seeing Joan Blair again just didn’t make him want to curl up on the sofa, watch bad TV shows just so he could complain and drink too much Cognac. Mel wouldn’t pick up his puke again he knew. He’d be on his own. Solitude bore down on him all at once.

Snap out of it, man, she’s looking at you.

Joan waited for her cue, which came in the form of a bass touch just slightly harder than the rest. On the third beat, she started the routine. The singer’s haunting voice lingered over each syllable.

Archer watched mesmerized as she went through it with perfect cadence and timing, with proper bursts of speed followed by languorous passes and twists around the pole. She forgot to point her feet a couple of times but popped her hips, cambered her back all nice and high. Fuck. He was getting hard again. Hadn’t he just come, what, twice in the last hour?!

Settle down. She needs to nail this thing.

For her safety and his apparently. Unless Adriano was just being skittish.

Yeah, probably it. And anyway, how does he know something big is going to happen tomorrow? Who is he anyway? He lives in Italy for all I know. Baww, let him worry. Chickenshit.

As the moment of the dreaded Reverse Knee Spin approached, he could tell Joan was getting anxious, if only by the determination tightening her mouth. With a huff, she

grabbed the pole, wrapped the outside of her leg around then kicked off so she'd slide backward and down in perfectly controlled manner so as to land gracefully after two exact clockwise turns and not thud on her ass. Archer swore there was a "click" when she nailed the move. *Nailed it!*

The electric guitar wailed its last peak and then there was silence, only occasionally interrupted by Joan's panting. Wet hair stuck to her forehead. She looked at him, her eyes searching. For his approval?

So this is what they're talking about.

When they mention the moment a man knows he's fallen—and *fall* was the exact word for his case, and something told him he'd be landing hard too, with Joan's foot stamped in his ass—fallen for a woman. Fallen bad. It was true then, the feelings bad poets described—the euphoria, the fear, the hope. All mixed in with a good dose of apprehension and the last few shreds of denial clinging to his heart. He couldn't fall for Joan. Not like that. He'd lose her in barely a day. There'd be tomorrow then there'd be never. There'd be him watching her back at The Quicksilver while she did her thing, caught the bad guy and received all the accolades her role duly merited then there'd be the screaming, possibly the Archer ass-kicking. And then he'd be alone in a posh house too big for him and filled with nothing but pictures of his dead parents. *Good times, good times.*

Archer knelt so he could sit on his heels. "Joan," he began, trying not to let his heart ooze out of his eyes. "That's the sexiest, most beautiful dance routine I've ever seen. If they don't take you, I'll kick their asses. I don't care if Laramée has twenty goons around him."

She blew hair out of her face and came to kneel in front of him. "He shouldn't have twenty goons with him, that's why we want to sting him at his club, when he expects it the least. As far as he's concerned, we don't know he's back in Canada. But thanks." After a quick look back at the pole, Joan cocked her head. "Is everything okay?"

Archer felt his heart squeeze as though someone had just lassoed it and tugged it down and out through his ass. Ugh. "Why do you ask?"

He was desperately trying to hint at the trouble Adriano had warned about without rousing her suspicions. But he was good at lying, wasn't he?

"You look worried. Is it about tomorrow? You'll have the wire. My colleagues will be inside the club in a matter of seconds if things turn ugly."

"I'm still thinking about the goons. What if the place is crawling with them? A few seconds is all you need to get shot."

What if the one who's supposed to watch your back is a liar and a cheat and an opportunistic prick who's too much of a chickenshit to tell you what's on his mind? What about that guy? The one whose heart is breaking?

Her eyes narrowed and for a split second, Archer was going to tell her. Right here, right now. He even took a breath to do just that. But the thought of her so close to him, the disgust that would twist her face.

I'm such a coward.

And selfish. He wanted to remember her this way and not pollute the moment with stuff like, well, the truth. Man, he wanted a drink right now.

He framed her face with both hands, gently brushed her cheekbones with his thumbs. He didn't say anything, could hardly breathe as it was. Archer couldn't believe it. He really did love her.

Joan stared into his pale eyes and saw something that hadn't been there before. Affection. Warmth. It enveloped her, made her feel warm and tingly. Wow. Such a difference!

Archer kissed her gently, tenderly, with only his lips and not that wicked, wicked tongue. She responded in kind. While he caressed her shoulders, her neck, she did the same to him, as if she were discovering him all over again, this new man. And when he applied a bit of pressure to indicate she should lie down on her side, she acquiesced immediately so she could better savor the change of pace and what lay ahead.

He remained intense but silent as he ran his hand along her shoulder and side, down over her hip and thigh, even reached down to her knee and calf, which he used as a canvas to draw serpentine shapes with his index finger. She shivered with pleasure.

"Archer —"

He shook his head. "Shh."

So when he lay in front of her, likewise propped up on an elbow, Joan didn't move or try to touch him in return. He clearly wanted to do this by himself. Who was she to complain?

Soon his subtle touches triggered shivers, his gentle caresses palpitations. There was a longing in his eyes that hadn't been there before. Joan couldn't reconcile the man with the phantom mint and the affectionate lover presently touching her. Both were intoxicating, yet the current Archer rose by a head and shoulders above his Casanova half for the solicitude of his touch and the passion in his gaze. Joan couldn't believe it, but Archer was acting in a *loving* way.

Man, she would've poked at that angle more had she not been afraid to burst the fragile bubble. So maybe she *was* special. Maybe there weren't so many notches on his pole.

Even if he never said a word, she understood him perfectly when he pressed against her hip, rolled her over onto her back so she lay supine beside him. The tiny discs sparkled quietly in the amber light as if it'd rained gold. She was sure he touched every individual one too, smoothly circling each tiny penny, treating her navel to the same attention, coming higher and toying with the last row along the bra. She could hardly breathe!

His gaze on her, he leaned over and kissed the shallow dip below her sternum. No tongue. Just lips. Tender, tender lips. Then he blew on her skin, creating a bloom, a deep

need in her that only he could properly attend. She felt as if she'd melted between the legs. As she began to rub her thighs together to show her hunger, Archer's hand left her bra and dipped below her mons. At once, juices seeped from her to him, which he collected and rubbed over her vulva. And if this simple pleasure didn't just make Joan want him even more! She arched against his hand. A cordial finger entered then two. In and out. Slowly, knowing exactly how to please her. It wouldn't take long.

While he made love to her with his fingers, his mouth wasn't idle. Like a pearl necklace of kisses, he pressed his lips at regular intervals between her breasts, higher on her neck, her face. Joan just closed her eyes and accepted his sweet gift. Pleasure soon built up, cramped her thighs. He must have felt it coming too for Archer accentuated his cadence, but only slightly. Instead of the brain-melting sex she'd had with him, what they presently shared felt deeper, closer, even if he was just using his hands.

"Archer..."

"I know," he whispered against her mouth. "Shh."

A spasm bloomed her pussy, warmth spread to her butt then cum coated them both as she exhaled the most profound orgasm. As if she were sharing a secret pleasure with him, pleasure she hadn't known was there. He breathed in her gasp, kissed it out of her and into him. His reward. Her gift.

Archer smiled as he pulled away. Replete, she didn't mind when he slipped his fingers out, kissed her on the forehead.

"Thanks," she murmured, knowing she smiled like a fat, lazy cat.

He shook his head. "No. Thank you."

And Archer meant it. He was thanking her for sharing this quiet pleasure with him, for allowing him into her body and her life, even for a few days, even if it'd all come to an end the next day. At least he'd had this with her.

After he lay down beside her, but on his belly so he could rest his head on his crossed arms, he stared at her a long while. The vestiges of climax soon faded from her blushed face. She was so beautiful this way. So...

I really screwed up this time.

She mirrored his position, eyes half closed.

"Don't these jobs scare you?" he asked. "Stings, I mean." It did him.

She shrugged. "Sure. But I've been trained for it. And you should see the size of my partner's gun."

They shared a quiet smile.

"I know. Still... Why do you even have to be at the club in person? Can't you guys catch him any other way?"

"We've tried before but he's a slimy fish. When you think you have him pinned down, he slips out of the country. It's not that we don't have enough to charge him this time, we do, but we have to get him—physically—I mean. He's been gone several

months, in Eastern Europe from what INTERPOL says, and now that he's back, we have to try to tag him again. Only this time, we'll play dirty."

"Tag?"

"Have someone make visual confirmation, you know, so he stays put for when the cavalry comes in. My job is to go in there, ID him, hopefully manage to keep a grip on him until the rest show up. That's why we use the safe word. So it's nice and quick."

"That's not how they do it in movies." That sounded petulant and he didn't care. He really was worried for her. Where would the SWAT guys be? The big guns?

Joan laughed. "It's not as climactic but it works. With Claude Laramée, any method is good as long as it gets the job done. We've tried the subpoenas, his lawyers just laughed us out of court. We've tried to have INTERPOL arrest him abroad, they couldn't find him after one of their informants, the one who alerted them of his impending return to Canada, was found murdered. So tomorrow we're coming after him in his own home, something we've never done."

"Let's say he's there and you manage to keep him with you long enough for your posse to get there, then what happens?"

"We wait and pretend we're just as shocked as everybody else when they raid the club and arrest everyone for a variety of charges."

The irony of life. "Oh, *this* I can do pretty damn well. I have practice."

"Oh?"

"Don't ask."

She looked as if she wanted to but didn't. If only he could've been born a bit more honest, a bit less self-centered. He might have avoided the big trap he'd set for himself.

"Everything will be fine, okay?" she said, leaning forward and planting a kiss on his mouth. "You'll have the wire."

Archer had never guessed that someday his life and that of the woman he'd come to love would hang by a wire. Literally. He hoped for both their sakes it was a thick one.

* * * * *

"It's nice that we don't have to worry about hair," Chantal said, smirking in the way Mel had done the day before. Did all women smirk this way when they didn't say exactly what was on their mind?

Yeah, he waxed his chest and legs! Not only that, he used body lotion too. So what of it? Ladies, they loved the smooth skin.

So sue me.

Archer let the gangly woman apply another measure of hypoallergenic tape to his chest—said so on the pink dispenser. That stuff was great and not just for holding J-Lo's dress together either. It also served to tape wires to cheats and liars such as him.

Although in his case, he was wired to watch Joan's back because she couldn't wear one herself. So in this case, it was different.

Sergeant-detective "Pain" Sauvageau looked on as Joan's partner fiddled with the tiny disc-shaped mike and wire before stepping back to admire her work. Or his pecs.

"Perfect."

"I know. I work out." He couldn't help it.

She grinned a lopsided one that told him this woman was trouble on legs. Attitude on legs. And legs on legs too. She must have been five-ten, but the proportion of legs was just weird.

"*Pas pire pour un maudit anglais,*" she said through a smile. Maybe she didn't know he'd been raised with French kids, despite his mother tongue being English.

Not bad for a damn English...? Pfft!

"*Merci du compliment.*"

When her eyes flared, he felt like patting her on the shoulder but let her roast on her own fire instead. Yup, thanks for the compliment.

Sauvageau surprisingly looked delighted. He chuckled as he rearranged his bulletproof vest over his shirt.

"This is going to hold all night, with the sweat and everything?" Archer asked no one in particular, buttoned his best shirt over the wire and tiny battery pack. His best shirt, suit and shoes for his best performance. The lie of his life. His swan song too for Adriano would fire his ass after he learned Archer had gone anyway, despite being told to sit this one out. Fuck Adriano. Fuck Gentlemen Inc. and his fears about the night's dangerous events.

Archer was dressed to kill – or *be* killed – in his dark gray suit, open black shirt and shiniest shoes, and he felt...

Like shit.

Joan's gaze on him forced back on his nonchalant smirk. *Gotta keep up appearances.*

She wore a long cream-colored jacket over her "costume" and had her hair *au naturel*, just loosely brushed back and spilling over her athletic shoulders. Why couldn't he have met her before? Under different circumstances too. Bad timing and bad mojo. That just sucked.

"It should hold. You have the memory stick?" Joan asked for the third time.

He nodded, pulled it out, showed it to her then slipped it back in his jacket inside pocket. Her song was on it, to give to the audition people. Archer wondered if it doubled as a tracking device too. In case things turned to shit...

Only Chantal and Sauvageau were presently in the locker room, the rest of the team members waited in the underground garage one level down, getting ready to raid The Quicksilver, arrest Laramée's criminal ass. Even if he was a guy, Sauvageau's presence didn't bother Archer since he knew the man regarded Joan as a colleague and perhaps even a baby sister. Archer couldn't detect any lascivious undertone in the way he

looked at her. And for this he was glad because if Sauvageau would've made any inappropriate comment regarding her costume, which she'd showed, grinning to her partner, Archer just might have taken his frustration out on the big man and laid the judo technique down on his hairy ass. With the rest of the guys gone downstairs, Joan wouldn't have to put up with the catcalls and the lewd comments, not that he thought she'd take it. Or that Chantal would let them. That one looked fearsome both verbally and physically. He, for one, wouldn't cross her unless he absolutely had to.

A door closed somewhere. "At the *slightest* sign of trouble, Mr. Archer," said an older Asian woman as she stepped around the row of lockers, "you say the safe word."

She was dressed in dark blue and wore gold and jade jewelry. Now *this* was a nice suit, cut perfectly for her petite frame. Who said lady cops looked like guys? These three right now looked perfectly female. Well, Chantal did look a bit mannish, but in a sporty sort of way.

"You say the word, scream it, sing it, whisper it. 'Rhodes.' And we're there." The older woman snapped her fingers. A deep crease marred her surprisingly smooth brow. She didn't look happy but managed to keep her cool. Archer instantly recognized her as the Big Boss.

"It's all good, Lieutenant," Chantal replied, her French accent making the rank sound like "Lee-ewtt-naw".

"No, it's not," replied the boss lady. She gave a pronounced look at Joan. "You be careful, Constable. I'm asking as a mother and a police officer. You make sure you come back with all your bits attached."

"Mr. Archer too," Sauvageau commented through his mustache. He gave Archer an ominous look that said in neon color, "You fuck up and you lose *all* your bits."

After a few last-minute preparations, Archer and Joan got into her car—he buckled in nice and tight as soon as his ass connected with the leather—while the rest would follow in various vehicles ranging from SUVs to Datsun pickups. So unlike the movies with their caravans of black trucks and vans. Where did the Montreal Police get their sting getup? At the used-car dealerships?

Joan sat, buckled up then turned to him. "*I'm nervous,*" she mouthed silently.

Oh yeah, that's right. We're taped.

She tried for a valiant grin but it ended up a grimace.

Archer thought his heart would break. "*It'll be okay,*" he mouthed then pointed to his chest. "*I have The Wire.*"

They shared a quick, forced laugh.

"Okay, let's go. We don't want to be late."

"But it doesn't mean you have to drive any faster than necessary, right? Right?"

"*Très funny.*"

She flicked her loose hair back, started her car then drove out of the underground garage. Behind them, Archer could spot at least two of the police vehicles, one of them

the converted mail delivery truck in which Sergeant-detective Pain and the *Lee-ewtt-naw* sat. Chantal had gotten into one of the smaller cars. He didn't know if the gun hanging under her arm was custom or what, but it'd been *huge*.

A lady cop with a killer stare and a huge gun? Good.

He wasn't one of those macho Neanderthals who believed himself invincible because he happened to have a dick and facial hair. The more armed people on his side of the fence, the better.

As agreed, they circled the block a couple of times to establish the communication and make sure everyone received them all right. Because Archer's wire was meant to send and not to receive, Joan and he wouldn't have a way to hear the rest of the team. Apparently hiding a receiver was much harder than a transmitter, which could be hidden anywhere on the body as opposed to an earpiece that unfailingly had to be placed in the wearer's ear. After a few spins, the mail truck flashed the high beams once, the previously established confirmation everyone received Archer's mike loud and clear.

"We're good," Joan said, her tone of voice much lower and hard. She shifted gears. "Let's go."

Archer's first reaction was to sit deeper in his seat. Did they have airbags in older BMW models? Did they conform to today's norms? Would they hear him screaming like a girl through the mike? Archer briefly closed his eyes when Joan took a corner like a maniac, swerved to avoid a furniture delivery truck that had slowed in front of a store and passed with the legerdemain of a drunken racecar driver. All recklessness and speed.

Goddamn son of a bitch!

He took a deep breath when Joan stepped on the accelerator and drove onto the Metropolitan highway, someone's bright idea to make crossing the city left to right, east to west and vice versa, supposedly easier. Archer wouldn't mind smacking the engineers upside the head. He wondered what had gone on in the conference rooms as they thought this highway up. "*Hey, let's build a suspended highway over the city and not give it shoulders for broken-down cars to stop on, and let's make it very, very narrow and frustrating as all hell. Just for the fuck of it!*"

With the late afternoon sun dipping below the highest roofs and casting everything in coppery light, Joan took the Northbound 13 and drove in silence for a while, only occasionally glancing at him. He could see her every time, even if she looked as if she tried to hide it.

"When this is over, Joan," Archer said at length, "we have to talk."

She beamed. "Your place or mine?"

He smiled. A fake thing, but he was good enough to hide his true feelings. She didn't need a mind screw right now, she needed to be focused, and letting on that things weren't all good on his side would only mess with her or upset her. If she were upset and pissed and failed to place for the amateur night later on, the whole thing

would collapse. Laramée would go free to bring kids in from other countries to act as sex slaves.

Yeah, I'm suddenly all Sir Al Truist from the Selfless Order of Saint Prick.

As much as the thought repulsed him, he wasn't doing it for those kids but for Joan. He was stomping on his own heart for her. He just wished he could have hugged her one last time. But in front of everybody, it would've been too awkward. Already her partner had looked at both of them with her eyes narrowed and a knowing sneer.

Joan smiled all of a sudden, which piqued his curiosity as nothing else. "What?"

"I was trying to imagine you telling the contractor how to install all those poles." She chuckled.

"Yeah, that was funny. The guy kept arguing. I asked him if he was either a stripper or a fireman. That settled it."

"How did you become involved in that?"

"You make it sound like it's the mob or something," Archer replied, his first reaction always defending his job. Although with Joan, he knew she wasn't attacking it, just wondering. "Well, I'm a smart guy, right." He stopped, waited for the smile he knew would come, was rewarded by a big toothy one that made him feel as if the sun shone just for him. "So it was either watch a bunch of guys grabbing each other's gi or having my studio filled with women practicing their moves at the poles. It wasn't hard."

Joan's laugh was infectious and lightened his mood for a good ten seconds. He even forgot about Adriano's dire warnings.

"Grabbing each other's gi...what the hell is a gi?"

"It's what judokas wear."

"Ohhh...I had these visions and it wasn't pretty. 'Grabbing each other's gi.'"

She nodded, still chuckling. The woman had nerves of steel. They chatted about inconsequential things for the rest of the way. They *were* being recorded after all.

"Here it is," she said as she pulled into the parking lot of a building that could've passed for a law firm. All stainless steel, brick and angles. Even the cars looked the same, a shish kebab of Benzes, Jags, Lexus, the odd Japanese car. There must have been a few million bucks parked in the lot. And those were the ones he could see.

Archer had never been to The Quicksilver. Probably the only club in town where even his connections wouldn't work. Maybe he could've asked Raphaëlle if she knew people who knew people who could get him in. He'd just never had the interest to know the place. Before now.

"Won't the bad guys notice your 'retinue'?" He checked back through the rear window and caught the mail truck parking in front of a drugstore across the street. One of the cops got out, parcel under his arm and entered the business. He ran-walked the way delivery people did, electronic signature pad in hand, baseball cap screwed on tight. Not bad acting.

"The rest will park farther down the street around the corner. There's a grocery store, so it won't show." She checked her face in the mirror. She wore eye shadow and lip gloss. Lots of it. Her lips glistened like wet candy. It impeded with his ability to think so he lowered his gaze.

"There are people waiting already." Archer could see them, the wannabes. They all looked the same everywhere. Those were the rich and famous people's friends. The ones who'd have to wait in line, give their names, wait some more for the infinite honor of stepping inside a club where their presence only served as coat hangers, drink holders and ego strokers. The social climbers. Or were they just called losers nowadays?

Joan cursed. "Man, don't these people have anything else better to do on a Saturday night?"

Archer couldn't help a mocking grin.

She snapped her chin at him. "What do *you* do on Saturday nights?"

"Shopping. I have the female store clerks *all* to myself on Saturday nights because stores are deserted."

"Yeah, everybody is waiting to get into clubs."

She pulled into a tight, *tiiiiight* spot between a Benz and something else he'd never seen. She shifted into neutral, jerked on the handbrake then held the steering wheel like a drowning woman would. A stitch of worry pinched his heart. What did he know, his Italian boss? He'd give a limb to find out. With his luck, some mafia hostile takeover or something.

"You know for sure Laramée will be here tonight?"

She nodded. "INTERPOL faxed us a copy of his plane's flight plan, the one that dead informant managed to get. So it's like a gold bar to us, you know, because over there, it's not as easy legally tracking planes with all the different state laws, plus there's customs and all. It gets complicated, especially if you fly over Switzerland where they won't share any of their air traffic intel with anyone. Anyway, he landed at Pierre Elliot Trudeau Airport early last week, which was confirmed by our guys here. His plane hasn't left since. So we know he's in Montreal. Plus, we also know he likes to show up for the club's special nights, likes to strut around and pick up girls. It's amateur night and that's how they recruit some of their performers...when they don't lasso them right off planes."

She hadn't said "strippers" but "performers". He wanted to smile and pat her on the back.

"When do we know..."

She was watching her rearview mirror intently. "He's coming back out. Let's go."

Archer spotted the same "delivery man", without the parcel this time, coming out of the drugstore. He didn't look at Joan's silver BMW as he climbed back into the black truck and drove away.

"He changed his mind, did he?"

Joan laughed. It sounded strained. "Yeah, decided to take his retirement. No, it's all part of the plan. They'll park a bit farther down the street."

He wished they would've shared more details of The Plan with him, the lowly civilian. "It's on a need-to-know basis, sir," Sauvageau had declared. The Gospel According to Sergeant-detective Pain. Wasn't it enough Archer had signed a waiver and confidentiality agreement? They could tell him a bit more than just "Stand there and never let her out of your sight". As though he would.

Archer joined her outside where the setting sun had completely disappeared below the adjacent buildings with only a purplish glow that heralded a balmy September evening and perhaps a gunfight, a civilian casualty, horrible scars for life and...

Okay, man, for fuck's sake, settle down.

Joan turned to him, movement that dislodged a thick strand of hair from behind her shoulder. The urge to run his hands through it made his fingers twitch. He realized he walked too fast for her when he made his way toward the club. Despite the danger, he was getting excited.

He gave the last few people in the waiting line The Eye. It was all about The Eye. He'd learned it early in life. If one let people think one had business someplace, that one's time was valuable and theirs wasn't, that one had a right to go in front because one had made previous arrangements, then most people would let one do one's thing without interference. And it worked again tonight as both Joan and he walked right up to the door.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a clump of girls much too young to be there. One of them elbowed the other, a gesture that spread in a ripple effect amidst the little group and alerted them of a potential rung in their social ladder. They smiled wide at him. One of them licked her lips.

She was what? Seventeen?

Usually, he would've been flattered by the attention. Tonight, he just wanted to roll his eyes. They were *girls*. He was with a *woman*. Couldn't they see they'd never stand a chance? Then he caught himself wondering if they would eventually become caught in Laramée's net.

"Security is wearing black suit, probably carrying. Six-three, two-fifty."

Joan spoke out of the corner of her mouth. Archer wasn't sure if he should angle his chest her way or not. He'd been told the mike would pick up voices in a four to six feet radius, unless it was loud. To make sure the rest of the team received her warning loud and clear—and to ease his own mounting worry—he grabbed her arm and held her close to him. The gesture made her frown but he couldn't help it. It came with the package. Dick, balls, testosterone, protective gene. All one bundle. The Macho Do-it-yourself Kit.

"We're entering the building."

We should do as Elvis did and leave the building.

“Don’t forget eye contact,” he murmured, turning to her. “It’s the most important thing. And when you do the bounce, you make those pennies work, okay? And point those feet. You tend to forget to point your feet when you spin, and oh, one more thing...” Archer stopped when Joan’s grin had become wide enough to convince him he was being a moron. When they stood inside the foyer proper, between the two sets of glass doors, he wrapped his hand around her upper arm, leaned in to her so he could whisper into her ear without his audience listening in. “You’ll blow them all away, *ma belle*. Just like you did me. I won’t even wish you good luck.”

He straightened, nodded.

And received a sound kiss on the mouth!

“Eat your heart out, Chantal,” Joan whispered in Archer’s shirt collar.

Archer couldn’t say a word. Serious body heat followed Joan’s little stunt. And serious guilt as well.

Oh man, Adriano, you really fucked me this time.

Chapter Nine

Something was up with Archer. He didn't look his usual smug self as he held the club's door for her and looked around. He must have been worried. Understandable given what he was being asked to do. He hadn't been trained for it. In fact, neither had she been trained to be a pole dancer! But here they were, both of them out of their element and thrust into the other's instead, with him forced to play at cops and robbers, and her about to dance half naked for strangers. A reversal of fortune. Ha.

There must have been a hundred people waiting in line along the building's façade, yet no one said a thing as they'd walked right up to the doors. Wow. She never would've had the guts to do that during her off time. Yet Archer hadn't had a single moment of hesitation. A lifetime of privilege. Old money, as her dad would say. Speaking of which, when she called her folks tomorrow, she wouldn't mention right away what she'd done. That'd require several phone calls to explain, to massage the notion their daughter had had to dance half naked in a club packed with Montreal's upper crust, the *crème de la crème* of the criminal community. She could barely believe it herself, truth be told!

Chantal's face when she'd seen Archer step into the locker room! Joan would've loved to tease her about how her jaw hung a good inch and a half lower than it should, that her eyes had been as round as dollars, but there hadn't been time for any of it. Poor Archer had had to take his shirt off right away, endure Chantal's little poke about his chest—his nice, smooth, hot and...*okay, focus.*

Speaking of chest, here's the bouncer. Pay attention.

A large man in a black suit who'd been standing in the lobby of what resembled an office building, complete with elevators and information board, left his post to accost them as they stepped inside. According to their contact and some recent police surveillance—Laramée was costing them a fortune—the ground floor comprised of offices while the underground level was the club, all ten thousand square feet of it. Huge.

"Bonsoir. Can I help you?" the bouncer asked.

Almost as large as Sauvageau, but thicker at the shoulders. And more polite too. Although she had no doubt the man would give her guys a lot of trouble when the fun began. She'd hoped there wouldn't have been so many civilians outside. If the police wanted to keep the element of surprise, which they desperately needed, they couldn't even evacuate the civilians before the raid and would have to just run around them, hoping a stray bullet wouldn't kill one of the sons or daughters of Montreal's richest citizens. In fact, she was hoping bullets wouldn't even have to be fired, although she doubted it very much. Because their situation was already desperate—using cops to

play exotic dancers wouldn't go down well in public opinion—they couldn't afford a messy incident or, God forbid, a gunfight. She'd never live down the headlines if they failed.

"We've been invited to audition for amateur night," Archer replied before Joan could open her mouth to speak.

Nodding, the bouncer pulled out a cell from his jacket pocket and thumbed it on. "*Vos noms, s'il-vous-plaît?*"

So polite.

"Susannah Bauer and James Wise," she replied. Archer didn't look like a James. Neither did he look like a George, come to think of it.

The thick fingers worked quickly over the tiny keypad. "Stand there for a minute please." The bouncer indicated the wall.

Joan stood against the wall with Archer looking as though he wanted to say something and was having a hard time keeping his mouth shut. He stood protectively between the bouncer and her. Didn't he know she could break the dude's arm in three different places? Or at least hurt him a little. But then again, she was no martial arts expert whereas Archer was. He'd worn a black belt with one or two stripes on it. She was glad her companion could take care of himself. Yet at the same time, she was worried he'd be in the way or worse, caught in the crossfire.

The bouncer took a picture of her then of Archer.

"You can go wait downstairs with the others."

The bouncer keyed in a number and almost right away the elevator pinged. The door opened and a mean-looking man with an eyebrow ring stepped out. He wore a suit but Joan could recognize a thug when she saw one. Whereas the front door bouncer was just a big guy in a suit, Eyebrow Ring was the real threat, down to the broken nose and thick chin. And they had no intel at all on this one. He must have been able to fly below radar and avoid being linked with Laramée. *Well, no more, buddy.*

She felt Archer tense beside her.

"Which one's the stripper?" Ring asked, giving Joan a once-over that would've cost him a few strips anywhere else but here.

"She's the *performer*," Archer replied. His voice was hard and cold. She couldn't believe the difference. "I'm her manager."

"You can't go backstage. Only her. You'll wait out front."

"I don't think so—"

"Then get the fuck out," Ring interrupted while pointing at the door behind them.

Joan forced a smile. "It's okay, honey, you can wait with the rest of the men out front."

Ring nodded. "Listen to your girl and I won't bust your pretty mouth. Now face the wall."

He turned just as Archer's "pretty mouth" thinned to a tight line. He threw a glance at Joan, seemed about to say something but took a long breath through the nose.

"I said, face the *wall*."

Joan reacted first, went to stand against the concrete wall and planted her palms against it, legs spread a bit for what she knew was coming.

"Know the drill, huh?" Ring remarked with a mean chuckle. "Spread wider, I got big hands."

A scowling Archer stood beside her, his hand almost touching hers when he adopted the "let's be searched" position. Clearly, he was having a grand time.

Ring took his time patting her everywhere and as much as it pissed her off, he was doing a good job at it too, with his "big hands" finding every little recess and crease and even lifting her jacket over a hip when he seemed to have felt something weird. It turned out to be the penny belt. Fear that this brutish but skilled man would feel Archer's wire spread through her as a fever would. *God, what if he finds it?*

Ring slapped her butt. "Clear."

"If you slap my butt..." Archer snarled, throwing a scowl behind at Ring, who only sniggered and sucked at his teeth in reply.

Archer suffered the same fate but with much less tolerance and much grunting and cursing under his breath.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," he spat when Ring ran his hands along the inside of his legs, slowly coming up behind him and cupping Archer's crotch. He must have given a squeeze too for her companion's mouth opened, yet no sound came out. His eyes narrowed to murderous slits.

"You didn't squeal. Good. Now listen." Ring put his chin right over Archer's shoulder. "If you give me attitude again, I'll mess up your pretty face then I'll make you watch while I have some fun with your girl. Got it?"

He released Archer, who angrily adjusted his shirt collar and jacket. "Yeah. Got it."

Ring sucked his teeth again, gave Joan a long look then strode for the elevator. "You coming or what?"

He took them down one floor, and as soon as the large stainless steel doors opened, Joan couldn't help the small "Whoa" of shock. The club was huge. It looked even bigger in person than what she'd read about in the file. A cavernous room, two levels deep with mezzanines made of clear thermoplastic and tubular metal while a large dance floor, all black and shiny, occupied the center of the "cave". At the far back gleamed a catwalk, just like at fashion shows, with tiny lights along the edges. On both sides near the wall and surrounded by a three-sided golden cage were firemen's poles that glistened as though water continuously oozed down the length of them. The lingering smells of cigarette and industrial-grade cleaning chemicals permeated the air.

“Go down there,” Ring said, pointing over the balustrade at a table near the long bar where a group of people sat and seemed to be filling out forms from clipboards on their laps. A man sat with a laptop open in front of him. “Ask for Moses.”

He left with a last mocking look at Archer, who gave it back with interest.

As they made their way downstairs via a curving, clear staircase, Joan described the place in as many details as possible, including approximate measurements when she could and guesstimates the rest of the time. Her guys would need all the details she could provide. When they’d reached the lower level, Archer walking so close to her he nearly tripped her—he looked *pissed*—the older man with the laptop looked up from the table and made a “come over here quickly” gesture.

“You guys just made it. I was gonna give out the names of those who’d gotten on the list,” he said as soon as Joan was within earshot. “You’re gonna have to really work it if you want a spot.” He proffered a clipboard and a pen. “Fill that out. Make it quick, I got about ten minutes. Who’s that?” He spoke rapid-fire. Quick, chopped syllables.

Archer visibly bristled. “I’m her manager.”

“Manager?” the older man, Moses she assumed, said, narrowing his eyes. “It’s *amateur* night.” A few heads turned their way.

Joan forced a laugh, even made an “aww, shucks” gesture. “He’s not the one dancing. I am. *I’m* the amateur.”

Moses’ face crinkled when he smiled. “Oh, the boss will like *you*.” Turning back to Archer, the older man ran a hand in his thinning gray hair. “So you’re here for moral support?”

“And to make sure she’s safe,” he replied deadpan.

Shit, Archer!

She wanted to slap him upside the head. She could just imagine the concert of groans from her colleagues in the van.

“And to make sure you got this as well,” he added quickly. “It’s the music to her routine. Three minutes, twenty-five seconds.”

Nice recovery. Maybe Chantal won’t kick your ass.

He pulled the memory stick from the inside pocket of his jacket and gave it to Moses, who took it with a growing grin. She was starting to like the old fart. Too bad he’d be arrested with the rest of them.

“You didn’t get this passed through the front guy or Ty? My boy, you enjoy living dangerously. If Ty learns you snuck something by him, he’s gonna hit the roof. And it’s not pretty when he does.” Moses took the stick, placed it on the table beside the pile of CDs.

Joan looked around at the women and the couple of guys sitting at tables along the catwalk, most of them dressed in tight-fitting clothes and wearing too much hair products, and couldn’t help the inward cringe. How many were here out of desperation? Desperation Laramée would make sure to harvest. One of them, a dark-

haired young man with a certain androgynous beauty, looked up, met her gaze then quickly lowered his eyes.

Her cop instincts were instantly on alert. Who was this guy? Why was he looking at her that way? He was shaped like a gymnast too, and wore a big tattoo over his shoulder, which she could see below the sleeve of his tight sleeveless faux cowboy shirt. Cowboys didn't wear lava-red silk shirts, did they?

"How many dancers are you looking for, sir?" Joan asked of Moses, instantly regretting the "sir" at the end. The young man had unsettled her. *Shit. No time for this.*

Moses shook his head. "Don't try to suck up to me, girl. You don't need to. Just looking at you is good enough for me." He pointed to the stage and winked. "But since you're so polite, if you do good, you'll get to go first tonight."

By her side, Archer grabbed her arm and led her a few paces away. "Something's not right here," he murmured near her ear. "I don't like that Russian guy."

"What makes you think he's Russian?" Still, she took a few seconds to describe him to their unseen audience.

"The cheekbones, the eyes. Anyway, would you just listen?" He unbuttoned her jacket so he could stay close to her. "That Ty guy is dangerous. And he has a gun."

Joan nodded. "I know. He has two actually. One in the left pant leg. Both big. Black suit, piercings, he's the security boss. I don't recognize him from known associates either, so he must be extra sneaky." She relayed more details to Archer's shirt so her guys in the truck would visualize the situation in as many details as possible. "Anyway, James, they probably have a whole arsenal in the place."

Archer straightened, his eyes narrowed, his mouth set into a thin, angry line. When he grabbed her by both arms and put his face right against hers, Joan knew he wasn't joking about this. "Something is *going on*."

Without looking as if she were, well, *looking*, she peeked over Archer's shoulder and caught the young "Russian" man studying the lay of the place, gazing up at the balconies, back at the fire exits—they were locked, she was sure of that but they'd soon be *unlocked* quite effectively and forcefully by Sauvageau's unit—then he turned his gaze to her and smiled. There was something chilling and intent in that quick look.

Fuck. Archer is right. Something is going on.

"Today would be nice too," Moses called behind them. The affable smile was gone.

"We have no choice," Joan murmured. She pulled an arm out of his grip and finished unbuttoning her jacket. "We have to keep going."

"Shit, Joan."

But she no longer listened to Archer. Her gaze had traveled from her companion's angry face to another man standing on a balcony overlooking the club. He wore a pale gray suit of impeccable design and cut. His curly blond hair was raked back over his skull, lending him energy and youth, even if he was in his fifties. Claude Laramée. In all his criminal splendor. She couldn't believe that after months of investigating, of endless

frustrations, she was finally meeting the man in the flesh, in his club and was about to bring him down. Goddamn, it felt good!

"He's here," she hissed close to Archer's collar. "Gray suit, black shirt, physical appearance is the same as on the file. He won't be hard to pinpoint."

Archer turned to look up at the mezzanine. She heard him whispering a curse.

The goal was in sight and this fired Joan's blood as nothing ever had before. Well, except for Archer's fine *handling*.

"Wish me luck."

She yanked the jacket off, shoes too, squared her shoulders and spotted the stairs leading to the catwalk, which she reached just as Moses was standing.

"Good of you to join us," he said, a sarcastic grin pulling his cheek. He nodded at someone high up behind her. The sound booth probably. "Do your thing, miss. Good luck."

Archer only had time to hiss through his teeth when she left him by the side of the stage. Feeling horribly exposed in her Turkish dancer costume, Joan walked to the closer pole and rolled her shoulders. Man, she was so nervous she could pee!

After adjusting her belt, she looked out at the small crowd, barely a dozen, and fixed her stare on Archer, who went to the bar, leaned back against it and must have thought he was doing a good job at playing Mister Cool Cat. He looked pissed and twitchy. Poor guy.

When the song began, Joan stopped looking at him. It was hard to focus whenever she looked at Archer.

Despite the light—or as bright as a club could be during downtime, without windows or any direct sunlight—there definitely was a sensation of closeness, of being enveloped by the place, even if the size dwarfed anything she'd ever seen. Up on the mezzanine, Ty—or so she surmised—stood beside Laramée and leaned on his elbows. The ring at his eyebrow flashed.

She forgot Ty too.

The only one she kept in her sight was Laramée.

He was the prize. The goal. The target. And right now, he'd be her audience of one. If she impressed him enough, maybe he would even invite Archer and her backstage or something. Have a drink while the police gathered at the door. She was the Trojan horse in this story. And he was Troy. She'd have the perfect opportunity to keep an eye on him. And if he didn't play nice, she'd find a way to keep him busy. Her only problem would be Ty.

Her skin squeaked against the pole when she twisted down its length, one leg at full extension, the other tucked under her for a perfectly smooth landing. Man, Archer was a good trainer! Three minutes and twenty-five seconds had never felt so short!

Archer thought his heart would stop beating when Joan finished the routine, the dreaded Reverse Knee Spin apparently mastered once and for all. He could tell she'd pinned the audience too for both guys up on the mezzanine—Ty and probably The Boss, if he'd have to judge by the clothes and deportment—stared down at the stage with their mouths hanging open. Ty was the first to recover. He leaned in to his boss, murmured a few words then did the sort of thing that had once sent Archer into a fit of rage at a bar. Mel would probably remember better than him since he'd been a little wee bit, well, *inebriated*. It'd happened a few years before his parents' deaths, a time when Archer had felt great, untouchable even. Anyway. A guy, equally drunk but rude on top of things, had looked at Mel, grinned and made the motion with his hips that he'd enjoy "*sticking it in there, if you know what I mean, huh-huh-huh-huh*". The disgusting pig. Archer had lost it when the guy had reached for Mel's arm to whisper something in her ear. She'd looked so shocked and for a split second she'd looked worried too. Even in his state, Archer, who'd been training hard for an upcoming judo championship, had neatly sent the guy crashing through a table with a perfectly executed *Yama-Arashi*—Mountain Storm Throw—the guy must have thought he'd fallen off one for real. It would've won Archer a gold medal. Too bad judo judges didn't hang out in bars.

So when Ty was done presently pumping the balustrade in front of him to show just what he'd do to the gorgeous dancer at the pole, Archer just about lost it and only the tape pulling on the skin of his twitching pecs reminded him there was something bigger and more important than his ego here. And it could be dangerous to Joan, so vulnerable and alone up on the stage. So he calmed down, at the price of much breathing and mental murders—he had to satisfy his male pride *somehow*.

Moses turned back to look at Archer and gave him the thumbs-up. "Your girl's good. She'll go first tonight. Say around ten-thirty, okay? You can hang out in front with the rest until then."

Archer nodded. In a sick puppy kind of way, he felt proud Joan had nailed the audition, had blown them all back on their asses and put his routine to excellent use, but at the same time, he felt jealous and pissed off and scared that she'd just caught the eye of two very, very dangerous men.

He was waiting for her with jacket ready to cover the essentials—goddamn pigs were still looking at her as if she were a chunk of meat—when a beaming Joan came strutting down the catwalk, all legs and glitter. Man, she was so hot, so incredibly hot. And funny. And smart. And kind.

And a cop about to kick your ass. Just you wait until you tell her about Gentlemen Inc. and the thirty grand and all them notches on your pole.

If he gave the money to charity, would it make a difference? He doubted it.

"That went well, I think," she exclaimed, jumping off the catwalk without using the stairs. She bounced, created a glorious wave effect with the penny belt that made drool accumulate in his mouth. He wanted to kiss her, pin her against the stage and take her right then and there. And he was getting hard just thinking about it.

Remember Ty, man. Remember the look in his eyes.

His erection killed more swiftly and deeply than if someone had shown him videos of a baby rabbit being gutted with a wooden spoon, Archer took a long breath and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. He helped her get the jacket back on.

“You were fantastic,” he murmured. “And I love you.”

Oh fuck! Oh fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!

Had he just said that?

No, you didn't! No, you didn't! You moron!

Joan tensed in his arms. She pulled her face away to look up into his. “And now we have it for posterity too.”

Her grin didn't make him feel any better. What an idiotic, selfish, thoughtless thing to say. And great choice of locations too, with gangsters coming out of the glasswork and everything. Genius.

“You sure know how to use that pole, Madame Bauer.”

Names travel fast in this place.

Archer didn't need to turn to know The Boss stood behind him. His French Canadian accent made the word “how” sound like “ow”, without the breathed H. He steeled himself and plastered on The Smirk as Ty and his boss came over, the blond man with his hand extended to Joan.

“I'm Claude. It's nice to meet you.” He smiled.

Fuck, he's good.

He had that middle-age good looks going for him, blond hair with very little gray and big bright teeth like that Virgin Records founder. He'd only seen Claude Laramée on TV as he moved in and out of courthouses for the various mistrials, dismissals and other drama, but the man in the flesh was positively charming. As in cobra charming.

Joan shook his hand and seemed to want to release it but the guy held on, twisted her wrist – Archer knew exactly what to do against such a grip. It was called *Katate Dori Nikkyo*, it added a couple of hinges to a guy's arm and it hurt like a bitch.

His blue eyes on hers, Laramée kissed the top of Joan's hand. “*Enchanté*. Can I call you Susannah?”

Because he'd learned to know her over the last few days, Archer recognized a fake smile and a blush that had everything to do with anger and wanting to kick the guy's ass than some feminine excitement over having her hand kissed.

“Sure. If I can call you Claude.”

Laramée smiled wide. “I wouldn't have it any other way.”

And I'll have you spinning on a rotisserie hook, you sleaze. I'll have you that way!

Ty's gaze kept going down the length of her, an act that ratcheted Archer's blood pressure quite effectively. Oh, and the prick knew it too since he glanced at Archer, sucked his teeth then resumed visually disrobing Joan.

The goddamn prick. The ugly, brutish, lowlife. I'd like to—

As though he knew what Archer was thinking, Ty turned toward him and the air between them charged with electricity. Archer swore someone could get zapped if they walked between the two of them.

Laramée grinned tightly. "And you have a manager too, I hear."

"I'm James."

"Sure you are," Ty replied then repeated the name but with a lisp and a precious smile. "*Dzaymes.*"

Archer smirked. "Funny."

Laramée grinned, those big bright teeth gleaming. "I've never seen you in my club before, James."

"No, you haven't."

Great going, antagonize the ruffian Joan is risking her life trying to arrest. Great going, genius.

He shook his hand and Archer wanted with an unhealthy passion for the crook to squeeze his hand too hard and too long as he'd done to Joan, just so he could show him a thing or two about joints and human anatomy. But the prick let it go at the appropriate time.

Party pooper.

Laramée gave him the once-over. "Nice suit. Designer?"

Archer tried not to curl his upper lip. "Custom-made. Turkish silk."

"Nice."

"Thanks."

Turning to Joan, the boss smiled in a way that made Archer's hair stand on end. "Come have a drink with me, Susannah. I'd be delighted to show you around." He presented his elbow for her to take. Clearly, the guy wasn't used to asking and even less to being refused.

Archer swore he could hear the horrified, collective "*NOOOOO!*" inside the police truck parked outside. He couldn't let her out of his sight. He was the one with *The Wire*, goddammit!

"Oh, I'd love to," Joan said, throwing Archer a warning glance. "After my performance?"

Laramée shook his head. "*No. Before.*"

Archer took a step, instincts and eons of males wanting to protect their females guiding his steps if not his brain. "Where she goes, I go."

Ty's hands twitched at his sides. "Remember what I said, pretty boy?"

Archer didn't give a flying rat's ass. Flying, crawling, swimming, driving a truck...any and every kind of rat ass. That jerk was *not* taking Joan out of his sight.

Joan grinned wide. The fakest grin he's ever seen on her. Couldn't they see she was putting on a show? Couldn't they tell she was faking it? He could. "It's okay, James. Claude will take good care of me." She took the offered elbow, winked then patted the man's forearm as if she were testing the muscles there.

Archer wanted to faint. Faint like a girl! A frisson of fear crawled down his back and for a second, he swore his heartbeat would interfere with the mike's reception.

Jesus...no...

And as one of Montreal's most notorious criminals was leading away the woman Archer loved, he was reduced to seething in silent rage, cursing at the whole affair and Adriano and Mel too, just for good measure. She was the one with all that brain. Couldn't she have kept him from getting mixed up in all this shit to begin with?

He watched Joan leave, climb up the stairs toward one of the balconies, one last smile for him then disappeared through a door partly concealed behind a column. He logged the door's location carefully in his memory and as soon as he had a moment, he'd make sure to relay the information to his shirt.

"Sucks to be you, huh?" Ty remarked, that smirk begging to be kicked off his ugly mug.

"Don't push—"

A shrill bell drowned the rest of his sentence. He noticed the club immediately began to fill with patrons, all of them dressed like the fashion slaves they were. He spotted staff milling about the place, behind the bar, amongst the thin but demanding crowd. Happened fast too. Were these folks waiting behind doors or what?

Ty drew near, licked his bottom lip, which he kept tucked behind his teeth. "Maybe it's not your girl's cherry ass I'll get to fuck tonight but yours."

Before Archer could reply—and fuck if he had a pile ready with the jerk's name on it, in big bold letters and glitter too—Ty's hand shot out with the speed of a striking snake and gripped him by the front of his pants. Another inch and he would've screamed like a woman at a male revue show! And women could *scream* at those shows. But Archer had twisted his hip at the last possible moment and the thug only got fabric.

That's Turkish silk, you dickwad!

Archer had had just about enough. Today was definitely a bad day. He'd had his chest taped by a smart-ass chick, his balls squeezed by that jerk and now this.

I fucking think not!

With a subtle flick of his hand, he reversed Ty's grip, effectively bent the guy's wrist sideways. The technique—perfectly executed, not bad for a guy who hadn't practiced steadily in a few years—broke his hold on Archer's pants.

"Be careful where you stick your dick, man, some holes have teeth."

"Not when I'm done with them," Ty snarled.

His face barely a couple of inches away, Archer was sure everyone in Joan's team could hear both men's breathing and the testosterone dripping. He parted his suit

jacket, clearly intending for Archer to see the butt of his gun sticking out underneath his arm.

“That sure is a big gun you have,” Archer snarled under his breath. “Compensating for something?”

Ty’s face went blank for a second then a mean smile pulled it tight. “I was gonna be gentle with you, but I think I’ll just fuck some respect into you. Maybe loosen your snob ass a bit first, huh?”

“Yum.”

Patrons floated a bit closer to them, a pair of young women seemingly zeroing in on Ty. It must have been the eyebrow ring and the whole bad-boy veneer, because it sure as hell couldn’t be his good looks. Or his charm.

Music kicked in gradually while lights dimmed to a pulsating blue-green-blue sequence. Archer peeked upward at the door behind which Joan had disappeared.

The gravity of their situation suddenly crystallized in him.

Why the fuck am I doing this?

He *really* didn’t care about the “mission”. Not even a little. He was doing it to help Joan. To *be* with Joan. He didn’t give a shit about saving teenagers from other countries—yeah, so he was a selfish prick on top of a liar. All this crap was going to end right now. Joan would hate him. But she’d hate him anyway, so there!

When this was all over and he was looking at jail time for having intentionally ruined a police raid on a criminal nest, he’d blame the hormones. Better yet, he’d blame his heart.

Because right now, if Archer didn’t break that jerk’s arm in three places, didn’t climb up those stairs and didn’t bust down that door—making a complete moron of himself, possibly even a dead one—his heart would be ripped out of his chest and passed through the meat grinder. Twice.

Joan Blair, prepare to have all your plans ruined.

Damn testosterone.

Damn men.

Damn love.

He barely made two steps before Ty stopped him with a well-aimed punch to the lower back. He should’ve seen that one coming.

Testosterone got in the way, eh, Archer?

Whirling around on the spot, he must have caught Ty by surprise for the thug only cringed when Archer grabbed his shoulder, forced the articulation in a way it hadn’t been meant to go and yanked hard. A loud howl assured him he’d at least broken the guy’s wrist if not more. But unfortunately, Ty didn’t seem to care as he snapped his head up, caught Archer on the chin and sent him floundering back against a group of women, who scattered pretty damn quickly despite the killer heels they wore. They didn’t even spill their colorful drinks!

Ty came at him with fury in his eyes.

A vicious punch aimed for Archer's throat had him rocking back on his heels. He only managed to stay upright by clenching a fistful of Ty's jacket. To counter the sudden change in equilibrium, the thug wrapped his hand over Archer's shirt collar and tried to yank him away. The shirt gave, split clean down the middle right to his belt. Ty's face registered shock, confusion then white-hot rage when Archer's wire, clearly visible taped to his chest, dangled impotently.

"You're a fucking snitch!"

"RHODES!" Archer roared, somehow doubting the cops outside had waited for the safe word before raiding the place. Or so he hoped. Because he had no time to deal with Ty. It was Laramée he wanted.

Like in a slow-motion movie, Ty reached inside his jacket. Archer knew exactly what waited for him if that hand was allowed to come back out intact. Throwing all his weight into it, he tackled Ty, managed to wrap his hand over the prick's wrist and keep the gun sheathed for the extra second he needed. A one-handed *Uchi-mata*, an inner-thigh throw. It was one of the most potent judo throws and illegal at championships—the one-handed kind anyway. It was nasty, painful and it worked like a charm.

Jaws locked for the impact to come—but he'd land on top, that was for damn sure—Archer grabbed a fistful of Ty's jacket near the shoulder, unbalanced him with a brusque yank forward, slipped his leg between the thug's feet, twisted his hip so he'd face the same way the other guy did. For a split second, he felt Ty tense.

Oh yeah, buddy, it's gonna hurt.

Archer raised the leg he'd slipped in between Ty's while simultaneously leaning forward, fist never letting go of the jacket. With as much force as he could put into it, he "rolled" the jerk over his hip, made sure the shaved head was pointing down before using his long reach to dip them both toward the floor. Archer wasn't as heavy as Ty, but he was long, he was trained and he was *pissed*. With a snarl and a thunderous gunshot—the sound ripped into Archer's brain—Ty thudded against the floor, Archer falling on him for a brutal pin.

Before Ty could recuperate, Archer was already on his feet and running for the stairs, the whole while keeping the door behind which Joan had disappeared well in sight. It was all that counted. That and the fear of getting shot in the back by Ty if he managed to get up in time.

Get to Joan.

Fuck everything else.

Chapter Ten

For a crazy second, Joan thought Archer wouldn't let her leave with Laramée.

Archer, please, let me do my job.

He must have understood her silent message, even if he didn't agree with it—obviously, judging by the big vein showing on his temple. He looked ready to say something and it wouldn't be nice. By his side, Ty smirked and seemed to be enjoying himself very much. He was dangerous, that one.

And she was leaving him with Archer, who'd just told her he loved her. He'd looked only slightly more shocked than she'd felt! The notion of a man like him confessing his love, knowing he was being recorded, blew her mind. As soon as this job was over, she'd make sure to investigate this sudden declaration more closely. Maybe even use pink fuzzy handcuffs to torture another such confession out of him.

As she held on to Laramée's—Claude's—elbow and climbed to one of the balconies, Joan saw both men enter into a conversation with Archer's smirk reaching dangerous proportions. It sure resembled a pissing contest to her. Dammit. Then she had to concentrate on the way ahead to keep from rousing Claude's suspicions. She couldn't afford that. She had to nail his ass and do it tonight. There wouldn't be another chance this good. They had no legal way to ground his plane since he'd made sure to wipe official footprints tying it to him and could soon lose him again to Europe multinational span and its porous, Byzantine customs. If she failed, he'd fly away in his pricey jet, drink his fancy whisky—they were well informed on his habits—and live the good life in Europe while the Montreal police, already stepping on federal toes, tried to explain the monstrous expenses tied to this little venture. Plus, who knew when anyone would find him a gain? INTERPOL had lucked out once, would they again?

Claude led her to the farthest balcony, opened a door she hadn't noticed behind a concrete column and held it for her.

A room entirely decorated in shades of red and black greeted her. There must have been a whole herd of bovine killed to furnish the leather in the lounge. And what do you know? A firemen's pole. So a private performance was in her future?

Great.

And Archer, the man who loved her, was stuck downstairs with a killer.

Worry about yourself, woman, you're stuck upstairs without a wire, a gun and any way to let the guys know where you are.

Still, that her first instinct had been to worry about Archer told her a lot. She liked him. She liked him a lot. More than that. A sigh left her.

"Don't be nervous, Susannah," Claude said, all smiles. "I'm always gentle."

"Gentle? *Oh.*"

His smile didn't reassure her nor did it erase the images his comments had created. Eek. Not that he was ugly, but he was a criminal, a crook, and plus, he wasn't near as delicious as Archer.

No man was.

"Have you ever had absinthe?"

"Wasn't that stuff banned?" she couldn't help the cop from blurting that one out.

Claude shook his head as he would with a headstrong child. She hated the way he made her feel. "It's no more dangerous than tequila. And much sweeter. I'll prepare us glasses while you get ready."

So basically, take your clothes off, woman.

The pig.

"Mmm, a private show?" she replied, trying to sound teasing while she scanned the place for possible weapons. That lamp looked too heavy to wield one-handed but the long bottle holding a single steel flower on that table over there would be perfect. Just like Clue. *I accuse Constable Blair, in the private lounge with a flower vase.* Ha.

Slowly, hands trembling a bit, she unbuttoned her jacket, let it slide down her shoulders and pool at her feet.

"There," he proffered a thin, tiny glass the length and width of her middle finger. Kiwi green liquid filled it. A tiny sugar cube bubbled at the bottom. Claude's blue eyes followed her barely covered form, head to twitching toes then back up again. She held his gaze.

"*Merci.*" She took the glass, swirled the liquid around. "I thought there was a whole ritual to go with this thing. Absinthe, I mean."

Claude nodded. "Those who *think* they know how to enjoy it do that. The whole slotted spoon nonsense. The same kind of artsy idiots who wear Che T-shirts when they're not even old enough to remember the Eighties." He shook his head, looking highly disgusted. "With absinthe, the show begins *after* you drink it, not before. *Santé.*"

"*Santé.*"

She dipped her upper lip into the liquid, swore it'd melt right off then coughed as she licked the anis-tasting *fuel* off. Someone could power a machine with that stuff, she was sure! Man, it was vile.

"Whew," she said, truly breathless. No faking it there.

Claude grinned wide, drew near. His lips glistened after he licked them. "You're older than the girls I usually get on amateur night. Second career?"

Yeah, 'cause I'm older than thirteen, you mean? You disgusting swine.

Fear made her nape tingle, just as his roaming gaze did. The penny belt clicked softly when she shifted feet. "Yeah, I'm a late bloomer."

“And ‘bloom’ is the perfect word for you,” he replied, caressing her jaw with the edge of his glass.

He tipped it slightly so a drop of green liquid teased out and followed the natural crease between her breasts, an act that caused a shiver to spread to her whole body, followed by a heat wave of massive proportions. The gesture could’ve been sexy had he been someone else – say Archer. But right now, all she wanted to do was pour her entire glass down his pants, kick his balls just for good measure and wait for Chantal to get here with the tie-wraps. And oh, she’d put them on extra tight!

Leaning in to her, Claude licked the wet trail, his bright blue eyes rolled up to watch her reaction. From the vantage point, she could see that the guy didn’t brush his tongue as a thin whitish film cracked when he licked her. Too bad, such nice teeth. And major Eww on her scale too, that tongue.

“Claude,” she murmured, taking a step back. “I’m ticklish and I have wicked reflexes.”

And they all involve knee jerks, you pig.

“I love a girl with reflexes. Makes the courting much more fun.” He flicked his jacket buttons with a hand, his gaze never leaving hers, his fingers skilled and very long, and when he rolled a shoulder out of the tailored garment, a fit and firm chest tightened the black shirt.

Switching hands, he took a sip, smiled and removed his jacket altogether. The black shirt highlighted his wavy blond hair, which he’d combed back over his perfectly shaped forehead. A handsome man. But a crook all the same.

And he doesn’t brush his tongue.

Music began to pound increasingly faster beyond the door. The bass resonated in her belly. Joan tried to dip her lips again but it was just too vile and rolled the fluted glass between her fingers while Claude poured himself another.

“It’s an acquired taste,” he remarked, sitting on one of the couches nearest to the pole. He planted his feet wide apart, reached behind the backrest. At once, as if someone had opened a window, the same music that pounded in the club proper filtered into the room.

“I want you to do that pole routine again. For me.”

“Sure,” Joan replied, putting her glass on the low table, a gleaming black lacquer affair. She neared the pole, grabbed it and walked around a couple times. “It’s not my song though.”

He grinned, spread his knees wider. “I’m sure you’ll manage.”

Great, the guy has a hard-on.

The beat was all wrong but Joan began her routine anyway, her eyes half closed so she wouldn’t have to look at Laramée’s dick tenting the pants, his intense eyes fixed on her like blue laser beams. She couldn’t hear her belt clicking but knew he was watching it intently. She thanked Archer again for choosing such a judicious outfit, one that hid

her well enough but was also revealing in a subtle, sexy way. Standing with her back to the pole, she grabbed it one-handed and let herself slide down until she crouched on her heels, knees wide and angled toward the door. He could probably still see her golden thong underneath the penny belt but at least he didn't get a full frontal view.

He snapped up like a broken bowstring. "Stay this way, Susannah."

Great.

"That's perfect," he said through a lascivious smile.

Yeah, maybe for you, but my quads are burning, buddy.

Claude scooted forward on the couch, stretched an arm and poured a generous amount of absinthe between her breasts. She shivered.

"When I'm done with you," he murmured, smiling. "It'll be your turn."

The joys just kept piling.

A sudden fear grabbed her. The guy wanted more than to just watch her do her thing. He wanted to touch and be touched in return. Not only was this *not* part of the plan, but she couldn't even do anything about it since Archer had the wire and he wasn't here but stuck downstairs with an armed thug. She couldn't call for backup without giving herself away because it'd mean two things—at least two but probably more.

One, she'd jeopardize the mission, possibly lose Laramée.

Two, she'd put Archer in danger.

When Claude leaned over and proceeded to lick her throat, even going down farther, reaching her quivering belly below the suddenly too small and revealing "bra", Joan forced her face into an impassive mask. Each pass of his tongue caused a series of muscle spasms to twitch in her biceps and shoulders. She wanted to punch him bad enough to do it.

Think of the kids he brings into this country. Kids with his dick in their mouths. Eww!

New resolve hardened her muscles, the grip above her head, and Joan waited until the man had had his fun. Oh, but he'd pay later on. He'd pay for all those who couldn't defend themselves. Girls used up then killed, discarded like garbage. Boys too.

Their gazes met. And Joan knew she was in deep shit.

Blue eyes narrowed dangerously. He straightened. "Who are you?"

And as Murphy's Law would have it, two things happened that weren't supposed to. Bad things.

One, a gunshot ripped the air beyond the door. And two, the door burst open and in charged that young man, the Russian according to Archer, she'd noticed earlier during the audition. A vicious-looking knife was tucked in his right hand.

"You should have stayed on your side of the street," he snarled, rushing for Laramée, who'd snapped to his feet.

Then Joan understood. A turf war. Tonight of all times. Great.

“C’est quoi le sacrement de problème—”

He never had time to finish asking, “What the fuck was the problem”. Joan sprang to her feet, shouldered aside the shocked crime lord and barely had time to sidestep the gleaming knife when it sliced past at shoulder height in a vicious arc that ended near her head. A sharp burn licked her neck. Joan didn’t have time to check her injury for the young man retracted his arm and slashed again, this time low and aimed at *her*.

Shit!

Another burn, this time a bit more intense, lent her the energy she needed. Joan grabbed the man’s wrist and twisted it with all her might, walking into him, his limb still secured in both hands.

And now I’m gonna have to protect the guy I want to arrest. Great.

“Go! He’s after you!” she yelled at a shocked Laramée, who ran out but stumbled right back in when a tall man dressed in black rushed inside the room.

“Archer! Get out!”

His jacket was gone, his shirt had been ripped open. The wire hung loosely over his pants. He took a split second to gauge the situation then his face twisted in a mask of rage.

Our cover is so blown!

Not only did Archer not listen to her but he came to her help. Shit!

The young man yelped when Archer grabbed him by the neck, literally ripped him out of Joan’s grip, sent him waltzing against the wall. Gunshots erupted out in the club proper. Screams followed.

“Ty!” Laramée yelled. “Ty! Get the fuck in here!”

More gunshots rang out.

When the young man came at Archer, knife leading, the much-taller man only sidestepped economically, reversed his stance at the last possible moment—Joan was about to faint from the fright alone. He slashed for Archer’s face once, twice, thrice. Quick and hard. Archer skipped back, chin tucked in. And while he parried the next brutal attack, Joan watched impotent as Laramée ran out of the room.

“I’ll be fine! Get him!” snarled Archer, closing his substantial hand over his attacker’s wrist.

“But—” What if something happened? What if Archer got hurt?

“Get him!”

Torn between the two goals—catch the crook, save the lover—Joan chose the first and sprinted out of the lounge, the soles of her naked feet squeaking amidst the rest of the noise.

Chaos had broken out inside the club, people ran to and fro, down the stairs, out across the stage. The music still blared its thumping beat, the lights still blinding with a laser show near the corner and the rest dipped in blue.

Her guys had already breached the place and ran for the bar, the yellow *Police* written on the backs of their dark jackets a perfect contrast. But they weren't the only ones with guns. A bullet whizzed by, pinged on the metal handrail not an inch away from her hand. Joan crouched behind the column and peeked over the balcony. Other people returned fire from one of the emergency exits. Those weren't with the police and probably part of whatever turf war was going down.

She then spotted Laramée and Ty, who seemed to favor a leg, or perhaps both, as they hurtled down the clear steps to her right.

An image flashed in her mind. *Little girls wearing lipstick and high heels.*

Without thinking things through—her trademark—Joan took a run, bent in half, a hand over her head to fend off bullets—very effective.

Ten feet at least. Ten goddamn feet.

She leaped at the pair of backs a good six, seven steps down.

For the split second she was airborne, Joan cursed her stupidity. One didn't tackle a bad guy going down a set of stairs! Only pain there.

Oh shit, oh shiiiiit...

Out of some sheer dumb luck, she landed partly on Laramée and partly on his security man, tackling them both. A yell of pain tore out of her when all three went tumbling down, thudding painfully hard as they rolled and flailed and rebounded. Something broke in her hand. She was sure of it. Blinding pain hit her lower back. Still, she held on to Laramée's shirt collar with everything she had.

Little girls in lipstick.

When only a handful of steps remained, she dredged up strength from some reserve she had no idea she possessed and closed her other fist around his collar. He was *not* slipping away this time, she had *not* worked so hard for nothing. By their side, Ty was having a difficult time rolling to his knees. He bled profusely from the mouth.

"Police! Don't move!" someone yelled very close to her. "*À terre, crisse!*"

While she held on to Laramée's shirt with everything she had, Ty floundered to his feet, jumped the last few steps and was seen running along the catwalk a few seconds later. He limped badly and held an arm close to his chest. A very large, very tall man with a mustache waited for Ty as he reached the end of the stage. Both went down in a tangle of limbs.

Someone cut the music. The lightshow stopped, replaced with unforgiving emergency light from different corners. Several voices yelled "police" in French and English. Another language added itself to the mix, something with a lot of rounded vowels. Russian? Then the guns fell silent. She swore she could see dust floating down. Her hands hurt. Something hot dribbled down into her eye.

Ouch, shit.

In her hands, Laramée's shirt had torn in the front. She whimpered when he elbowed her then half crawled, half rolled down the last few steps. She was pawing numbly at the back of his shirt when he shuddered, collapsed on the spot.

Still with her fist balled tight, Chantal's stoical face bent down close so she could stare at Joan right in the eye. "*Calvaire*, Murphy, I can't leave you for a *maudite* minute." Swearing in both official languages and simultaneously. Chantal's specialty.

Joan grimaced, nodded. "Cuff him."

Oh no...

"Archer!"

She didn't know how she did it, only that the next second, she stood on shaky legs, using the handrail to pull herself up, two steps, three, four. By her side, Chantal argued, trying to keep her from climbing any farther. Then a yell from upstairs made Joan's blood freeze in her veins. She looked up and swore her world had vacillated.

Archer was still fighting it out with that smallish, effeminate Russian man. Obviously, he knew how to fight for he seemed to be giving Archer a run for his money. The pair had stumbled out of the lounge and onto the balcony itself. She yelped when the young man rushed at Archer, who stumbled sideways, received the human projectile and was propelled several paces backward, right against the rail. He collided against it, bent back dangerously far, his denuded chest exposed when he windmilled frantically to keep himself from tumbling down to the dance floor twenty feet below. But his attacker wasn't so lucky. With the force of his charge, the young man rolled right over the metal tube. Something flashed. Archer, still bent back over the handrail, grunted when the other used him as an anchor to keep from falling over. Used only one hand though.

God. No.

A gunshot ripped the air, made Joan nearly jump out of her skin. Archer's attacker let go and plummeted to the ground.

Joan didn't care. Chantal's arm was still extended, smoking gun unwavering, by the time Joan had sprinted up the entire staircase. Her heart would break, she knew it would.

What she'd seen flashing was the vicious knife that had nicked her earlier. But it hadn't only nicked Archer. For there it was, planted right down to the guard in Archer's chest.

Archer, you big...

Fear and rage choked her sobs back down her throat. Had to be strong. Had to lend support. Had to be there for the man who loved her. The man she loved in return. Had to keep her chin up, had to stay focused. Don't look at the knife, don't...

Christ, she was going to faint.

She only realized she'd reached him when he collapsed in her arms. Pale eyes rolled up at her. A tear traced a shiny wet line down his cheek.

“Shit...sorry.”

Then Joan was falling into the abyss.

Chapter Eleven

Archer swore he'd swallowed a bucketful of liquid fire. And he was drowning in it. Coughing weakly for the burn in his chest, he realized he lay on his back and that something pressed down on his feet. He hated how heavy blankets would do that and tried to kick up the covers a little. A fresh wave of molten pain spread to his chest. Then the weight was lifted off his feet. He sighed his thanks, opened his eyes.

Mel was in the process of sitting in a fake blue leather armchair but when she glanced up into his face and saw him looking back, she snapped to her feet and knocked aside the wheeled table to get closer.

"Hey," she murmured.

Archer cringed against the noise. Mel should learn another tone of voice. Her normal one was killing him.

"Hey."

"I'll go get Joan. She went to get us something to eat." She was already near the door.

"Wait," he said, trying to lift a hand but only managing to wiggle the needle on top of it. "Ow. Wait, Mel."

"Sure."

Did that girl use a transporter or something? She moved too quickly for his eyes to follow. She stood directly above his face once more.

"Joan?"

"She's fine. A scratch or two, nothing bad."

Relief flooded him. Then as though his situation weren't bad enough, the whole Adriano angle came rushing back.

"Do...you have...your PDA?"

She nodded, reached for the pocket of her white cargo pants. Beltless. *Ah, Mel, Mel, Mel.*

"I got it right here. Why?"

"Type."

"What?"

Archer would've rolled his eyes if he thought it wouldn't hurt. He just sighed. And, holy shit, did *that* hurt worse! What was wrong with his chest? He reached up tentatively, with Mel looking as if she wanted to help or prevent him and hovering uncertainly.

"I'll get it for you. What do you want?"

"My chest hurts. What's wrong with me?"

Her big dark eyes welled. "You've been stabbed. You stayed in surgery all night." She knuckled her eyes. "I'll go get Joan."

"I *don't* want to see her!"

Mel's face sagged. She looked down, fussed with the sheets.

His little outburst cost him several agonizing seconds during which all he could do was close his eyes and wait for the fire to die down. Getting stabbed *hurt*. Ha.

"Start...typing."

"Typing what, Archer?" Mel asked, eyes welling again. She slipped her PDA out, looked ready to argue but must have thought he was in enough pain already. Good girl.

"A letter. To Joan. You print it out...give it..." Archer's world spun for a few seconds. "Give it to her. Okay?" He swallowed. *Ow, ow, ow. Shit.*

"Okay."

So Mel had learned to whisper after all.

By the time he was done dictating a letter in which he explained everything—since he was too much of a chickenshit to say it to Joan's face—a letter that took a lot longer than should've been necessary but his voice kept breaking, fire was bubbling up his throat. He closed his eyes.

I fucked up big this time.

Just thinking about what he'd done shredded the last of his strength. "Sleep. Okay?"

"Do you want something to drink first?"

"No...thanks...Mel?"

"Yeah?"

"You need...a belt with...those pants."

He never heard if Mel commented or not before sinking into a dark, burning pit.

* * * * *

When Archer woke next, it was dark in what portion of hallway he could see through the doorway. Mel's snoring made him grin weakly. He'd recognize that hiccupping snore anywhere. Someone's hand was over his own. He didn't want to wake his friend so just looked down.

"Joan?"

Shut up, man.

Too late. Her head snapped up as if a spring had broken somewhere.

"Archer," she whispered. A real whisper. Velvet brushing against his cheek.

Man, he loved her.

Dark blonde hair spilled over her face and she raked it back impatiently while at the same time scooting forward in...whatever she sat on. He couldn't see a backrest. She must have been so uncomfortable.

"Do you need anything? Does it hurt?"

"Only when I breathe."

She smiled. It was all the painkillers he needed. And he also knew Mel hadn't given her the letter. A tic tugged at his eyelid, which triggered a worried expression in Joan.

"Do you want drugs? The duty nurse is very nice—"

"I don't want anything."

Rephrase that—I can't have what I want. There. Much more fitting.

Anger settled in. Anger at his own foolishness, Joan's recklessness, Mel's beltless cargo pants, at life in general. People were right, life was a bitch.

"Did he touch you?"

"Laramée, you mean? No. I'm all right." She rested her chin on her fist against the mattress. She was so close he could feel every breath. Pure torture. "You saved my life, did you know that? Thanks."

He'd saved her life and almost paid with his own. A small price to pay. He'd do it again too. The whole thing. Just for the grace of being near her, even if his time with her was about to end. He wouldn't do as his dad had done, put his own needs first. He'd smoked in his wife's face her entire adult life, never once even considered quitting or always finding a good excuse not to. She'd died of lung cancer after not having smoked a day in her life. Grief and guilt—and lung cancer—had killed his dad not long afterward. But the damage had been done. Archer would do things differently. He'd put Joan first, even if it meant ripping out his own heart in the process.

"You're gonna have to leave, okay."

The shock on her face. The pain too.

"What do you mean? I've brought my stuff. I can stay."

"We can't see each other again...it...it wouldn't work, okay? You have to leave."

Archer couldn't even look at her in the eyes and closed his.

"But you said... Back at the club..." Her voice sounded so flat, so dull.

Numbness crept into his chest and he knew with terrible certainty nothing would ever be the same. *Or I can blame it on the meds.* "I didn't... Please, Joan."

She was silent for a long while. Finally, he felt her shifting. "We'll talk about it later. You're tired."

Anger bubbled closer to the surface. Damn her. Being nice to him when he didn't deserve it. Archer noticed the snoring had stopped.

"Mel, you give her that letter. You print it out somewhere and you give it to her, you hear me?"

He'd started wheezing and had to stop talking for a while.

The weight that had been her leaning along the bed was lifted and he realized Joan had stood. The side of his arm and thigh was already growing cold. He wanted to cry. His heart would break for real.

"Mel?"

"Yeah," a sliver of Mel's usually loud voice replied. He barely heard her.

"You get her out of here. Now."

Still with his eyes closed, he had to guess what was going on. Someone was moving a chair, the legs scraping on the terrazzo floor. The sound of clothes, a soft rustle.

"I'll come back later on, okay?" Joan said, her voice subdued, carefully measured.

"No," Archer snapped, hating himself more by the second. "No, you won't."

He heard them walking away. Then silence.

Something wet seeped into his ear. Crying hurt his chest. But keeping it inside would kill him. So he let go. Let the tears come.

* * * * *

Joan had never felt this way. Like shit for something she hadn't done. Not that she knew of anyway. Why was Archer acting this way when it seemed to pain him as much as it did her? It made no sense. Her hand hurt. Dammit. At least there were no broken bones as she'd feared, only sprained muscles and tendons. Not bad considering she'd tackled two men down a flight of metal and thermoplastic stairs. It'd taken her two hours to get processed, cleared, then another hour to get rid of Chantal and Sauvageau, both of whom had offered, insisted and argued, to stay with her. Chantal had brought her some clothes at least. A gym bag full of sweats and T-shirts. Her idea of fashion in times of crises.

"Don't mind his tone. He's in pain," Mel said after a tentative glance her way. She closed Archer's door with a faint click.

Joan agreed with a nod. Poor guy. "How long have you known him?"

"Kindergarten. He was the only English kid in the class, couldn't understand a thing. I told my mom I was going to marry him."

They shared a quiet smile.

"Where are you from? Vancouver I think Archer said?"

Joan nodded. "Yeah. I go back twice a year, for Christmas and for Easter. Then my folks come visit me in the summer, when there's not ten feet of snow."

"He... Ah, he's not a mean guy, you know. He's been through a lot."

"Mm. I'm just so relieved he'll be okay. He scared the shit out of me. So, what letter was he talking about?"

They made their silent way to the waiting area at the end of the hall and sat in slippery-smooth plastic chairs the color of kiwi flesh. Under the dimmed hospital ward light, the other woman's face took on a deep shade of rose. She slid a hand in her pants

pocket, started to slip something out, stopped and pulled her hand out. She did that a few times. Like a snake charmer reaching inside the basket but changing his mind three times.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have a printer.” Mel started crying.

A printer? What the hell’s wrong with these two?

She wrapped her arm around the petite woman, brought her close and patted her head until the sobs had quieted to hiccupping sniffles.

Joan wrapped her hand underneath the bottom of her T-shirt and wiped Mel’s eyes with it. Chantal knew her stuff.

“Okay, you two are acting very strange. I think it’s time to tell me about whatever it is that’s bugging you.”

The look of panic in Mel’s eyes was almost comical. Almost. “Tell you...that’s for him to tell... I have his letter here. But I don’t have a printer...” Tears welled in Mel’s eyes again. Her bottom lip trembled.

Joan patted the air. “It’s okay. Just tell me. I’d like to hear it from you. Woman to woman, you know guys aren’t good with that stuff.” She crossed her leg toward Mel, leaned into her, showing as much positive and reinforcing body language she could. Despite feeling like shit herself, she always tried to make others comfortable. There must have been a name for it in psychology books. Probably came under L for loser. “Tell me what’s wrong, okay. I’m not known for going ballistic on my friends. You can tell me.”

“Ohh, man, this is so awkward.” Mel shook her head, wiped at her nose and took a big breath. “Something happened about two years ago. It hurt him. A lot. You have no idea. I’ve been picking up pieces of him since.”

She tried for a smile but Joan saw it for the painful grimace it was. “Go on.”

“His girlfriend – or *girlfiend*, as I enjoyed calling her – got pregnant two years ago, from him she said, but had an abortion –”

Joan’s knee-jerk reaction slipped by her. “It’s *her* body –”

Mel shushed her with a hand. “Yeah, yeah. I know it’s her body, and Archer knew it too. He was there, Joan, holding her hand while...ugh. But I was the one to hold *his* hand when he got so drunk that night I was still wiping puke off the walls the next morning.”

“Off the *walls*?”

“Don’t ask.”

“He wanted to keep it, the baby, I mean?”

Mel nodded. “Vickie, the *girlfiend*, left the province not long after. She lives in Toronto now. Has two kids.”

A flare of anger hit and for the life of her, Joan couldn't explain it. "That's, uh, ironic."

"Yeah."

"Will he kick your ass bad if he finds out you told me?"

"Big time. You've never seen him angry." Mel shrugged as she pulled her PDA from her pocket. "He's full of *surprises*, that one."

Joan wasn't sure she liked the turn of the conversation. "Surprises or secrets?"

"Is there a difference?"

Don't answer that one.

"But that doesn't explain tonight. What else went on after, er, Vickie?"

"His parents had died not long beforehand, so it was a double-whammy, you know. Anyway. He wasn't the same after, started questioning his life, that stuff. Then a man contacted him, an Italian. Adriano. He made an offer to Archer. And he took it."

Joan couldn't think of the kind of offer Archer would take from an Italian man and preferred to hear the true events instead of trying to speculate. This was becoming much stranger than she'd anticipated.

Unless...

Oh great, Archer was involved with the Montreal mafia.

"He's with the *mob*?"

Mel's look of pure horror settled it then and there.

"What then?"

"Archer is an escort."

Joan swore her blood pressure had just plummeted to dangerous levels. "Archer is an escort? Um, well, that's not what I expected...but it's okay with me." *Liar.*

"You don't understand. He's an escort. As in, he's been paid to meet with you."

"I know, the police hired him."

Mel shook her head twice rapidly. "Someone *else* is paying him too. Aside from the police. He gets money to...well...Adriano, that's his boss, he contacted Archer with your name and everything. He has connections, that guy – What?"

Joan had started patting the air in front of her. "Whoa, slow down. I didn't get half of it."

Mel shook her head. "Okay, Adriano is the Italian guy who contacted Archer. Right?"

"Right."

"He owns that agency, it's called Gentlemen Inc. They're worldwide. A big network. Right?"

“Right.” Joan uncrossed her leg and straightened. She couldn’t explain the sudden drop in blood pressure nor the fear tightening her stomach. Where was this story going?

“He contacts Archer when he has a job for him. It’s all very clandestine, you know, very hush-hush and under the table. The money, I mean. And how he finds these women.”

“That Adriano guy contacted Archer *before* the police did?” Joan asked, now as equally worried as she was disillusioned. If Archer had lied about this, what else had he lied about? “How did this Adriano know about police operations?”

How the hell had she managed that polite request when she wanted to put her fist through the wall?

“I have no idea,” Mel replied. Clearly, this was beyond the petite woman’s understanding. “All I know is that Archer wanted to tell you but after the job.” Mel’s voice was paper-thin.

“How does it work, that agency? What’s Adriano’s last name? Do you have his number?”

Mel shook her head. “Adriano wires money, a preset amount, from Switzerland. Then the agent does his job—”

“How often does Archer do these jobs? I mean, ‘escort’ women? Does he sleep with all of them or is that more expensive?”

Mel flushed, hurriedly pulled her PDA from her pocket. “Whoa, this is getting way beyond me. Um. He...he wants you to have this, and he explains everything to you but I didn’t read it...well, I *did* type it, but I had no choice...here, that’s what he said.” She snapped her mouth closed, proffered the PDA in a badly shaking hand.

Joan couldn’t help feeling sorry for Archer’s friend. When he should be the one explaining himself, he’d given his friend a letter to give to Joan. How cowardly could a guy get? He couldn’t even tell her to her face he’d been hiding all kinds of dust bunnies under his rug. And to say she’d spilled her guts to him, told him how she felt comfortable with him, that there wasn’t any baggage trailing behind either of them. He must have thought her quite the dweeb.

The guy is in a hospital bed because he helped you, cut him some slack.

She extended her hand, palm up. It was shaking.

“Don’t throw it if you get pissed, okay?” Mel pleaded as she gave Joan the PDA. “Go kick something but don’t throw it.”

Joan would’ve laughed any other time. If her heart hadn’t been breaking, that is. Great timing for the realization too. She hadn’t considered how much she enjoyed Archer’s company until yesterday night at the club when he’d sat there with a knife sticking out of his chest. Regret, bitter and useless regret, squeezed her heart. And her who’d considered the possibility of perhaps making a life with Archer. All that waste.

Man, I need a drink.

She didn't even drink.

The screen glowed aqua when Mel thumbed it on, clicked with her fingernail to access the latest file and turned it toward Joan when she found what she was looking for.

"I'll, um, I'll go to the bathroom while you read." She walked away a few paces, whirled on the spot, both hands coming together like a tiny Tibetan monk wearing white cargo pants and a manga T-shirt. "Don't throw it. *Please.*"

There must have been hidden cameras somewhere. Surely this was some twisted reality TV show.

Joan sat, the PDA on her lap.

Joan,

I'm an asshole.

I should have told you earlier. And for that, you'll never know how sorry I am. Truly. But it's done. I wasted my chance and there's nothing I can do to change it. So here it goes.

I work for an escort agency called Gentlemen Inc. They contact me when there's a need in my local area. Adriano called me a little while back to help the Montreal Police with a sting op by training one of their officers. I accepted. He paid me thirty thousand dollars. But something happened during the week, something that should have been good but turned bad. I lied to you about that and I lied when I said I don't make a habit of sleeping with my students. I do. There are a lot of notches on that pole. I didn't want to hurt your feelings or make you feel like you didn't count. You do.

So I changed my mind about the job and wanted to call it off. But I didn't want you to lose your chance to cuff that son of a bitch or get hurt while trying, and decided to stay with it until after the sting, when I'd tell you everything.

I never meant to hurt you, Joan. I swear. I was afraid to lose you, even if I knew you weren't mine to begin with. Men like me don't deserve women like you.

Goes to show hell is paved with good intentions.

I'm sorry.

Archer

A tiny drop plopped against the screen. Joan wiped at it absentmindedly then when another landed she realized she was crying.

Feeling disconnected and strangely light, she walked over to the payphone, dialed collect call and could barely speak when Chantal's gruff voice—what time was it anyway?—answered.

"Can you come pick me up?"

How she managed to link so many words together, Joan had no idea. She felt so empty. Of everything. But something was brewing, she could feel it. As if she were

preparing to hurt, that weird feeling of knowing pain was just around the corner and there wasn't a thing she could do to avoid it. She'd had that once, carrying the laundry basket downstairs. She'd thought she'd reached the last step and started walking toward the washer when her foot encountered nothing but air. She'd realized she was still another step from the basement floor. That split second feeling was the same as what she felt now. The certainty of impending pain, the cringe and the "*Oh shit, this is gonna hurt*".

"Joan?"

"Yeah."

"I barely recognized you." Her partner sounded worried. "Give me fifteen minutes, okay?"

"Thanks."

"You're at the hospital still? Is he okay?"

Chantal knew her too much. "Archer is fine. His friend is with him. He...he doesn't need me to hover here as well."

"Oh. I'll be there, okay, don't move."

Joan hung up.

She put Mel's PDA on her seat, retrieved her gym bag and took the elevator down. The whole while, she felt as if she acted normally, too normally. She greeted with a nod a night cleaner who shuffled by, pushing a wide, partitioned wagon filled with cleaning products. The older man had worn blue paper slippers over his shoes. Down in the main foyer, only a couple of people sat, huddled in hushed conversation or alone, checking their watches or fingernails. One woman was in her night robe. It was sage green.

Joan felt everything come to her, go through her then out the other side. She retained nothing. She was hollow.

How could she be so calm, so normal outside? But there wasn't anything going on inside either. She wasn't hiding her emotions. There just wasn't any to be felt, even if she knew a storm waited for her. Yet she felt no rage. She wasn't angry at Archer. Weird. She should. He'd made her feel special, had even professed his love to her and the twenty or so police officers listening on the wire, when in fact, she wasn't. Just another notch. Plus, someone had paid him thirty thousand dollars to accept the police offer. Would he have done it without his generous Italian boss? Would he have taken the job for the measly amount the police gave him, helped out of the rightness of their cause? She didn't want to consider the answer. Still, she should be mad as hell at him for no other reason than not trusting her enough to tell her about "*Gentlemen Inc.*"

A secret escort agency.

Joan sat in the hospital's main lobby, hands crossed over her lap, her aching back as stiff as a two-by-four. To her right on a low table, someone had ripped a portion of a

magazine cover. A good recipe maybe? Or an Internet site? No one would know now. It was gone. Ripped out and stolen. People had no respect.

Chantal arrived not long after. She still sported pillow prints on her cheek and wore gray track pants on backward. *Collège Nicolet* arced over her crotch instead of her butt.

“*Mon amie*, you scared the shit out of me on the phone. I thought you were a guy.” She took Joan’s bag. “You look like a ghost.”

Joan felt like one too. Not connected to this world. See through. Dead.

“Archer...he’s...”

Joan’s eyes filled.

“*Le chien sale!* He’s married, eh, *le maudit cochon!* That’s it?” Chantal slapped her thigh, let out a long string of rapid-fire French curses. “I knew he was too smooth to be honest. *Crisse!*”

Joan hung her head. She was too much of a loser to be angry at him and even felt bad that her friend would call him “a dirty dog” and a “goddamn pig”. If that was what Chantal had said. Joan’s brain refused to cooperate any more than just the basics. Tear ducts and a few other essentials.

In a very deep part of her she hadn’t known was there, Joan realized she wouldn’t tell Chantal about Archer’s extracurricular *activities*. She wouldn’t tell anyone.

You’re a softie, Joan Blair, or an even bigger coward than he is.

She wouldn’t tell anyone not because it was embarrassing to have been boned—ha—by a professional, physically and emotionally, but also out of courtesy and a sense that she owed him at least one. He *had* come to her help, *had* tackled two armed men counting the dangerous Ty. Chantal had relayed the details of Ty’s injury with great relish, listing by its Latin name every bone Archer had broken while pointing to her own body and kissing her fingertip afterward. Big goof was worse than her. Archer had done all that without regard for his own safety—to disastrous consequences to his health in fact—and this, she’d never let herself forget. George B. Archer may have lied about a few things, his love among those, but when it’d counted the most, he’d showed up ready and willing.

She was standing in front of her door by the time she pulled herself out of her downward spiral. While Chantal did everything—Joan didn’t even have the strength or will to unlock her door—she leaned her forehead against the smooth panel, remembering how Archer’s long hands had felt around her shoulders. She’d give an organ to relive such a moment. Maybe some day, if she let a man come within ten feet of her. But not now. And not soon either.

“I’m more for venting at the firing range, but if you want to talk about it, you sit me down and you vent.”

“I know. Thanks.”

“That was a backward way of asking if you want to talk about it. Don’t leave me hanging, *mon amie*, you know that makes me cranky. Think of everyone who’ll suffer if I go to work cranky tomorrow.”

When Joan turned toward her partner, she caught the half smile. “Don’t try to make me laugh, okay. Just...just *being* hurts.”

Sobering, Chantal nodded. “*Désolée*. Uh, is there something I can do?”

“I don’t think anyone can.”

“I’ll make you tea then get out of your face.”

“No tea.”

“Just get out of your face then?”

“Please.”

One last concerned look and Chantal was gone.

Finally, Joan was afforded the luxury of falling apart. And did.

Chapter Twelve

They discharged him after six days. Six days of fun, fun, fun with either the nursing staff and their needles or the investigators with their just-as-sharp questions.

Yes, he'd taken on Ty What's His Name, had roughed him up a bit then gone after the knife-wielding maniac. No, he hadn't tried to push him over the edge, seeing as he was busy with a knife planted in his chest and all. Yes, he'd testify in court. No, he didn't want his name printed. Yes, painkillers, *please*, for the love of everything that's holy. No, thank you, he could pee without a catheter. Yes, no problem, Sergeant-detective Pain, he'd stay away from Joan or else. No, Mel, he didn't hate her for telling Joan about his loser life and Vickie.

Yes. No. Yes. No.

Fuck.

Archer was trying to pick his slippers off the floor—Mel having thankfully left his room for a few minutes to sign him out—when a man entered. In his mid- to late-thirties, shiny black hair in waves slicked back over his high forehead, hazel eyes and aquiline nose gave the stunning man a Mediterranean look. A hot pink T-shirt that no one but this man could've pulled off without a public lynching complemented his lean frame, as did the low jeans and brushed silver belt buckle. A walking fashion catalog. Even the square-toed shoes were perfect for the outfit. Italian leather, no doubt about it.

"What?" Archer snapped, his hand clutched on the tubular footboard. No matter if the guy accessorized better than most women he knew, Archer was in no mood for chit-chat.

"I wanted to see how you were doing."

"I'm fine. Who are you?"

"A friend of a friend."

Despite the situation, Archer felt his smirk rising. "I have *one* friend, and she never told me about you. And trust me, she would have."

The man smiled. Dazzling teeth created a perfect white crescent in the tanned face. "I think you have *another* friend, but this one might require a bit of finesse to win back, *sì?*"

The guy flicked his *Rs* on the tip of his tongue just as a Spanish woman Archer had dated a few times did. *Mmm, the tongue on that woman.*

For some reason, Archer felt he knew the guy, had seen that hot pink T-shirt before. "Do I know you?"

The man shrugged. "I like your shirt. Cavalli?"

"Whatever. What do you want?" Archer couldn't help feeling he was being gauged and didn't care for it one bit. That and jealousy over the perfect outfit. He wanted those shoes, man. They didn't have that in Montreal. Eurotrash.

The guy turned, poked his head out the door, chuckled then faced Archer once more. "Your delightful little friend is very clever. And very loyal. I am happy to see you are all right. You worried me."

Had he been feeling up to it, he would've grabbed the handsome prick by the front of his fabulous T-shirt for a good shake and a *mano a mano*, a hand-to-hand so to speak. Or knuckles-to-cheek.

"Look, I'm not in the best of moods, okay, so either you tell me who you are or get the hell out of my room. I've had my balls squeezed by a gun-totting maniac, I've been stabbed by a Russian thug, I've lost..." He suddenly couldn't push the words through. He'd lost the woman he loved.

A look of melancholy flashed across the man's face. He nodded. "I understand that sort of loss. But yours is still alive. Go after her or let her come to you if she chooses to. If you do not, you will take that regret to your grave. From one gentleman to another, believe me, life without her..." He closed his eyes briefly, checked outside the room again. "I must leave. *Arrivederci*."

He left Archer's room, a faint ribbon of expensive cologne floating in his wake.

Spaniards didn't say *arrivederci*.

Italians did.

From one gentleman to another...

"Fuck!"

Mel entered the room not even two seconds later, flushed and grinning like a one of those hyperactive animé girls on TV. The only thing missing was the exclamation mark above her head.

"That guy with the pink T-shirt. Did you see him?" Archer wanted to rush for the door but had to stop and take a breather. *Ow, shit*.

She beamed. "You bet. Half the nurse station is hanging over the counter for a better look."

"It was him, Mel, *Adriano*! I'm sure of it. He came to see how I was."

"What?" She whirled on the spot, took a step toward the door, clearly torn. "Oh *maaan*! I could've *touched* him I was so close!"

"Go!" Archer waved her off. "Quickly!"

Mel took off like a missile. A grinning, five-foot-two, PDA-wielding missile.

Man...*Adriano*! In his hospital room? How the hell had he known where to find Archer? The guy was seriously connected.

"...you have another friend," *Adriano* had said. "But this one might require a bit of *finesse to win back, sì?*"

Archer swallowed the lump and willed it back in his chest. He'd pushed Joan away for her own good. For the good of everyone involved. So he wouldn't have to see the disgust on her face when he told her, so she wouldn't have to see the heartbreak in his. His Loser Quotient was just off the scale.

Mel returned not even five minutes later. Archer was still trying to pick his slippers off the goddamn floor. She looked as though someone had canceled Christmas. And Easter. And Halloween too. Or any other form of happy festivity.

"I got this but lost him when he gunned it," she said, showing him the tiny screen. A seven-second video of the man in the pink T-shirt hurriedly getting into a silver car played in a continuous loop. Nice ass too.

Eurotrash.

"Did you get a license plate?"

Mel shook her head. "He drove away too fast. But it was a rental, that I know."

"Then it must have been him."

"Why?"

"Only an Italian would gun it in a hospital parking lot and manage not to kill anyone."

She let out one vicious curse that had Archer staring in shock at his long-time friend.

"Whoa, Mel. Take it easy, okay? It might not have been him." But when he relayed the short conversation that had gone on before Adriano – if it'd been him – had left, Mel was literally jumping up and down in frustration.

After watching the short video a few times, she pocketed her PDA. "I'll drive you home, okay?"

"Then you'll spend the next two weeks on the computer at work."

She didn't reply, only picked his slippers off the floor and crammed them in the overnight bag she'd brought. He recognized the look well. Mel was on a mission.

When she started as if a bee had stung her and frantically patted at her pocket, Archer had to put a hand to his chest to keep from keeling over. The girl moved like a squirrel, all twitchy and erratic.

"Oh. My. God," she breathed when she flicked it open and thumbed the keypad. "It's for you."

If she'd had an encounter with a supreme life form, she wouldn't have looked more subdued and awed as she passed the slick little cell phone his way. Archer took it, knowing in his gut who it was. A text message glowed silver against the aqua screen.

Dear Archer,

It was a pleasure to work with you. I wish you the best of luck in your future. Always stay a Gentleman to the Ladies in your life. Cherish the one you love. You never know when it will be taken away from you.

Arrivederci.

AdL

P.S. Cavalli looks very good on you.

“Holy shit...”

Mel took her phone back, rubbed her thumb over the screen as if it were her most prized possession. “It *was* him.”

Archer agreed with a nod. “Seriously connected.”

As she drove him home and after she’d left, Archer was still replaying his conversation with Adriano and his subsequent text message. He’d decided the man must have lost someone dear to him, a woman undoubtedly. But what stood out against the rest was when he’d said, “*Go after her or let her come to you if she chooses to. If you do not, you will take that regret to your grave.*”

He would, wouldn’t he?

It’d been – what? – a week since he’d seen Joan, or watched her knock something or cause some other kind of havoc. And he missed it so much, the klutziness, the *oopses*, the ready smile.

You will take that regret to your grave.

Archer sat on the sofa, put his hand on the remote out of habit but didn’t do anything with it. He’d seen what taking regrets to one’s grave looked like. His eyes turned to his favorite picture displayed on a bookshelf near the window. His mom and dad and him in the center, all three of them smiling wide. His father’s smile had never been the same after his wife died. Because of him. Archer’s eyes filled and he had to look away. He couldn’t help blaming him, even if deep down, he knew his father hadn’t wanted to lose his beloved wife, his high-school sweetheart. Yet despite all the teasing, he’d never once smoked outside the house or tried to curb his habit. When his mom had been diagnosed, then his father had quit. Ha. Too little too late. And he’d taken that regret to his grave. Along with Archer’s reproach.

Archer stood suddenly. A bit too much so soon since he had to clutch the backrest for a few seconds to keep from sinking back down. He wasn’t going to take this regret to *his* grave.

Maybe it wasn’t the smartest thing he’d ever done, driving in his condition, and pulling up in front of the police station. But he had nowhere else to go. He didn’t know where Joan lived. He hadn’t even asked. What a jerk!

Those were the highest, steepest, bitchiest stairs he’d ever climbed and when he reached the top, he was wheezing and sweating and wanted to kick something. Even a puppy.

Okay, maybe not a puppy.

A garbage can though. That'd make him feel better.

"Can I help you, sir?" a male cop asked from behind a long gleaming counter, eyes narrowed at Archer. Not at all like the TV series. No colorful prostitutes, no overflowing filing cabinets. The station resembled a bank.

"Constable Blair? Do you know where her office is?"

After a few seconds, the man brightened. "Oh yeah, Constable Blair. She's on leave, I think. But I could go get her partner. You're Mr....?"

"George Archer."

"Take a seat over there. I'll go see if she can come down."

Archer sat on the first of a row of black vinyl chairs. Man, his chest hurt. He wanted to peek under the bandages but didn't really want to see the horrible scar. Well, he *did* want to see but –

"*Ah ben, crisse,*" a woman snarled, coming down the stairs on one side of the airy foyer. Plants rustled when the human hurricane marched past them. "You have some guts, man, I'll give you that. What the fuck do you want?"

He stood, if only to preserve his shredded dignity. But to see Joan again, he'd walk around in a Hawaiian shirt. "I want to talk to her."

"Yeah, sure, I'll give you bastard her address, eh? Chantal is nice like that." Her accent made the last words sound like "Shann-tahl iz nice like dat".

"Look –"

"No, man, *you* look. I don't know what you did to her or what you said, but if you didn't look half-past dead already, I'd kick your ass across town, okay? *Crisse de chien.* She's on leave, taking a break, and you get your ass out of here."

A fucking dog? Ouch. The woman had a way with words. Not that it didn't apply to his case.

After a satisfied tug on the sleeve of her white dress shirt, she turned to leave, mumbling under her breath.

"Wait, Chantal, *attends.*"

There must have been something in his tone that stopped the five-foot-ten fury for she stopped, turned to him with her eyes narrowed to slits. "Speak fast."

"Not that I owe you anything but –"

"Time's up, sorry –"

"Jesus fucking Christ! Would you shut the hell up and wait?! I love Joan, okay! I *love* her. That son of a bitch might as well have finished the job because I sure as hell don't feel alive without her. There's a hole." He jabbed his index finger in his chest and nearly collapsed from the pain. "And she fits right in it."

Chantal crossed her arms. "And?"

"And?" Archer huffed. "That should be enough. The rest, I'll say to her."

“Not if you can’t find her...”

He felt himself deflating like a balloon. “Don’t make me beg, Chantal,” he snarled under his breath, casting a quick look at the cop behind the counter. “I would.”

She opened her mouth as if to say something, snapped it shut. She must have changed her mind and instead reached to her belt for the cell phone there. She indicated the chair with an imperious index finger. That woman had kids.

While Archer sat—he needed to anyway, so there—she thumbed a number, waited with her narrowed gaze on him.

“*Salut*, it’s me. Yeah, not bad. You?” A short silence then Chantal nodded. “He’s here. Yeah, here at work. I know, I told him. He wants to talk to you.”

Do it for Joan, he kept chanting in his head. *You’re doing it for Joan*.

Chantal waited, nodded. “Okay, bye.”

After snapping her phone shut, she came to sit by his side. The perfect creases in her dark blue pants barely flattened. “She’s a better woman than me, Joan. I wouldn’t have been so nice. She said she’ll talk to you tonight.”

Archer would have preferred to go talk to her now.

What, George? Afraid to lose your nerve?

He nodded. “*Merci*, Chantal.”

She shook her head, mumbled, “*Les maudits anglais*.”

“Those damn English.” Well, it was better than being called a “fucking dog”.

So Archer went back home, took a shower with a plastic grocery bag stuck to his chest—sexy—pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms and then spent the afternoon dozing on the couch, absentmindedly clicking at the remote. Mel called to see how he was. He didn’t tell her he desperately wanted to hang up in case Joan called. He had his pride. Some anyway. Then supper came and went. At eight thirty, Archer had convinced himself Joan wouldn’t call. He couldn’t blame her. Maybe it was a woman thing, getting back at him for what he’d done. Or maybe she’d honestly considered calling him then changed her mind. He so would’ve loved hearing her voice again, even if she undoubtedly would’ve been busy yelling at him and calling him names—all justified. It was close to ten when it dawned on him he’d lost her for good. He went to bed, fought with the pillows, punched a few for good measure. Sleep eluded him.

So he heard it clearly when it started.

Archer lifted his head off the pillow so he could hear better. A deep thumping sound, rhythmic.

“What the hell?” He checked the alarm clock. Eleven forty-six.

None of his neighbors were young enough to play music so loud so late. He padded to the kitchen and opened the door, only to realize it came from his studio.

“Shit.”

Because he'd had his fill of knives for a while, Archer grabbed the flashlight from the "everything drawer", tapped it in his other palm to get the balance just right—no way he'd be judoing anybody in his condition—and padded out of the house and around the thick rhododendron bushes, which gave off their too-strong scent. Another thing he would've changed to the house, but he didn't have the heart to rip them out, not after his mom had spent years caring for the monstrous things. He was more a tulip kind of guy. Nice for two weeks then they die. Quick and easy.

Someone will be in a world of hurt.

He was in no goddamn mood to fuck around. Yeah, maybe taking out some of the hurt on someone else would help. A thief would be perfect.

Squeezing the flashlight hard, he crept closer to the studio door. Here the music was louder. And he could easily recognize the plaintive electric guitar and haunting female singer.

It must have played on a continuous loop too for the song should've ended but didn't and started again.

"Give me a reason to be, ee...a woman," sang the female artist.

Joan's song. No one should be allowed to play it any longer. Archer's heart constricted. Goddamn it hurt. A tear rolled down his cheek.

That's Joan's song. My woman's song.

The prick had chosen the wrong soundtrack for his little stunt. Despite the pain in his chest, Archer shouldered the door, sent it clattering against the wall. Shock nearly floored him. He had to lean against the wall for support when he saw who'd broken into his studio at eleven forty-six at night.

* * * * *

Chantal's call had created a scree of goose bumps down her back and legs. Joan had felt torn between excitement and anger and confusion and hope and...*argh*.

What could he want to tell her now? Repeat his letter verbatim? She'd read it, surely Mel had told him that. She'd read the damn letter and had spent the week forcing herself not to stay home and mope around in her worn tracksuits and T-shirts. She'd eaten out with Chantal and her family, had watched a few rentals, gone shopping. The food had been bad, the movies boring and nothing had fit properly. Everything sucked. Dammit.

So Archer wanting to talk to her felt as though she'd waited for it, when in fact she hadn't.

Right?

Because that'd be very, very loserish. Big time.

She'd caught herself wanting to talk to him too, if only to hear his voice or watch his mouth—that wicked, wicked mouth—do that thing with the phantom mint. So

she'd made a shotgun decision, the kind that unfailingly landed her in trouble or hurt. Or both. She'd go to him. She'd put on her "costume" one last time. Her swan song.

She wasn't ready to let Archer come into her house, her last refuge from the pain he'd inflicted—and goddamn, it hurt for real—and had decided instead to go to his place. She had to *know*. She'd go nuts otherwise, always wondering. Despite his claim, had she only been one of the metaphorical notches on his pole? The time they'd spent together, had it only been a contract for him? Was she only worth thirty thousand dollars to George B. Archer, escort, trainer and the man she'd come to love? There had to be more to it than just the contract. She had to know. Tonight. If it ended, then being in the place where everything had begun felt right somehow.

And if it turned out to be only the beginning...

Do. Not. Hope.

But now that she stood in his studio waiting for him to show up—she'd broken into his place no less, because as Murphy would have it, she'd forgotten about the key in the brass mailbox until it was too late—Joan didn't know how she'd react. Give him a piece of her mind from across the place? Let him come, talk as civilized people would? As long as she didn't start bawling, it'd be tolerable. Thinking about Archer made her want to lay down with a box of tissues and sappy movies.

Loser.

So she focused on her routine, the one thing they'd created together. The two of them. His gift to her if nothing else. Joan kept her eyes half closed as she watched herself twirl around the pole, the pennies catching the faint light from the brass garden *torchière* lamps Archer had in the backyard. It barely gave enough light for her to see her outline in the mirror. With the sort of thing she'd done, using her police know-how to break into a guy's house and the fact she was wearing a Turkish dancer's costume, she didn't need unforgiving light to force herself to meet her own, guilt-ridden gaze.

When the door burst open, Joan nearly lost her grip on the pole, coming *this* close to repeating the awfully embarrassing tumble of her first day with Archer.

How stunning he was!

Yet he looked like shit. Not that he'd let himself go and wore bad clothes or anything. Those dark pants and his black hair tousled just so reminded her yet again how gorgeous Archer was. In and out of his clothes. But his face, his eyes...the pain was easy to see there.

Should that have given her some measure of satisfaction? He'd made her suffer and so should suffer in turn. Right? That should've gratified her to some degree. It didn't.

He stood in the embrasure, a flashlight in his hand—clearly as a weapon and not a source of light—his expression under the garden lights a mix of shock, dismay and confusion. He only wore dark plaid pajama bottoms hanging on his hips. A thick square bandage had been stuck over his left pectoral with gauze wrapped around his chest. The knife had come so close. A couple of inches lower...

Despite the loud music, she heard her name.

“Joan?”

No one said it quite the way he did.

“Don’t say anything.” She pointed to the chair she’d set by the “master pole”.

Obviously too shocked to speak, Archer slowly made his way to the chair and lowered himself onto it, a cringe that broke her heart twisting his features when his butt connected. He’d put his life at risk for her. It wasn’t something she’d forget. No matter that he’d lied about his other life or what happened tonight. *If anything happened.*

The song entered into her favorite part, the wail of the electric guitar filled the awkward silence between Archer and her. She was glad for it. She couldn’t speak. His gaze never left her when she grabbed the pole, walked around it once, twice, thrice, one foot in front of the other and not with her regular “square” walk but so her hips would sway from one side to the other. Following the beat. The song began again—she’d put it in a continuous loop—and Joan took position behind it, grabbed the pole nice and low, both hands together. Left then right, she rolled her hips, her shoulders.

Archer’s mouth opened. He didn’t say anything.

She had to learn if it’d only been a contract for him, if she’d only been one of many. Ordinary. Nothing special. His eyes wouldn’t lie. She’d know. She had to know.

With one of those bursts of speed Archer had lauded so much, she seized the pole one-handed, sprang down fast and hard, bounced her butt once on her heels then snapped back standing so she could follow through with a rapid series of pivoting steps. When the bass really ripped into the song, Joan’s heart began to beat at least twice as fast. She wanted this to work. She wanted him.

After the burst of speed came the slow portion, during which she was supposed to put her back to the pole and slowly slide down the length of it until she crouched with her knees no more than shoulders’ width. Archer had said wider and it offered too much to the audience, narrower and it pinned her as an amateur. But for this audience, Joan went all the way down, literally sat on her heels and spread her knees as wide as she could so he’d get a full frontal view. She’d never felt so powerful and feminine and wanted as when he leaned forward in his chair. Despite the light, she saw it. He was doing the thing with his mouth. Joan wanted to smile in triumph. She’d pinned him.

She finished her routine, her eyes never once leaving his face and walked over to stand in front of him. After she leaned over and planted her palms on the backrest corners, she held his gaze for several seconds.

Archer lifted his face to hers.

“You hurt me. You lied to me. If we’re going to have something special, you and I, then it has to stop. I won’t take that kind of crap a second time. You hurt me again, you lie to me again and that’s it, we’re through for good.”

Archer nodded. His eyes spoke volumes, even if he never said a word.

He was sorry, they said. If he could, he’d do everything differently. He’d trust her. If only.

She nodded.

His chin quivered. He cleared his throat, looked into her eyes again. "Joan..."

"I know."

Chapter Thirteen

She *did* know.

Joan had suspected and guessed and hoped. Now she knew. With certainty and a sense of liberation, of surfacing, she knew he loved her. He'd been telling the truth back at the club, had only lied at the hospital to protect himself, to force her to leave. Plus, what kind of woman would she be if she held against him what a man said coming out of surgery? She wasn't one of those women who demanded every shred of heart and soul from a man. He loved her. Had told her. Had shown her. It was plenty good enough for her!

But no more lies. She'd told Archer the truth, she would *not* take the secrets and the lies.

Suddenly, with her bent over him this way, the mood changed from emotionally charged to unbelievably erotic.

"I want you," she said over the music.

His eyes did a quick down-and-up scan. He grinned a lopsided one. "If you'll have me, I'm all yours."

"I'll have you. But no more secrets."

"No more secrets."

Using her arms to keep herself suspended over him, she kissed his cheeks, his eyebrows, brushed her lips over his for a quick, teasing taste. He tried to trap her mouth with his but she pulled away, grinning, then proceeded to kiss her way down his throat, circumvented his wounded chest and instead concentrated on his other side, which she licked. He tasted so good. Smelled so good. She'd missed him so much.

By her elbow, his cotton pajama bottoms tented enticingly. She'd get to it soon.

After she rolled her eyes up to his face, Joan crouched in front of him so she could pull at the drawstring of his pants. His breathing accelerated. He tucked his bottom lip behind a silent snarl. The music still played. But she no longer needed it to get in the mood.

In a fist, she grabbed Archer's cock through the cotton, rubbed her thumb over the apex, touched the wet spot there then licked the pad of her finger. He closed his eyes, swallowed hard.

Archer's mouth opened when she pulled the front of his crotch down over his cock while she fished it out with her other hand. So smooth and hot. Into her mouth it went. No preamble. No kissing and licking. Just down her throat as if he'd been built just for that purpose. Built for her.

She *mm*-ed loudly, cocked her head left and right to screw herself down around his thick shaft. So good. But he pushed against her forehead hard enough to dislodge her.

“Not here, Joan,” he said through his teeth. “In my room. In my *bed*.”

Joan had no idea how they made it there, only that they somehow managed to open and close the appropriate doors, lock those that still had functioning locks, stumbled down the corridor and up the thick wooden stairs. He flicked on a switch and golden light spilled onto the landing. When she finally saw it, his large but cozy bedroom reminded her of a summer cottage. All plaid duvet, warm wood and Canadiana *décor*. With a grimace, he sat gingerly on the edge of the bed.

“Give me a quick break, okay? The stairs were a bitch.”

“I’ll do better than that.”

Despite his protest—*men*—Joan lifted his legs and rolled him onto the hip-height bed so he lay supine, sunken in the thick duvet. His penis stuck out over his waistband.

Periscope up!

“You’re not allowed to move from that position, is that clear?” Joan demanded. If the fists on hips didn’t convince him, nothing would. She quickly removed her costume.

He smiled tightly. “You’re giving me orders again, Constable Blair?”

“Damn right. Now where was I?” She tapped her index finger on her chin. “Oh yeah. I remember.”

He gasped when she knelt over him, but didn’t settle down around his waist in case she hurt him, and pulled his cock completely out of the pants and into her mouth. Pumping up and down, up and down, she brought him close—thighs twitching was always a good sign—then released his penis so she could stroke his legs. The pants came down easily. Naked on his plaid duvet, with the landing light filtering in for a soft glow, he couldn’t have been more handsome and masculine.

“Come over here,” he said with a curl to his index finger. “Come sit right here.” He pointed to the tip of his tongue, which he’d stuck out, curled upward and so damn tempting.

After she’d trapped it into her mouth and sucked at his tongue a while, Joan scooted forward and grabbed the headboard so she could straddle his face while making sure her knees didn’t come anywhere near his chest.

He’d saved her life. That knife-wielding maniac would’ve hurt her bad. Probably worse.

Dear Archer. How she’d come to value him. Love him.

“Come on,” he mumbled from between her thighs. “Don’t make me exert myself in my condition, you know.”

He laughed when she slapped the top of his head.

She hadn’t fully lowered herself over his mouth that he was pushing up against her pussy, eating her urgently and deeply. She gasped when fingers right away pulled her

cheeks wide for a more profound claiming. The headboard creaked when she yanked against it.

Oh. Yes. Ohhh.

Rolling her hips, she followed Archer's tongue as he pushed it in and out then licked front to back while his fingers dug increasingly deeper in her flesh, flesh that throbbed at the thought of the man's cock sinking in, so smooth and hot and made for her.

"Mmm," he said between greedy pulls. "Mmm. That's it, give it to me, right here. Push against my mouth. *Push.*"

Joan sat down a bit lower. That mouth!

"That's good," she murmured, leaning against the headboard. "That's good. So good."

"Then show it. I want to hear."

While he claimed her pussy with his mouth, Archer's hands kept busy anchoring her to his face, enough so that she could barely roll her pelvis anymore for the force with which he was holding on to her. As if he meant to never let go.

"I love you so much," she whispered, half hoping he wouldn't hear. Half hoping he would.

"I do too, Joan."

Unable and unwilling to wait any longer, Joan hurriedly scooted back down around his waist and lifted herself up on her knees. Her pussy throbbed and was so slick, his thick member sank in almost of its own volition. She gasped when Archer bucked his hips once at the last moment.

"I said not to move!"

"Sorry, couldn't help it."

"Now I'll have to punish you."

He grinned wide. "Pink fuzzy handcuffs?"

"Next time. All I have on me is this." She pulled out to the glans then stabbed back down.

The grin left his face. His mouth twisted in a decadent, lascivious snarl. "Oh baby, you can punish me all you want. I've been very, very bad."

She did it again. Then again. Until she was bumping her hips hard enough to make their skin clack together. She must have been hurting his chest but he didn't seem to notice or mind as he kept her butt cheeks out wide with his large, hot hands, fingers splayed and curled into her flesh.

"Do it again."

As though she needed his urging!

Rhythmic creaks from the bed accompanied their cries as both their voices filled the room. A climax ripped through her, unannounced and one that left her shaking and

biting her bottom lip hard enough to taste blood. Suddenly, a sharp buck from underneath lifted her a good few inches off the mattress. Despite his diminished state, Archer could still manage to lift her off without apparent effort. He rode her hard and fast until she felt the tiny pulsations at the base of his cock. He slowed, deepened his penetration then stopped altogether. So quiet they were she could feel his burning seed filling her, his loving hands roving lightly over her skin. She bent down and placed a soft kiss on his chin.

Archer winked. "Is it incredibly bad form if I fall asleep?"

Joan laughed. "Not if I can too."

He reached over his head and produced a box of baby wipes hidden behind the headboard.

"Baby wipes?"

Archer rolled his eyes. "Moist towelettes."

"*Baby wipes*. To wipe baby butts. You *man*."

"Okay, okay, grammar queen."

She tweaked his nipple. "You do this often, eh? You knew exactly where that box was."

"Not with another woman. No. But I enjoy sleeping in on Sundays and, well, you know how it gets." A black eyebrow bounced mockingly.

"You're just impossible." She rolled off him, wiped herself of his semen then held the box while he had his turn at the *moist towelettes*. When he threw his wad down by the bed, she did the same. Not a neat freak then. Good, because with her ability to knock things over in two different rooms at once, she didn't want to have to constantly apologize for occupying space.

"I don't know if you had plans for tonight, but you're sleeping here." He patted the mattress by his side.

After pulling the covers and sheets down, they slipped underneath and cuddled. This was so *nice*. She sighed contentedly.

"You know," he said, stroking hair back from her face so he could look at her. "I've never done this."

"What?" She *was* sleepy. But pillow talk with Archer would probably be much more exciting. She'd sleep later. Plus, she had questions lined up from here to tomorrow. He had no idea how tenacious she could be when she set her mind to it.

"Cuddle this way after mind-blowing sex."

"Mind-blowing, eh? Ever the humble man."

"What? It wasn't for you?" he retorted. Sobering, he sighed. "Looking at you blows my mind. Your name blows my mind. How's that for sharing my *feeelings*? Not bad for a guy."

"Yeah, I just wish you would've *shared* a bit earlier, you know?"

She felt him tense. "I know."

"Okay, I have to know this. That escort thing, how does it work?"

"*Did* work. I quit. Actually, I went with you at the club against my boss's instructions. That guy is seriously connected."

"Mob?"

Archer snorted, winced. "Ow. No, he looks too expensive to be with the mob. I think he's a rich guy who lost someone dear to him, his wife maybe, a woman I'm sure, anyway. One thing for certain, he has access to designer shoes. I saw him at the hospital. I wasn't sure it was him until Mel got a text message on her cell...and he said I looked good in Cavalli. I had a *Cavalli shirt* that day at the hospital, Joan. It was creepy. Anyway, yeah, I quit. I'll tell you all about it, if you want."

"I do." Knowing he'd quit was a weight off her shoulders, even if the idea of him escorting women to social events didn't raise her territorial alarms. She wasn't a jealous lover, but still...

"And the money I made—"

Joan raised her hand and put her palm against his luscious mouth. He kissed it. "Look, your financial affairs are your own. I'm with the Morality squad, not the federal government. And in all honesty, the less I know about *that*, the better I'll be able to deny it later."

He smiled behind her hand. A mocking smile.

"Yes?"

"Women are complicated. You said 'no more secrets'."

"Yeah, but that didn't mean I need to have access to your bank account. Just don't do anything illegal with it."

"If I give it to an orphanage, would it count?" His voice came out muffled. His breath warmed her hand.

"I don't think that's how it works."

"A political party?"

Joan chuckled. "You'd probably have more chances to get rid of it that way." She yawned. "Anyway, it's not as if you can do anything about it now. Not tonight anyway. Hey, you never told me what the B stands for. George B. Archer."

"If you laugh, just you wait 'til I heal."

"Nah, I won't laugh. Tell me."

"The B is for Berthold. George Berthold Archer."

Berthold.

She tried. She really did. But her belly gave her away. Then a whole-body laugh shook her. No amount of biting her cheeks and slapping both hands over her mouth suppressed it. Hiccupping "Sorry, sorry, sorry", Joan had to roll onto her belly and

cram her face into a pillow to at least stop the sound. She was being so insensitive. Poor guy!

A loud and stinging smack landed on her ass.

“OW!”

She arched back like a broken bowline!

Joan just had time to catch Archer, propped up on an elbow, licking his hand from palm to fingertips before slapping her butt again. Hard. It hurt!

Wincing and pressing his hand to his bandaged chest, he lay back down, blew on his hand. “Just you wait until I feel better.”

She kissed his shoulder. “I’ll let you put the pink fuzzy cuffs on me, okay? Am I forgiven?”

He *humphed* noncommittally. Yet judging by the smirk rising to his lips, Joan knew she hadn’t goofed too badly.

Archer sighed, grimaced. “I acted like a twit.”

“Yeah, you certainly did. But it’s okay—”

“No,” he interrupted then planted his icy blue gaze on her. “It’s not, and if you want to punch me, that’s fine. But not in the belly or the balls, okay? I’ve already given to that charity.”

Joan rolled her eyes. “Why would I want to punch you?”

“That’s what women do to men when they acted like asses and hurt them.”

“It would’ve been different if you’d run around and cheated on me with other women, you know, while you’d pretend we had something when we didn’t. That’d be different. I wouldn’t take that. I think it was more a false start than a real betrayal. You didn’t goof too bad. And you didn’t do it on purpose, right, I don’t think?”

“No, of course not.”

“No punching then. For now.”

After clearing his throat, Archer leaned forward, trapped her in his intense gaze. “I’m sorry, Joan.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do,” he countered, scooting forward. “I’ve always been an opportunistic prick and an ass, but never to those...those I love. And I *do* love you. A lot.”

Do. Not. Cry.

Joan took a deep breath. “You have an odd way of showing it. Lying to me. For what anyway? What did you think I’d say? It’s your life.”

He shook his head. “I never said I’m a smart man. I may look all, you know,” he made a face as if he were posing for a photo shoot. “But I’m really a socially awkward boy inside.”

Joan snorted a laugh. “Yeah, right.”

Archer grinned. Then he did it. That thing with his mouth. Oh, Bad Boy Archer was back in full force, was he? Heat wafted out of the sheet she'd tucked under her armpits.

"You should've trusted me enough to tell me about Gentlemen Inc."

He cringed at the name. "It doesn't sound the same when you say it. Not as suave. But yeah, I should have. I just didn't want to take the chance you'd look at me differently, that I'd lose you because of it. Ha, but then I almost lost you anyway, didn't I?"

"You didn't lose me," she said. After a second of hesitancy, she put her hand over his and squeezed. "I'm not that easy to ditch. But you did hurt me, not by something you did, but by omission. Sometimes, it hurts just as bad when someone doesn't do something they ought to have done."

"So back to the me acting like an ass part. And the sorry part too. The 'very sorry' part of my story should be what sticks out, if you'd have to come up with a headline. Something like *Lying Jerk Gets his Butt Kicked by Hot Lady Cop*."

Laughing, she squeezed his hand harder, suddenly feeling like wrapping herself in him, a protective, sarcasm-lined, fashion-conscious, gorgeous with a capital G man-blanket. "You know, for a guy, it's true, you're not bad at sharing your feelings."

Archer grinned, bounced an eyebrow twice. "You should see me making it up to a woman."

"Why don't you —"

He did.

Archer drowned the rest of her sentence with one hell of a tender kiss, which began slow and measured, lips mostly, then deepened, became more intense, desperate almost, with tongue and teeth and deep-throated moans.

Joan pulled away, panting. "You hurt me again, I'll let Chantal have at you."

A wide grin pulled his glistening lips. "A threesome? Yay!"

Epilogue

Adriano leaned back from the laptop screen, rubbed his eyes then let out a chuckle. He'd have to find another agent for that region since Archer wouldn't come back to Gentlemen Inc. Satisfaction swelled him with an urge to go out and have a nice strong *caffè corretto* at some sunny terrace. How he missed his native Tuscany. But his present location suited his business much better. It afforded him the logistical network he needed. And the secrecy as well.

He stood so he could stretch his legs but was drawn right away to the window, where ever-crowded *Piazza Navona*, with its richly colored tents for the weekly market stretched several corners down from his window overlooking a narrow, pedestrian street.

Thinking of Archer reminded Adriano how close he'd come to getting caught on video or whatever the petite woman had brandished in her hand. He'd had to "step on it", as they said in North America, to make a hasty retreat undetected and unphotographed. Clever little thing! And pretty too, with a fresh, youthful face where freckles crowded over her perfect nose. Even if she'd failed at taking a picture of him, Adriano realized he'd have to be careful not to give the computer hacker—Archer probably didn't even know what his friend did in her "spare time"—a hold in his hide. It was enough that she'd noticed him in the hospital corridor. Truth be told, he'd noticed her too. She was even prettier in person. And smarts shone in her large dark eyes. He loved smart women. Women in general. And nothing, *nothing* riled him more than seeing one suffer.

Angry despite the perfect day and recent success, Adriano yanked the curtains shut over the bustling life of his adopted home and returned to his laptop, the fan whirring softly and emitting ribbons of heat to graze his wrists. He had much work to do. First, he had to e-mail one of his agents in Turkey for a task that would require finesse and much patience—that Lady was a handful, *two* hands full, with generous curves and a smile to melt steel. Her picture presently occupied half his screen as he perused the article that had caught his eye the week before. He had the perfect man for it.

If his Gentlemen thought he was tasking them to help Ladies, Adriano wasn't about to let them think otherwise. Yet he personally saw it more as a reciprocal venture, wherein a man helped a woman with her helping him in turn. A circle. Life worked in circles, never in straight lines. Love did as well.

Adriano wondered when—if—his own circle would be complete once more. Sometimes, he suspected, feared, he'd be doomed to a life of solitude, that nothing would ever soothe the hurt in his spirit and fill the abyss in his heart. He shook away the depressing thought so he could focus on the present file. Feeling sorry for himself

had worked for the first year or so after Isabella's passing, but it wouldn't work now. Not after so long.

He'd decided to put his time and fortune to better use, play Cupid in a sense to his unwitting Gentlemen and Ladies, and wouldn't stop now. Somewhere there was a woman, a Lady, facing unfair odds, excessive adversity or even direct threat to her wellbeing—as one of his recent tasks had revealed, one he'd been more than happy to “correct” with a particularly convincing agent...her belligerent ex would think twice before raising his hand on a woman again. In the meantime and with others he'd researched, Adriano de Luca would make sure, *damn* sure, to do what he could.

Because he was a Gentleman.

About the Author

I am a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school drop-out, 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).

Nathalie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorasCave.com.

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