

Love's Bounty



Kimberly Grey

Hard Shell Word Factory

www.hardshell.com

Copyright ©2004 Kimberly Grey

October 2004 Hard Shell Word Factory

NOTICE: This ebook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This book cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This ebook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

Chapter One

IT WAS SOMETHING out of a nightmare.

It was something that always happened to the other guy.

It was the unexpected. The unexplained. It was walking into the convenience store to pay for the gas just pumped and finding the attendant being held at the point of a gun.

Pushing through the glass door and into the tiny building—one room crammed with shelves filled with junk food for customers and automobile products for cars—it took Rae Grayson no more than a glance to realize what was happening, and in that moment she knew she was going to be late.

Always being on time was a personal fetish. It was one rule she never broke. At least not if she could help it, and she didn't want this day to be an exception. It was a bright, sunny afternoon. She didn't want to fall victim to the clock. So, holding up the crisp twenty-dollar bill she had ready to turn over in payment for the fuel she'd just put in the tank of her Dakota, she looked from the pale-faced clerk behind the counter, to the would-be thief holding a revolver in one hand and a fistful of the clerk's shirt in the other and said, "I can see the two of you are busy and I don't want to interrupt so would it be okay if I just pay and go?"

The clerk blinked in stunned disbelief, and with his hands in the air in the worldwide sign of surrender, his stare made her feel more like an alien from Pluto than an off-duty and out-of-uniform police officer of the Los Angeles Police

Department. Yet it was the outraged growl of the gunman holding the snub-nosed thirty-eight that got her attention.

Tall, dark, and deadly with his weapon, he abruptly swung on her with a glare. "Lady, are you nuts? Can't you see what's going on here?"

She nodded. "Yes, I can, and that's why I don't want to interrupt. You see, I have an appointment, and I really don't want to be—"

The harsh gurgle that erupted from his throat gave her pause. She figured discretion, as always, being the better part of valor meant she should be silent. At least for a couple of seconds.

Using the twenty-dollar bill to cautiously gesture to the clerk who, once again, had the gun pointed at his head, she kept her focus on the man with his finger on the trigger. "You really don't want to do this."

"Lady, you don't know what I want to do!"

"Shooting someone is a felony offense," she offered with polite reason. "So is robbing the store. If you get caught, you're going to go to jail."

"Ain't nobody going to catch me!"

Keeping her body and hands still, she let her eyes roll to the corner of the room where a video camera was trained on the counter. "Maybe not right away, but I don't think they're going to have any problem identifying you once they take a look at the tape that's being recorded."

He followed her gaze, and his fierce scowl turned to dumbfounded amazement just before his jaw dropped.

She nearly sighed out loud. Everyone everywhere knew video cameras were in almost every convenience store. It was only those out to break the law who seemed to forget about them and, she figured, that was why crime didn't pay.

"You know," she continued before he could speak. "The cops are going to collect the tape as soon as they get here, and they're going to give it to the local television stations that are going to flash your picture all over the place."

The gunman's glare darted from the camera to her to the clerk and back to the camera again.

"When that happens, you know somebody out there is going to recognize you, and they're going to call in to collect whatever reward's being offered and give the cops your name."

She watched his Adam's apple bob, and his frantic glance that searched the store as if looking for a hidden witness.

"Once they have your name, it'll be easy to track you down, and all of this will have been for nothing." She shrugged. "So why don't you let the man go, put the gun down and walk out the door, and have a nice day?"

His response was a string of violent and loud obscenities.

"Can I take that to mean you're not just going to leave?" she asked, letting her arms drop to her sides with deliberate ease and shoving the twenty-dollar bill into the front pocket of her jeans. The motion allowed her to hook her thumb into the waistband of denim close to her own revolver. Hidden by the blue and white Los Angeles Dodgers jacket she wore, the angry perpetrator she was facing didn't know she was armed. Not yet.

"Lady, I'm going to leave all right, and I'm going to have a nice day, too, because when I go, I'm going to be taking a lot of cash with me—and there ain't nobody going to identify me because there won't be any TV camera or tape left."

The thief's weapon swung from the clerk to the video camera—which was exactly what Rae was waiting for.

She pulled her automatic, dropped to her knees, and yelled. "Police! Drop it—you're under arrest!"

The man behind the counter, already terrified, abruptly fainted. He hit the floor with a thud, and his sudden absence left behind a vacuum of silence. It hung in the air with deafening intensity. The only thing that broke it was the quiet rumble of traffic beyond the door and the mad beat of her own heart drumming in her ears.

What would the gunman do? Give up? Or would he go for a shot? His hesitation said he was thinking. Just like she was. And they were probably thinking the same thing: What were his chances?

She wouldn't say they were good, but that wouldn't stop him. Not if he wanted to get away, and he did.

His roar of outrage announced his intent, and in the split second it took him to drop his aim, she fired.

The discharge from her revolver exploded through the tiny store. It shook the windows, ricocheted off the walls, and knocked a box of crackers from a nearby shelf. The crackers hit the floor just before the thief did. Caught by the power of the bullet, he was spun around by the impact before it carried him down to the scarred linoleum.

She was on her feet instantly. Ready to disarm and take charge. She wanted to get his weapon away from him—out of reach—but a movement out of the corner of her eye stopped her. She whirled, jerked her weapon up again, and looked down its sights to confront another man.

She nearly swore out loud. Tall, with sandy hair and a lean build, he wore a black San Francisco Giants jacket and weathered jeans, and he was watching her with a brilliant green gaze aimed over the cold barrel of a Glock.

She felt her heart skip. Even if she fired again, she wouldn't survive. He had her dead to rights. One pull on the trigger, and she was history. Her only consolation was she'd take him with her. Yet the blast she was expecting didn't come. He didn't shoot her, he didn't even blink, and his failure to react allowed her to find her voice. "You with him?"

His grin took her by surprise. "In a manner of speaking."

She watched him ease his grip on his gun and slowly lower it.

"My name's Scott Logan, and I'm a bounty hunter." He nodded toward the man stretched out bleeding and groaning on the floor. "He's my skip."

Relief shuddered through her. A bounty hunter. That meant he was on her side. Or at least on the side of the law. She wasn't his enemy. Still she wasn't prepared to blindly trust. Keeping her eye on him, she stepped forward to kick the weapon that'd fallen from the gunman's grip out of the felon's reach. "Not anymore. Now he belongs to the City of Los Angeles."

The man named Scott shoved the Glock out of sight and into a holster beneath his jacket and sighed. "Bummer."

She glared, not prepared to be sympathetic for his loss of a reward. Not when it was *his* fault that *she* was going to be late. "Yeah, well, if you'd nabbed him one minute sooner, I wouldn't have to turn him over, and I wouldn't have to miss my appointment."

"Appointment for what?" Scott bent to retrieve the thirty-eight using a crumpled tissue from his pocket.

She accepted the weapon and holstered her own, grateful he knew enough not to touch the felon's gun with his hands. The robber might have a one-way ticket to jail, but forensics would still kick her ass if the bounty hunter's print ended up on the piece. "I'm supposed to be meeting my best friend to help her pick out a wedding dress."

White teeth flashed again. "That doesn't sound like as much fun as filling out all the paperwork for this mess."

Stepping over the thief to grab the phone behind the counter, she spared a glance to the attendant who remained stretched out on the floor behind the counter. He was out cold. "This is supposed to be my day off."

"You could always tell them that you let me shoot him," Scott offered as he knelt to give First Aid to his skip. "That way I could collect the reward, and you could avoid the hassle."

In the middle of punching 9-1-1, she hesitated. Was he kidding? A glance over her shoulder at him left her unsure, and irritation flared because the idea was tempting. "I wish," she muttered, not willing to admit she liked his line of

reasoning. After all, she'd taken an oath to serve and protect. It was her duty to follow through. And, of course, there was the videotape. It would, no doubt, be collected when the uniforms arrived, and it wouldn't lie. She groaned. Like it or not, she was stuck.

In a matter of minutes the first squad showed up. It was rapidly followed by an ambulance—and another squad. The four officers from the vehicles, wearing navy blue and sporting badges on their shirts, took statements, collected evidence and saw the perp hauled away. He'd live and stand trial, and it was unlikely he'd make bail again before having his day in court. Not with a record of having skipped once already.

Thinking of the possibility as she watched her comrades work the scene and interview the attendant who, finally, was on his feet once more, she found herself looking to Scott Logan, bounty hunter.

Off to the side, he hadn't tried to disappear when the cavalry arrived. Instead he'd stayed where he was and hung around, making no attempt to avoid requests for identification and freely backing her story when asked. He'd also volunteered the thief's name and turned over the paperwork he was carrying which gave him permission to bring in one Bud Jacobs, two-time loser when it came to armed robbery.

Standing in the parking lot outside the store, Rae watched Scott mingle with her friends and fellow officers. Now that the crisis was over and she could see him without the haze of adrenaline and terror clouding her vision, she guessed him to

be just over six foot and rangy. His body wasn't bulked up with muscle.

His frame was long and lean and hard. Running into him would be like colliding with a brick wall, but his movements were easy even if his make up was tough.

She guessed him to be in his mid-twenties in age, but his eyes were older. Emerald in hue, experience echoed in their depths, and humor did, too. The latter softened the harsh effect of lessons learned, and she wondered at the scars. At him. Who was Scott Logan?

"I'll tell Griff to give you a call," he told one of the uniforms and turned to find her studying him. The observation didn't even make him pause. He just started toward her to confront her curiosity.

"Griff?" she asked but recognized the name. It was one she'd heard around the precinct.

"My boss," Scott clarified. "Ex-cop turned bounty hunter. He runs Bail Busters, Inc."

She nodded, memory clicking the details into place. She'd never met the man named Griff, but he had a reputation for being straight up. If bounty hunters weren't normally favorites of the police, seen as pests and dangerous interlopers, he was the exception. "I've heard of him."

"But not me?"

The injured look Scott feigned was pathetic enough to make her smile. "Should I have?"

"No, but you will."

Her eyebrows arched at his bravado, and his shoulders moved in an easy shrug.

"If I'm going to keep making a living doing this, I might as well get to know the people I'll be working with in the Department." He gestured to the cell phone in her hand. "Did you call your friend?"

She nodded and shoved the instrument into her jacket pocket. "Yup."

"She mad?"

"No, she's a cop, too."

"Ah, she understands then."

She cocked her head at him, suddenly more interested in him than she wanted to be. She liked his confidence, his attitude, and he wasn't hard to look at either. "And you? Were you a cop?"

"Nope," he denied. "I was a felon."

Her tongue tripped, and he leaned closer.

"I'll tell you my life story if you let me buy you a beer."

Intrigued by him and by the invisible hum of hormones suddenly vibrating between them, she didn't back up but did let her gaze drift skyward to where the sun was shining brightly. "It's a little early."

"So, let's make it a root beer."

Surprised she wanted to say yes, realizing he'd done more than pique her curiosity, she wanted to accept his offer, but the timing wasn't right. "I can't. I'm already—"

"Late."

She sighed. "The wedding dress."

"I'm just glad it's not yours."

The unexpected declaration made her stomach flip, as did the grin he tossed her as he reached around her to open the driver's door of the Dakota.

"Maybe we can get that beer some other time, Rae Grayson."

Starting to move past him to climb into the truck, she stopped to pin him with a narrowed glare. She hadn't introduced herself. She hadn't given him her name, and the twitch of his lips said he knew what she was thinking.

"I'm good at detective work."

"I'll just bet you are," she agreed, and admiring the full line of his mouth above a jaw that was square and strong, she could imagine what else he was good at—like breaking women's hearts. She got into the cab and he slammed the door shut once she was inside, but he didn't walk away. He stayed by the open window as she turned the key in the ignition. She nodded at him. "Watch your six, Scott Logan."

"Keep your head down, Rae Grayson."

"I'll duck when I see you coming again," she assured him, and the flash of his smile was the last she saw of him as she put the truck in gear and drove away.

* * * *

SCOTT WATCHED THE shiny silver Dakota disappear into traffic, and the smile curving his lips lingered. Auburn hair, gray eyes, long legs. Trouble with a capital T, and just the type of trouble he liked to tangle with.

Rae Grayson. The red glints in her shoulder-length hair spoke of hidden temper. The misty gray of her gaze testified

to hidden depths, but the cool control she'd faced Bud Jacobs with proved she had courage. Moxie. She didn't run, not under fire, and he liked her for it—and for the way she made his blood hum.

Whistling tunelessly, he headed for the Jeep he'd left around the corner of the store. He'd parked it there when pure dumb luck led him to the busted-up Chevy Jacobs drove. Thinking of filling up, he'd spotted the car, recognized the license plate and pulled in hoping for an arrest and a reward, but a sneak peek through the front window of the building had killed that idea and given him a front row seat to the showdown in progress.

He jumped in the Jeep and started up the engine. The ending to the shootout could have been a lot worse. Someone could have ended up dead, but Rae's rambling dialogue had confused and disarmed and led Jacobs into making a fatal error.

It had been a smooth takedown under the circumstances. Unfortunately, it hadn't been his, and the ten percent commission he would have collected off the twenty-five-thousand dollar bail bond was lost.

Scott sent the Jeep zipping out into the street. Griff wasn't going to be happy with the loss, but their bail bondsman, Alan Levy, would be ecstatic. He was going to get to keep the premium paid for the bond he'd issued. He wasn't going to have to turn it over to Bail Busters, Inc. Yet the occasional loss of such revenue was the price Levy paid for issuing a bond to a felon who tried to escape the law.

Scott sighed. One man's loss was another's gain, but in a city the size of LA, he didn't need to worry about the one who got away. There were skips enough to keep any number of bounty hunters busy, and he worked with the best of them.

Shaking his head, Scott sent the Jeep toward downtown LA and the offices of Bail Busters. He was lucky, too, that Griff was an even tempered kind of guy. Only having seen his boss mad once, Scott wasn't eager for the opportunity to come again—and he remained grateful Griff's wrath had yet to be directed at him.

Topping out at six four and over two hundred pounds of solid muscle, Scott didn't envy anyone who tangled with Griff, not that Scott considered himself a pussycat, either.

Grinning at his own ego, Scott aimed the Jeep toward the parking garage entrance of the building housing Bail Busters' offices. He was anxious to see Griff. He needed to pass on the message from one of the cops, and he wanted to tell Griff about Rae Grayson. Not because Rae was important to business but because he was nosey—and because, being a former cop, Griff knew just about everything and everybody when it came to the LA Police Department. He would be a good source to find out about her, and Scott wanted to find out all he could.

She interested him, and he wanted to buy her that beer. The only way he was going to be able to do that was by tracking her down again, and he figured that would be easy. The City of Angels was big, but it wasn't big enough to keep him from finding who he was after.

He shot into a parking spot, got out of the Jeep, and slammed the door shut with confidence. Like the old saying went, he always got his man—or his woman.

Unfortunately, conducting a personal hunt wasn't something he could give him immediate attention to. Work came first, and business was brisk. For the next week Scott found himself on hunts that took him from the streets of Beverly Hills to the shores of Laguna Beach.

Even if arrested in the County of Los Angeles, his quarry could come from any part of the State of California—or the United States, for that matter. Having gone as far away as Boston to bring back a skip to face justice, it never surprised him where he ended up. He just followed a trail that began when someone got a bond.

Once a person arrested and charged with a crime was brought before a judge, the decision was made whether or not that person should remain in prison until the date of trial or if that person could be set free on their own recognizance. Usually the happy medium was a bail bond.

A kind of insurance, to get a bond, the arrestee needed to apply to an agent and promise to appear in court on the set date to answer for whatever he'd done to get picked up. In return for that promise, an agent posted a bond of an amount determined by the court, but to hedge his bets, the agent usually tried to get collateral—or at least a co-signer or two—on the bond. That way, if the arrested party decided not to appear and the bond had to be paid to the court, the agent wouldn't be out any money. Yet before the agent went after

the collateral or any co-signer, a bounty hunter was hired to try to bring in the "skip."

Tracking down jumpers could be time consuming, not to mention tricky, but a good many of those out on bail didn't miss their hearing dates on purpose.

Some didn't appear because of clerical error. They got the wrong court date. Or, sometimes, people just forgot. Generally, a phone call would get the accidents and the forgetfuls to do what they had to—go to court.

There were, however, those who purposely didn't appear. For a few, the motivation for not going to court was fear. They were afraid of what punishment they might receive. Others no-showed because they just didn't care. Yet the minority was a more dangerous element of society. The last group was comprised of those who didn't go to court because they despised the law.

Believing they were above the system, they didn't barricade themselves in their homes and hope no one would come looking. They did everything they could to hide, and they were the ones Scott got to go after—and he used every legal means available to find them and make an arrest.

The work was seldom easy, often aggravating, and sometimes dangerous—and he loved it.

That Friday Scott found himself on Venice Beach. The afternoon sun was hot and the boardwalk crowded. He paused to toss the paper from the sandwich he'd just finished into a waste bin and to study the sand and sea and to search for a familiar face.

The skip he was after this time was a woman. Sandra Povlaki. Just thinking of her made his mouth thin. Arrested for dealing drugs in the Venice Beach area, it was reasonable to assume she would come back to her home turf to pick up where she'd left off—making cash by satisfying her regular clientele.

Sandra was flamboyant and cocky enough to think she could get away with it, and catching her—and other skips—usually came from their failure to break their pattern of habits, not to mention their own overconfidence in their ability to outfox the law.

Scott moved into the crowd cruising the popular stretch of ocean and continued his lazy perusal of those he passed. If Sandra was back on her old stomping grounds as he suspected, she was smart enough to recognize the need to change her appearance. It could be just a change in hair color or maybe a different style. Or she might be using glasses to cover her face, anything to give her an edge and allow her to feel free to prowl her old haunts without worry of detection by the police—while those out looking for her would worry a lot.

Sandra wasn't just a drug dealer. She was a violent felon. Her arrest record included assault, and she'd added attempted murder to her repertoire a few days earlier. She'd shot the last bounty hunter who'd tried to bring her in. Shot and nearly killed him.

Stepping off the boards and onto sand, Scott stopped to grimly scan his surroundings. He wouldn't be the only one keeping an eye out for Sandra. LA's finest would be searching, too. They knew her face, they knew her habits,

and they knew what she had done as well as he did. For him it was just more personal. He wanted to catch her more than they did.

Eyes narrowing against the day's glare, he thought of the bounty hunter she'd almost killed. He knew the guy. The man was a friend, and Scott was determined to finish what his buddy had started—catch Sandra and bring her in. He was also going to do everything possible to make sure that once she was in custody and locked up, the cops would throw away the key.

Still, it wasn't Sandra he unexpectedly spotted patrolling the sand. It was someone else. Someone with auburn hair, gray eyes, and who wore a navy blue uniform of Bermuda shorts and a short-sleeved polo shirt. *Rae*.

Pleasure rippled through him at the sight of her—and the long legs holding her up. The golden tan of her skin testified that she was a redhead who could enjoy the sun rather than burn under it. Smiling, he started toward her. He wanted to talk to her again, and he didn't think she'd seen or at least not seen and recognized him.

One nice thing about being a bounty hunter was not dressing the part. Being a bail enforcement agent didn't require a uniform. He could wear whatever was comfortable or whatever got the job done, and the outfit for the day was well-worn cutoffs and a battered tank top. Combined with the wrap around sunglasses he had on, he would be another stranger on the sand until he was standing in front of her, but as he approached, he was quick to note she wasn't alone on the beach.

She was working the beat with a partner, another female officer who was dressed in the same navy blue she was. Blonde to Rae's red, short to Rae's tall and a bit stocky to Rae's slim, Scott wondered if the woman was the best friend in need of a wedding dress.

"Good afternoon, officers."

Both women turned at his greeting, but it was Rae he was watching. It was her reaction he wanted to see, and she didn't disappoint.

With her mirrored sunglasses propped on top of her head and her hair pulled back into a ponytail, he watched the emotion ripple through her eyes. Surprise came first, but it was quickly followed by pleasure. Her lips quirked into a smile warm enough to make his pulse hop and his toes curl.

Kissing her was suddenly something he wanted to do very badly, but it wasn't the time or the place. And, of course, it would be a break in protocol she wouldn't appreciate.

To avoid temptation and to insure he kept his hands to himself, he looped his thumbs into the belt tabs of his cutoffs and cocked his head at her. "Nice day."

"It is," she agreed, her gaze clinging to his in acceptance of the quiet undertow surging between them, but she didn't forget her partner was present. Nodding toward him, she made the necessary introductions. "Jodi Holt, meet Scott Logan, bounty hunter."

The blonde reached up to pull her sunglasses down her nose for a better look at him. "You're the reason she was late the other day."

"Are you the one looking for a wedding dress?" he countered.

"I am."

He held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, but it wasn't my fault she was late."

"If you'd been one minute earlier, I would have been on time," Rae sniffed, and Jodi grinned.

"She doesn't like being late," her partner clarified, releasing his hand to slip the glasses back in place. "She *hates* it."

"I'll remember that," Scott said and looked at Rae again. "I didn't know your regular beat was the beach."

"You didn't ask," she reminded him. "Who are you here looking for?"

"She also believes in being direct," Jodi laughed as he put a hand to his chest in mock injury.

"What makes you think I'm looking for anybody? Maybe I'm here for some sun and fun."

"And maybe I was born yesterday," Rae cracked, and he looked again at Jodi.

"She's skeptical, too."

"No," Jodi denied. "She's good at identifying someone on the make."

He glanced from her to Rae. "In other words, there's no pulling the wool over your eyes."

"A good thing, too, don't you think?" Rae asked. "It's too hot out here for anything heavier than cotton. Now who are you looking for? Maybe we can help you."

"Sandra Povelaki."

Rae's eyebrows shot up, and he shrugged.

"She skipped."

"We know."

"She also shot someone I work with when he tried to bring her in."

"We know that, too." Rae looked away from him to the people scattered across the beach. "This is where she was arrested."

"I think she'll come back here to continue her business," he said, letting his gaze drift with Rae's. "Bad habits are hard to break."

"We'll have to see who finds her first."

"Ten percent of thirty-five thousand dollars gives a man a lot of incentive."

Gray eyes narrowed on him. "Just remember you're on our turf, and you play by our rules."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed with a wink to Jodi who grinned as the radio on her hip squawked.

The message was short and came from some other officers who were observing the ocean front from the walk high above where the three of them were standing. A suspicious group of people had gathered on the beach. Rae and Jodi were to check it out.

"Mind if I tag along?" Scott asked as they turned down the busy beach.

"Just stay out of the way," Rae warned, and he fell into step beside her without protest of her caution.

The sun and surf were attractive, and on a Friday afternoon, a lot of people were out enjoying the many

attractions. Known as the playground of the rich and beautiful, Venice Beach was the second largest tourist attraction in California. People came in by the thousands to cruise the boardwalks, watch the street artists, or simply to shop and to eat, but the carnival-like atmosphere had a down side. It provided the perfect stage for those walking on the wrong side of the law.

Bad things could happen on this particular stretch of sand. Much of it due to the sale of illegal drugs. It was why the police constantly patrolled the area.

Marijuana, methane, and heroin regularly changed hands along the shore. Scott knew it was that kind of activity the police wanted to stop—and the kind of activity Sandra wanted to find. She'd be out looking for a market to sell her goods. She'd be looking for a fast sale and a quick buck, and as if drawn by his thoughts, he suddenly spotted her.

Bold as brass, flaunting the warrant out for her arrest and thumbing her nose at the system trying to lock her up, she was right back where she'd been taken down. Yet he only caught a glimpse of her. It came when the crowd shifted, but if the look he got was brief, it was enough for him to be certain of her identity. The big sunglasses she wore might cover half her face and a baseball cap her hair, but he recognized her. And she wasn't alone. She was with four of her buddies.

He caught Rae's arm as the constant ripple of bodies moving across the beach hid Sandra from view. "It's her."

"Where?" She stopped with Jodi, and he pointed as a gap in the crowd opened to reveal the group.

"Who's that with her?" Jodi asked, already reaching for her radio, but Rae stopped her with a hiss.

"It's Jackson!"

Jodi frowned. The name was obviously unfamiliar to her, and Scott didn't know it, either. Yet Rae did. She knew the man who owned it. Of that Scott was sure. Recognition showed in the tightening of her jaw, the narrowing of her eyes, and the tension that was suddenly rippling off her in waves.

"Jackson who?" Jodi asked, echoing Scott's thoughts as she tried to see through the bodies blocking her view.

"Joey John Jackson," Rae clarified and reached for her weapon. "He's mine."

Chapter Two

RAE STARTED FORWARD, but a hard hand settled on her arm. It stopped her progress. She tried to jerk free, but Scott didn't let go. Not even when she spun to glare at him.

"There're five of them."

His cool reminder gave her pause, and fury battled hard with reason. She didn't want to wait. She didn't want to go by the book. She just wanted to charge after Jackson, but logic and training won out. She glanced from him to Jodi. "All right, but from here on out, this is police business. If you want to help us with the take down, we'll see you get your commission on Sandra, but you do it our way."

"No."

"What?" Rae demanded in snarling disbelief, but he held up his hand to stop her from ordering him off the beach.

"I think you better do it my way." He nodded through the crowd toward their unsuspecting adversaries. "I don't know if Sandra's pals are carrying any weapons, but she is. Sandra never goes anywhere without her gun, and she knows how to use it."

Rae followed his gesture to the beach around them.

"We've got people everywhere. If she starts shooting, she's not going to care who she hits."

Knowing he was right, Rae glanced at Jodi, who was on the radio calling for back-up. "What are you suggesting?"

"They don't know me. I'm not in uniform. I can get closer than you can without raising suspicion. I'll try to get around to their other side."

"And box them in," she nodded in understanding at his strategy, but Scott was still a civilian.

"Can we let him do that?" Jodi asked, signing off the radio and voicing the question Rae was thinking, but his gaze was calm and steady against her stare.

"He can handle it." Rae nevertheless wagged a warning finger at him. "Do it, but no shooting. No one gets hurt on my watch."

His grin was sloppy. "I hope that includes me."

She didn't get a chance to tell him it did. She didn't get to confirm she didn't want him injured. He melted away before she could form the words, and he disappeared into the ebb and flow of pedestrian traffic.

Holding her breath, wishing she could go with him, she barely heard Jodi tell her back-up was coming as he angled across the sand. The route he was taking wasn't direct. He wasn't moving in a straight line toward those they were after, but he was getting closer to Sandra. Closer to Jackson. Impatience edged her forward into the crowd after him and on a course that was roughly parallel with his.

Jodi went with her, a silent shadow. They'd worked together a long time. They didn't need to speak to each other to understand what the other would do, and that was good because Rae was having a hard time concentrating on procedure. Instead she was focusing on a man.

Joey. He was back. She couldn't believe it, but he was. He was, and he was going to pay. She was going to make sure he did, and as if knowing he was being hunted, she saw Jackson's head come up to search the throngs of people moving restlessly across the sand.

She held her breath, but he didn't see her. A father carrying his young daughter on his shoulders abruptly stepped in the way. She sighed silent relief at the narrow escape, but she wasn't the only one on the prowl.

Anxiously she watched Jackson look in Scott's direction, but Jackson didn't see Scott either. At least not as any type of threat. To him, Scott was just another beachcomber. With his diagonal approach, it appeared Scott was heading for a point beyond the group, to the water perhaps. That left him above suspicion, and Jackson's gaze moved on.

Heart in her throat, adrenaline pounding through her veins, relief made her limbs tremble. Scott was okay. He was safe. He was also almost to where he needed to be in order for them to spring the trap.

Tensing, preparing herself for the coming charge, a sudden break in foot traffic caused an opening. It exposed both she and Jodi, and the man beside Jackson gave a shout of alarm.

"Cops!"

In unison the quintet scattered, and they went in all directions at once. Two went left, veering toward the streets beyond the beach. Three went right, a route that took them straight down it.

Jackson was in the group on the right. Rae went after him, and out of the corner of her eye, in unspoken agreement, she

saw Jodi cut left to go after the second bunch. It was a race Rae figured her partner would win because Jodi could run—and she'd have help with the takedown. Other cops on the shore were already converging from the boardwalk toward their position and would join Jodi in the chase.

She, on the other hand, was on her own—except for Scott who was somewhere behind her. It would take more time for other uniforms to catch up with the two of them, but she wasn't worried. She knew what had to be done, and she aimed to do it.

Swinging off the dry and shifting sand and onto the wet and packed grains by the water, she didn't try to follow the fleeing trio's footsteps. She made her own—on the wet, packed beach while the threesome attempted to hold their own on the soft and slippery granules some thirty to forty feet ahead. She could get traction. Jackson, Sandra, and their friend couldn't, and that was fine with her. Their mistake allowed her to gain ground. Jackson wasn't going to get away. Not this time.

Yet escaping was a battle at least one of the felons knew they were doomed to lose. Glancing over her shoulder, realizing the enemy was gaining, Sandra abruptly pulled up short to yank a gun from her belly pack, and Rae's heart leapt into her throat.

It was the worse thing that could happen: Someone shooting on a public beach. She tried to stop it with a shout. "No!"

Sandra ignored the cry and pulled the trigger.

The bang of the bullet was deafening. It echoed across the sand with deadly intent and started a panic.

Parents with children, teenagers playing games, men showing off, women in bikinis preening—hysteria grabbed them all in a flood of terror and sent them scampering for cover.

A second bullet screamed through the air, but Rae didn't flinch. She didn't try to duck or slow down. She sped up instead because the only thing she could do to help protect the innocent was to try to draw all the fire.

She was close to the water. Sandra was inland. If she could keep Sandra shooting at her, the angle of the shots would be away from the people and toward the sea. Hopefully that meant the lead would ricochet harmlessly into the ocean rather than some helpless tourist—or her.

God knew she didn't want to be hit. She didn't want to be stopped. She didn't even really want Sandra. She wanted Jackson, and after years of waiting, she finally had a chance to get hold of him.

"Split up!"

Scott's cry startled her. She'd forgotten he was in the race, too. She'd forgotten she wasn't alone in the attempt to arrest and capture—and she was abruptly left behind when he took off in an unexpected sprint.

Swearing at his recklessness, his plan confused Sandra, too. She emptied her gun, mindlessly trying to hit both moving targets at the same time. She ended up hitting nothing. Scott's crazy strategy worked. Out of ammunition,

Sandra's only chance for escape was to run again, but it was too late. Scott was almost on top of her.

The flying tackle he made was perfect. Sandra went down in a heap, but Rae didn't veer off course to help him make the arrest. She kept going—after Jackson—but she was getting winded.

The warm sea air ripped through her lungs with burning intensity. Her leg muscles ached, but her physical discomfort wasn't the worst of the chase. Someone else was between her and Jackson.

Rae didn't recognize the face of the third member of the trio. He was tall and blonde with a ponytail that flopped across his shoulders as he ran, and he was slower than Jackson. Slower and running out of steam. She would have to go around him to get to Jackson ... only she couldn't. Duty bound her to take whoever she could get—even if the only prey in reach wasn't who she wanted to catch.

Still, when he was a tackle away, she almost passed him. She almost let responsibility go. It was Jackson she was after. It was Jackson she wanted but, ultimately, she couldn't get him. Not if it meant doing her job.

Swearing, cursing her fate, she threw herself at the stranger and went face first with him into the sand. But she didn't stay down. She was on her knees almost immediately. On her knees and aiming her weapon at the man she really wanted to take down.

"Jackson!"

Her shout snapped across the beach, but it didn't even make him turn his head. Joey John Jackson, without

hesitation, ignored her. He ignored her and charged into and through the nearest group of people and used them as a shield to prevent her from firing.

Snarling frustration, with breath and fury roaring through her blood, she turned her wrath on the only person she could reach. The man struggling beneath her. Shoving her revolver against his nose, she grabbed him by the shirt. "Tell me where he's going!"

Blue eyes widened in terror, and the man sputtered.

She leaned closer. "Where?"

"I don't know!"

"Wrong answer!"

He whimpered. "Don't shoot me!"

"Don't tempt me!" And she was tempted. After all, it was *his* fault Jackson was getting away, but reason came from a voice above and behind her. "He's not worth it."

She didn't have to look to know who it was. Scott. Swearing bitterly she released the blonde. "I know it!" She stood abruptly, defying the trembling of her leg muscles and the mad pounding of her heart, and gulped a mouthful of fresh ocean air into her laboring lungs. "Roll over and put your hands behind you."

The blonde did as he was told. He was as winded as she was but not as angry. Glancing up at Scott as she snapped the handcuffs from her belt in place over the blonde's wrists, she noted he, at least, had gotten his prize. Sandra Povlaki stood beside him. She'd lost her baseball cap during the run and she was covered with sand, but it was the gag in her mouth that made Rae stare.

"She was giving you some lip, was she?"

Scott's lips twitched as he avoided the kick Sandra aimed at his legs. Handcuffed and muzzled, she was still ready to fight. "She was swearing, and with all the children around..."

Rae watched him shrug shook her head at the laughter in his sea green gaze, and nearly sighed in envy. "I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to do that to somebody."

"In bounty hunting, we don't have any rules that say we can't."

She nodded understanding. Bounty hunters could enforce the law without being tied by etiquette, policy, and politicians. She gestured behind him at the other uniforms coming their way. "The reinforcements are about to arrive."

Yet, jerking the blonde to his feet, it wasn't her comrades who kept her attention. That belonged to the man who'd got away. She looked in the opposite direction—and Scott seemed to understand. "You'll find him again."

"Maybe." Probably. But how long would she have to wait for a second chance? She'd already waited more than two years. Twenty-eight months actually, but who was counting? Reluctantly turning toward the other officers rushing to her aid, she wished she could be more optimistic about finding Joey again, but she wasn't. She couldn't be.

Jackson had been underground and out of sight for ages. No reason existed to make her believe he wouldn't go back into hiding once more after almost being caught. The likelihood nagged at her. She'd lost him. Again.

* * * *

HOURS LATER, RAE'S shift was over. The paperwork was done. Sandra and her friend, Billy, were sitting in cells—as were the two Jodi and the others had run to ground—all caught but Jackson. He was where? Doing what? Laughing about his escape? About her second failed attempt to catch him?

Head down as she crossed the parking lot, she struggled against depression. Jackson's victory irked. Her failure hurt. How was it he always won? How was it he always got away? Defeat dragged at her feet and at her soul.

"Why so glum?"

Surprise brought her head up. She'd thought she was alone in the early evening as it cast shadows across the black top, but she wasn't. Scott was with her. Again. Sprawled across the hood of her pickup, he was using its windshield as a back rest and the vehicle, in general, as a lounge.

"I've been waiting for you."

"Have you?" she asked, and the possibility pleased her. As surprises went, he was hard to top even if he'd changed his clothes. Gone were the scruffy cutoffs and baggy tank top that had bared well-muscled legs and enticing hints of a hard chest dusted with sandy hair. Standing on the beach, he'd looked good enough to eat, and lying on her truck in black jeans and a body-hugging tee shirt, he didn't look half bad either.

"Yup. I thought maybe, after today, you could use that beer."

She almost blurted out an immediate yes. A beer sounded good. Very good, but tired and bothered by the near miss

with Jackson, she was bordering on cranky and so shook her head. "I don't know that I'd be good company tonight."

"I would be," he assured her and slid off the Dakota to land smoothly in front of her. "If you don't want to talk, you can listen."

"To your life story?"

His eyebrows wiggled. "It's quite a tale."

She laughed, amused and interested. In him. "I'll just bet it is."

He opened his mouth to speak again, but she didn't let him say a word.

Stepping forward, instead she just fastened her lips on his and tried to swallow him whole.

She felt him stiffen, but he relaxed quickly enough. Reaching out, his hands settled on her hips, his mouth softened against hers and flames shot out to scorch and burn.

The inferno was something she needed. Wanted. She needed to be consumed. She also wanted to be held. If only for a moment. Just long enough to absorb some of his strength because hers was dwindling. She felt beaten, abused, alone, but the comfort she sought came with chaos.

When the kiss deepened and his tongue tangled with hers, the ground unexpectedly tilted under her feet, and she was startled into pulling away.

He didn't try to stop her retreat. What he did do was look at her for a long, silent minute in the fading light of day. Words, for once, seemed to escape him. That made her lips twitch, but he finally found his voice again. "What was that for?"

"I just wanted a sample."

"The first one's free."

She smiled as he licked his lips. Obviously he'd enjoyed the kiss as much as she had. "What's the second one cost?"

"A beer."

Her laugh echoed around the parking lot. "You are tenacious."

"Some people think I'm cute, too."

"Fishing for compliments?"

"Maybe."

Resisting him was futile, especially when she didn't really want to. She wasn't looking for a man in her life at the moment, but he could be a pleasant diversion. She certainly needed one. "Okay, but I have to go home first."

"You lead, and I'll follow," he said, but watching him shove his hand into his front pocket to dig out a set of keys, she reached out to cover his fingers with hers.

"Don't I have to blow in your ear first?"

He didn't have a chance to stop her. She didn't give him one. When her breath whispered over his skin, she felt a tremor shake him all the way down to his toes.

"Where'd you park?" she asked, backing away toward the door of her truck and watching his expression. It was a mixture of amazement, confusion, and satisfaction.

"Huh?"

She tucked her tongue in her cheek to stop her grin. She really should send him away. He *was* cute. Charming, too. He wouldn't be good for her peace of mind, but life was meant to

be lived, not avoided. Besides, she liked taking risks. "Your car?"

"Jeep," he corrected, his Adam's apple bobbing, and he blew out a breath. "This isn't going quite the way I expected."

"Disappointed?"

"No, but I am beginning to wonder if I can look forward to a seduction."

She pulled open the door. "You should be so lucky."

His teeth flashed in the last rays of the day's sun as she slipped inside the cab. "A man can only hope."

The truck rumbled to life beneath her hand, and he jogged off toward the street beyond the station fence. Watching him go, she sighed. The sound was a combination of exasperation and contentment. He was going to complicate her life, and it was complicated enough, especially with Jackson re-entering the picture. Still, she liked him.

Putting the pickup in gear, she headed out of the lot and onto the street. One glance in the rear view mirror confirmed Scott followed behind her, and her lips curved at his ready pursuit.

Tenacious and cute. A dangerous combination, but he wasn't anything she couldn't handle. She hoped.

* * * *

HOME FOR RAE was an apartment building not far from her beat and the station house. The neighborhood was less than elegant, but it was clean and convenient and included a locked entranceway that prevented anyone from wandering into the building without an invitation.

Following her inside and up a flight of steps to the second floor, Scott enjoyed the view of her backside, which was slim and trim like the rest of her, and tried not to get ahead of himself—or her.

Her kiss had taken him by surprise. The bottled passion inside of her held quite a punch, but it'd carried a hint of desperation, too. A longing that went beyond the buzz and zap of hormones snapping between them. He thought it had to do with the arrest that afternoon. The aftermath was wearing on her—and the loss of one Joey John Jackson was.

"Here we are," she announced, throwing the bolt lock and opening the door.

The sudden glare of an overhead light made him blink, but it didn't prevent him from seeing a streak of something dash from behind a couch of brown plaid. "You have pets?"

"Cats." She turned a wary eye on him. "You like cats?"

"I like all animals," he said and watched as a small black and white head appeared around the corner of an end table. He bent immediately, but the cat wasn't having any of him. It made a bee line for Rae who brought it right up into her arms.

"This is Grumpy."

"Grumpy?"

"She's not really," Rae swiftly defended, hugging the feline that was clinging to her and watching him with wary green eyes. "She just got the name because she was part of a seven kitten litter, and her mother was white."

"She's been hurt," he said, noting the slightly distorted face, probably from nerve damage, that gave the cat an expression that indicated a perpetually foul mood.

"Yes," Rae agreed and blew out a breath. "We found her and her family in a crack house during a raid. The kittens and the mother had been used as guinea pigs."

"They were addicted?"

Her nod was harsh. "They were used as test subjects to evaluate the quality of the drugs, and if they got in the way, they got a boot in the face."

"Thus the name Grumpy," he murmured in sympathetic understanding and offered his fingers to the young cat for a tentative sniff. "What happened to the others?"

"Members of the squad took them. We didn't know if any of them would make it, but they all did."

It was a miracle. He heard it in her voice and recognized it in the odds of a tiny animal surviving such cruelty. "She's a beauty."

A smile of gratitude came his way, and the ringing of a bell made her laugh when a gray and white, fur missile slid to a halt in the hall before them. "This is Dopey."

Grinning at the sleek feline that was smaller than its litter mate, Scott squatted to hold out a hand. The cat bounded forward to curl itself under his fingers for a pat. "He doesn't seem like he deserves his name either."

Rae snorted. "You don't know him. He runs around here like an idiot. Jodi says its because all his wires were never connected at birth."

"He's the runt?" Scott asked and reached for a ball laying nearby. He gave it a spin, and Dopey launched himself after it like a miniature torpedo.

"Yup, come on in." Still carrying Grumpy, she headed further into her apartment, but Scott lingered to look around at his surroundings.

The place was small but comfortable. Her color scheme was earthy with browns and beiges brightened by pillows, throw rugs and a painting or two placed strategically on white walls. The furniture matched, which was more than his did. The sofa had the same pattern as the recliner, and her end tables didn't have nicks in them. They also weren't covered with dust.

Rubbing a considering hand over his jaw, he figured if he ever invited her over to his place, he'd have to do some cleaning first. He followed her across the living area and away from the hallway on the right. It no doubt led to the bath and bedroom, but she was going for the kitchen, and he went with her.

Spartan in size, its long cupboards of varnished walnut provided storage while white counters gave standing room to a microwave, a toaster, a set of green Tupperware, and a mixer. The latter two said she liked to bake, and to him that was a good thing. He had a soft spot for chocolate chip cookies hot from the oven.

"Nice place," he told her as she popped the lid on a can of cat food that resulted in her immediate acquisition of two feline ankle bracelets. Both cats, now on the floor, began weaving their way in and out of her legs.

"Thanks," she said, setting a couple of dishes on the floor before retreating to the refrigerator. Reaching inside, she threw him a can of beer. "The first one's free."

Popping the top, he took a swig. "What's the second one cost?"

She eyed him over her can as she took it from her lips. "I'm working on that."

Avoiding temptation and the sudden urge to rush, he forced himself to lean back against the counter to study her. "What's wrong? Don't you know what to do with me?"

"What makes you think I want to do anything with you?"

He just grinned, and she took another drink.

"You're awfully sure of yourself."

"I learned young to go after what I want."

Raising an eyebrow, she leaned against the counter, too. "Your misspent youth?"

"I'm not from LA," he told her by way of introduction. "I grew up in San Francisco, down by the bay." He swirled the beer around in its can and looked into the past to what she couldn't see. "My father liked to drink. My mother got tired of it and walked out."

"And left you behind?"

He shrugged. "I don't really blame her. Not now."

"But back then you did."

"Oh, yeah, but I've improved with age."

Her answering grin was a reflection of his own.

"The old man used to bang me around a bit. At least until I learned to fight back. When I got big enough to give him a

black eye, he backed off, but there were others who were always willing to have a go at me."

"You belonged to a gang?"

He nodded confirmation of her guess. "The Razorbacks. I thought I was tough until I got hauled in and put in a program to rehabilitate me."

"Sounds like quite a job."

He didn't argue. "It was, but Sergeant Patrick O'Malley was up to it." He lifted his can in a toast. "That damned Irishman saved my life."

"Tell me."

Her demand had him gesturing widely. "Call it tough love, I guess. He came in to see us every day, and for whatever reason, he took to me. And, eventually, I took to him. He brought me home to his wife." He sighed satisfaction. "That woman could cook."

"The way to a man's heart..."

"Feed me, and I'm yours," he confirmed with a wink. "Anyway, somehow, we became a family. Maybe it was because they'd lost their son who would have been my age, or maybe it was because I wanted a mother and father who gave a damn. I don't know. Suffice it to say, it worked."

"He taught you law?"

"He taught me respect for the law," Scott corrected. "And without telling him, I started studying criminal justice on the side. When I turned eighteen, I finally admitted I wanted to do what he did. I wanted to be a cop, but he told me I was crazy."

Surprise lit her expression.

"Yeah, shocked me, too, but he was about to retire and had other plans. During the day he sent me to technical school where I learned all the criminal science I could absorb, and at night he took me out to pick up the criminals the system couldn't keep track of."

"Bounty hunting."

Scott nodded. "We made quite a team, the old man and I, and we were good at it."

"He died," she said softly, and Scott nodded.

"Heart attack while he was out working in the garage." Scott shook his head. "He died alone. I'll never forgive myself for that."

"You couldn't have known," she objected and moved closer to touch his arm. "I don't think he'd want you to take the blame."

Scott didn't say anything but struggled with the memory. And the guilt.

"I've thought about bounty hunting."

His attention snapped back to her.

"I could use the extra cash. Rent in LA isn't cheap." She cocked her head at him. "How'd you end up in LA?"

"Griff," he admitted without hesitation. "I met him while working in San Francisco with Pat. The three of us teamed up once or twice to nab a skip, and we gave each other referrals. About the time Pat died, Griff was starting his business. He offered me a job, and I took it. Working alone while hunting isn't a good idea. Man is a dangerous animal to chase."

She sighed agreement. "Today proved that."

"Today was an exception," he objected. "For you and for me. Most days, most arrests, are quiet. No muss, no fuss. Sandra was a loud one."

"You were alone tracking her," Rae accused.

"Only because I really didn't know if I'd find her, and when I went after her, I had back up."

"Me."

"We'd make a good team."

"I don't know."

"I do."

His gaze locked with hers in a silent duel, and the battle was hot. Awareness sizzled between them, but she wasn't having any. "I'm talking business."

"So am I," he agreed, ready to let her set the pace, but the heat burning between them had nothing to do with business. "For now."

She rolled her eyes and tossed back the rest of her beer. "I don't know. Thinking and doing are two different things. Bounty hunting seems undisciplined somehow."

"You're wrong," he told her. "It's just less restrictive. No Miranda rights, no need to knock on the door when you know your perp is inside, and the money's good. LA has enough clientele to keep us hopping. Griff is always looking for more help."

"I've never met him."

"I'll introduce you right now." Scott drained his beer, too, and set the can on the counter. "He's having a pajama party tonight."

"Excuse me?"

"He's tracking down a skip. Maybe you can help him take the skip down and show him what you've got. What better way to impress a new boss?"

She glanced at her watch, and he caught the gesture.

"Do you have to work tomorrow?"

"No."

"Perfect." He grabbed her hand. "Tell Grumpy and Dopey good night."

She sputtered but didn't really offer much resistance as he pulled her toward the door. She was already dressed for the part. In jeans and a tee shirt and wearing a light jacket. She didn't need to change so she went with him to his Jeep and climbed inside. "Why doesn't this feel quite legal?"

He twisted the key in the ignition and sent her a wink.

"Fun, isn't it? The excitement, the adrenaline..."

"The wondering what I'm getting myself into."

He laughed and sent the Jeep out of the lot and onto the street with a squeal of tires. "You're going to love it, and while we're waiting for the skip to show, you can tell me your life story."

"What makes you think I have one?"

"Oh, you have one, and I think Joey John Jackson is part of it."

She stilled beside him.

"Of course, you don't have to tell me." He glanced at her through the darkness, sensing both her surprise and her resistance. "You could make me guess and remain a mystery woman. I've always liked a little mystery with my romance."

"Where did romance enter into this?"

"I'm taking you out to buy you a beer."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"What if I want it to because I think you do."

Her grunt was indignant. "You're not just sure of yourself. You're full of yourself."

"You like me because I am."

"Why do you like me?"

"Let's see," he said, holding up his hand and raising one finger at a time. "You're bright, beautiful, you have great legs—and guts—but most of all, because I never know what you're going to do next."

He couldn't see her smile in the night filling the car, but he sensed it. "Like kiss you?"

"I could be convinced."

"Just drive," she told him when he lifted his foot off the accelerator, but she laughed.

"You do like me," he told her, and her sigh whispered between them.

"Yes, I do, but that doesn't mean we're going to have mad and passionate sex together."

"How about just passionate?"

She laughed again. "You're impossible."

"No, I'm easy. Ask anyone."

"I'll ask Griff."

Scott groaned. "Anyone but him."

Her laughter echoed once more, and he liked the sound. It washed over him in titillating waves. "He knows your weaknesses then," she suggested.

"I think you're going to be one of them."

"Yeah?"

He could almost hear her purr in the dark. "You don't have to sound so happy about it."

"Want me to blow in your ear again?"

"Not while I'm driving."

"Okay."

And it was. They were, and he didn't know quite why. Like he and Patrick O'Malley had, he and Rae clicked. They fit together and that pleased, and worried, him because she really could be a weakness. His. But giving in to her was something he couldn't imagine he was going to regret.

Chapter Three

THE BAR WAS on the seamy side. Dark and hazy with cigarette smoke, it was also loud with the blare of a broken-faced jukebox standing in the corner.

The clientele was about the same. Dark with meanness, hazy with whatever they were drinking and loud with bragging and obscenities.

"Do you bring all your first dates here?" Rae asked Scott as she stopped with him just inside the door.

"Only the special ones," he told her and nodded to the other side of the room. "He's over there."

Following his lead, she ignored the leers, avoided one grab at her butt and glared off an advance by a bald patron before stopping at a scarred table where two men sat. The first was dark and wore a patch over one eye. A modern-day pirate in black, he was a direct contrast to his companion who was blonde, broad-shouldered and had eyes of such a light blue, the shade bordered on white.

"This is David and Griff."

She nodded to the patched crusader then the blonde. Neither made any effort to rise as she took a seat, and Scott didn't bother to wait for her to take a chair before dropping into one of his own. Under the circumstances and in their present surroundings, she didn't take offense, but the lack of decorum bothered the man named Griff who offered an apology.

"Excuse us if we don't stand, but greeting or treating you like a lady wouldn't be appropriate here."

Shrugging off the explanation she'd already gathered for herself, she glanced around the shadowed room. "An interesting place."

"I brought her to meet you," Scott offered and signaled to the waitress with black, stringy hair and a bored expression who circled the room. "Her name's Rae Grayson, and she's interested in the hunt."

"Grayson," Griff murmured and stared hard at her. It was an examination that nearly made her squirm in her chair. "LAPD?"

"Don't tell me my reputation precedes me?" she asked as Scott ordered a couple of brews.

Griff's grin was a flash of teeth and dimples and, unexpected in its intensity and warmth, it also put her at ease. "I heard about a run-in you had with an old friend of mine, name of Dwyer."

"Ah," she said, resting her elbows on the table and keeping her voice low. "Captain Robert H. Yes, I've met him."

"I hear you almost decked him."

She felt rather than saw Scott's stare. "Lewinski stopped me."

"Good thing Big Lew was there. If you'd connected, you'd have been out on suspension."

"It would have been worth it," she sniffed, remembering her encounter with the assistant commanding officer of the Operations-West Bureau, and sat back as two chipped glasses holding bronze ale were set between she and Scott.

"I knew you had a story," Scott said, pushing a beer into her hand and looking at first Griff, then David. "She was going to tell it to me when we got here."

"No, I wasn't," she denied. "You told me I could make you guess and remain a woman of mystery."

Scott started to protest, but she turned her attention back to Griff.

"He also told me you know all his weaknesses."

"I do, but they normally don't run to redheads."

David grinned agreement while Scott sputtered. "He usually goes for blondes. The tall, leggy type."

"Guys," Scott protested, a soft shade of pink creeping up his neck. "You're killing me here."

Taking sympathy on him, she looked to David. "Tell me who you're looking for tonight."

"Sammy Gennetti. Aggravated assault. Fifty-thousand dollar bond. He likes to do his drinking here," David explained, and Griff nodded confirmation.

"In bounty hunting the best way to catch who you're after is by discovering what their habits are because no matter how much they want to hide, they can't stop being who they are."

"Or going where they usually go and doing what they usually do," she suggested. "That makes sense."

"It's a game of cat and mouse," Scott agreed. "You just have to be patient."

"And you collect ten percent of the bond for bringing a skip in?" she asked, doing fast numbers in her head. She liked the totals.

"Part of which goes to the overhead of Bail Busters, Inc.," Griff confirmed. "By being part of a group, we can share expenses, be part of a health plan and never worry about being out prowling alone."

She glanced at Scott. "You work with the police?"

"I worked with you today," he told her and shrugged at Griff and David. "Sandra Povlaki."

"I heard," Griff said, and David nodded. "Good work."

"We didn't get who she was with, though."

Rae watched Scott's gaze fasten on her again.

"One Joey John Jackson got away."

She recognized his statement for what it was. A dare. He wanted her to confess to a personal knowledge of the man, but she wasn't about to ante up. What she knew, she was keeping to herself, or she might have to tangle with Captain Robert H. Dwyer again.

"I know that name," Griff said, barely sipping at the beer she suspected he'd been nursing for a long time.

"So do I," David murmured. "How long has he been active?"

"Too long," she admitted, avoiding Scott's gaze. "Years, in fact, but he's been absent recently. Underground. Word was he left the city for a while."

"Now he's back," Scott murmured. "I wonder why."

He was still looking at her, and she met his stare without blinking. "Habit, just like Griff said. These are his old stomping grounds."

"He have some old warrants out on him?"

"You bet," she agreed and hid her frustration behind her glass. "Drugs, maybe murder."

"Maybe?"

"He's wanted for questioning," she dismissed, but Scott wasn't buying her nonchalance. She didn't think Griff or David were either. It galled, and she struggled to swallow her pride to share what she could. "It's personal for me as well as professional."

"We'll let you know if we hear anything," Griff accepted and changed the subject. "So when do you want to start work? We've got one vacancy left. I told David when I got him to join me that we'd quit at an even dozen."

"I could only work part-time," she objected, suddenly excited by the prospect, the challenge of something new to do and accomplish.

"Until you quit the force," Scott told her, and Griff grinned.

"Or until her red hair gets the better of her, and she pops Dwyer the Dick in the mouth."

"Here, here," she said and lifted her glass to the center of the table where three others knocked against it in a toast, but if she liked the laughter and the camaraderie, she was also aware of the questions. She could almost hear Scott's mind turning. He wanted to know about Jackson. He wanted to know how it was personal.

His eyes met hers over glass and beer.

He was going to push her, but she wasn't above pushing back. She'd keep him at arm's length and keep her secrets to herself, and she'd find Jackson. She'd sworn an oath she would. She'd sworn an oath she'd make him pay, and she

meant to keep her promise. Sooner or later, she'd track him down, and she didn't need anyone else's help to do it.

* * * *

SCOTT WAS UP and going early the next morning. A few phone calls, a couple favors, a stop at the station, and he was the proud owner of a copy of one Joey John Jackson's arrest record. He could pick up available court documents later, but the papers he had spread out before him on his desk at Bail Busters were what he needed to get started.

Rae Grayson wasn't the only mystery to come to light. Joey Jackson was one, too. He reckoned on solving both—with some luck, a little persistence and with the liberal use of some charm.

She already liked him. He could tell. He liked her, too, but she wasn't overly eager for his company. When he'd taken her home after meeting Griff and David the night before, she hadn't offered him a good night kiss. She hadn't even let him get out of the Jeep...

"You're up and at it early."

Looking from the papers on his desk to the door, he found Griff leaning against the jam nursing a mug of steaming caffeine. Their skip hadn't shown at the bar the night before. The hours of waiting had gained nothing and caused only a lack of sleep, but Griff wasn't showing the effect. Scott didn't imagine he was either. Both of them were used to odd hours. "The early bird gets the worm."

"I hear it's not a worm you're after."

Not surprised but still wondering at the speed with which Griff always found out one of his people were poking around at the station, Scott nodded confirmation. "Not in the literal sense." He gestured to the folders on his desk. "I've been down pulling records, talking to people, seeing what I can learn about someone who resembles a worm in the figurative sense, though."

Griff sipped at his coffee and came forward to ease his six foot four frame into a chair opposite Scott's desk. "So I understand, but I do have a question."

"What's that?"

"Who are you more interested in—Jackson or Rae Grayson?"

Caught flat footed, feeling like a kid nabbed with his fingers in the cookie jar, Scott cleared his throat and tried to stop the guilty heat from creeping up his neck. "Both, actually."

"I got that impression last night."

Scott tried not to squirm under Griff's pale gaze.

"So refresh my memory. Tell me about Jackson."

It was a question Scott could answer, but he had conditions. "Okay. I'll do that if you tell me what you know about Rae."

"That'll work for me," Griff conceded. "You go first."

Scott held up a copy of Jackson's rap sheet. "His history is as long as my arm, and he started his career young."

Griff scowled. "Gang?"

"One of the few who survived the experience and reached majority," Scott agreed, knowing one of every ten gang

members were dead by the time they hit twenty-one, but coming of age increased power. "He became one of the leaders."

Griff nodded understanding. He knew, as did Scott, that the older a gang member got, the farther removed from the violence he became. Giving orders to the younger members, the older reaped the benefits while the kids they commanded were the ones to bleed and die. "Joey John Jackson."

Scott could almost hear Griff's mind working.

"Joey J. That's what they called him."

"You met him?"

"No, I never had the pleasure, but I heard about him. A lot." Griff nodded and lifted one long leg to cross it at the ankle on the opposite knee before resting his cup on the arm of his chair. "I didn't work his area, but everyone knew about Joey and everybody wanted to nail him."

"But nobody could?"

"He was slippery, and he was good at what he did. His drug-running scheme was one of the best, and if his lieutenants or kids were caught, they never talked."

"Gang loyalty," Scott observed, but Griff shook his head.

"It was more than that. Joey was like Hitler. He mesmerized. Any member of his gang would slit their throats for him. It was scary."

Scott sat back in his chair. "So what happened?"

"He got a girlfriend."

Scott frowned. "I don't get it."

Griff sipped coffee and smiled. "You've heard the old saying 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned?'"

"Yeah, so?"

"Believe it," Griff told him. "I don't know what exactly Joey did, but he ticked his girl off and she went to the police. She agreed to help bring him down."

Scott grabbed at the papers on his desk looking for a name. "Vicky Roth."

Griff's shoulders moved in admitted ignorance. "I don't remember who she was. I just remember hearing she was a pretty little thing, and the suits liked her, especially the DA. She wasn't your usual gang member. She came from the poor side of the track, but her family was clean and she had no record. Not until she got mixed up with Joey."

"Not prostitution?"

"No, Joey wasn't the kind to share," Griff denied. "He hooked her on drugs."

"She was an addict?"

"As I recall," Griff said. "She was nervous about going up against Joey, but she was determined. She wanted to pay him back for doing her wrong, but her habit was stronger than her willpower. She snuck out on the uniforms who were stationed outside her home one night and went looking for a fix."

"Jackson killed her."

"That was the belief, but no one had any proof. No one could link her death to Joey. Still, even dead, she hurt him. She'd already told the DA and the PD as much as she knew about his operation. It led to a big bust, and they got lucky. They found a weak link."

"Someone who wasn't loyal to Jackson?"

"Someone who was more scared of what would happen to him in jail than out. He spilled his guts, confirmed what Vicky had said and gave the DA more to go on."

"And the DA called for an arrest that never happened," Scott guessed and nearly swore at the frustration of it.

"Joey disappeared. The rumor was he went out of the city, but everyone figured he'd be back."

"Habits are hard to break."

Griff sighed. "For some. Joey's a survivor, and over the years, he no doubt had developed some contacts. He probably went to them and, because he was good at what he did, he got some protection. He maybe even got shipped to another town to run the action."

"So the investigation died?"

"I left the force about that time, but I did hear they finally let the snitch out of protective custody after a year of trying to keep him undercover. With Joey a no-show for so long, they hoped he was gone for good—or maybe even dead."

"Let me guess," Scott muttered. "The snitch is the one who ended up dead."

"You got it."

"But Jackson never came to light again?"

"From what Rae said last night, no. Joey proved the rarity. He walked away from a lucrative business rather than risk an arrest by trying to continue to run it."

"So where's he been for two years?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, but if he's back, he spells trouble." Griff nodded to himself. "If he's hanging around with our friend, Sandra, he's looking to set up shop again."

Scott sat forward again to pick up a pencil to run it through his fingers. "The witnesses may be dead, but the PD will still pick him up for questioning."

"They've got enough to make Joey uncomfortable, but the law says he's got a right to confront his accusers."

Scott met Griff's stare. The legal system wasn't perfect. As it stood, even if Jackson was picked up, he wouldn't be held long, and any attempt to convict would be risky. Jackson would probably walk. "I wonder how Rae's connected to him."

"She said it was personal," Griff dismissed. "Odds are she knew someone our pal Joey messed with, and she'd like to see him taken down. You're probably going to have to get the details from her."

Scott drummed the pencil against the desk. He didn't think she was going to be too forthcoming with answers to any of his questions.

"What do you know about her?" Griff asked, and Scott sighed.

"Not a heck of a lot."

Griff didn't bother to hide his glee. "Just enough to keep you from getting a good night's sleep?"

"Yeah, well, you know how it goes. You win some and lose some."

"And there's some you never get out of your system."

Scott shook his head. "Oh, no. Not me. Just because you got married doesn't mean I want to be hooked. I like being foot loose and fancy free."

"I used to think I did, too."

"Read my lips," Scott said, leaning forward. "No way am I taking a stroll down the aisle. At least not yet. Some day maybe." He had plans for kids, too. Hopes, but they were part of the distant future. Still, he was curious about Rae. He pointed the pencil at Griff. "Okay, your turn. Tell me what you know about her. What happened with her and this Dwyer?"

"Uh-uh," Griff said with a shake of his head. "That's a story you need to hear from her, but I can tell you it's a damned miracle that no one's popped Dwyer the Dick by now."

"They really call him that?"

"Oh, yeah."

"I wonder how he ticked her off?"

"That's for you to find out." Griff pushed himself to the edge of the chair. "What I can say about Rae is that she's known as a good cop, but Dwyer tried to rap her knuckles because her superiors don't like cops who push the envelope."

Scott grinned. He knew he'd recognized a kindred spirit in her. "She doesn't like rules and regulations."

"So the rumor goes," Griff acknowledged and stood. "Maybe you can convince her that if she becomes a bounty hunter instead of a cop, she won't be so bogged down with red tape and she won't have to deal with dumb nuts like Dwyer."

"I could sure try," Scott agreed, liking the idea and the opportunity. He stood, too. "Does this mean you're giving her to me as an assignment?"

Griff stopped at the door. "Are you asking if I'm going to pay you to sniff after her?"

Scott gave Griff his best grin.

"No, but there is something that I wouldn't mind you doing." Griff's eyes lightened a shade. "You can help her track down Joey Jackson."

"And help our boys in blue?"

Griff nodded. "The LAPD is undermanned and overworked. That's why we're here."

Scott moved around the desk. "Yeah, but finding him isn't going to be enough. Not if we want him off the streets."

"Yeah, well, maybe the two of you could come up with something that would insure the DA could make that happen."

Griff's wink as he left the room brought the smile back to Scott's face and put determination into his stride as he returned to the desk and the papers on Jackson. The idea was something he liked. Bringing Jackson down—and working with Rae in the process.

Maybe in conducting business, the two of them could also get around to conducting some pleasure. It was a possibility he was prepared to work on, and in no time he was headed out of the office and to her apartment.

She was off for the day. She'd told him that the night before. It was the perfect time to convince her to form a partnership, but when he rang the doorbell, he wasn't sure of what kind of reception he was going to get.

She might be interested, but she was cautious of getting involved. And she didn't like his prodding about Jackson. For her, the man was a sore subject and a reason to keep Scott at arm's length. And that was okay. He was willing to give her

some running room. He just wasn't willing to let her go too far.

"Who is it?" The sound of her voice through the metal box set outside the front door came with a tinny ring, and he leaned close to answer.

"Who would you like it to be? Pizza delivery? Prize patrol?"

"I don't want anything."

"Not even me?"

The silence made him grin.

"I have a proposal."

"No, I don't want to get married."

"Good. Neither do I. Can I come up now?"

The buzzer was his answer.

Pulling the door open, he took the steps to her apartment two at a time and found her waiting—and looking delicious. Her hair was out of its ponytail. Loose, it hung around her face in soft waves, and her uniform for the day was a pair of shorts and a baggy tee shirt.

The former exposed slender thighs and a lot of smooth skin. The latter hid soft flesh, but not by much. A glance said she wasn't wearing a bra, and if she wasn't overly well endowed, what she had was enough to make a man's mouth water.

He cleared his throat and tried not to swallow his tongue. "Hi."

"I was just getting ready to go out."

"Good," he told her, not put out by the cool reception. "We can go together."

She heaved a sigh and shoved the door open so he could follow her inside. "What'd you have in mind?"

The answer he wanted to give, watching her backside as she sashayed away in bare feet, didn't bear repeating out loud. He glanced past her to the hallway and the waiting bedroom and nearly groaned. "I thought you might want to go hunting."

"Anyone in particular?"

Holding out Jackson's folder to her, he bent to scoop up Dopey who'd appeared to attack his shoelaces. Grumpy was watching him from the back of the couch, obviously ready to bolt at the first sign of approach. "See for yourself."

One glance was all it took for her to slam the folder shut. She shoved it back at him. "I know all I need to know about Joey Jackson."

"Then why haven't you caught him yet?"

"What makes you think I want to try?"

"You said it yourself. It's personal. That's why I went after Sandra. She hurt someone I know." It was a guess, of course, but she hesitated and he pressed his advantage home. "We caught one of the two working as a team. Why not see if we can catch the other?"

"Why would you bother?" she demanded, suspicion making her gray gaze stormy. "What's in it for you?"

"I talked to Griff. We want to help. Jackson's scum."

She blew out a breath and looked away from him. "We can agree on that."

"We can agree on a lot of things."

Her attention snapped back to him with a blink, and something shifted between them. Something hot. For the moment he tried to ignore it.

"We can agree to be partners in this business."

"Business," she repeated.

He raised his eyebrows. "Unless you have something else in mind?"

Propping a hand on her hip, she stared at him. "You're not going to give up, are you?"

"You mean about Jackson?"

"I mean about anything."

He lifted a hand to pull at his ear. "I'm stubborn that way."

"One of your more endearing qualities?"

He nodded. "I have many."

Her laugh broke the tension between them. "Why do I feel I'm going to regret this?"

"I couldn't say," he told her and took a cautious step toward Grumpy who fled as soon as he held out his hand.

"She doesn't trust men."

Recognizing the same wariness in Rae's gaze as had been reflected in her cat's, he shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "Maybe I can change your mind."

She didn't try to correct him. She only watched him for a long, quiet minute. "I'll go put on some other clothes."

"I'll wait right here."

Already moving down the hallway toward the bedroom beyond, she stopped to throw him an easy smile over her shoulder. "You do that."

He didn't breathe again until the door closed behind her. He didn't dare. He was afraid he'd drool, and feeling a tug on his shoelaces, he reached down to grab Dopey once more. "You lucky cat," he murmured to the feline. "I bet you sleep with her every night."

A plaintive meow was his response.

"I thought so." Glancing from the cat to the bedroom door, he wondered what it'd take to convince her that he deserved the same privilege—or, at the very least, the same trust.

Chapter Four

"SO WHAT'S YOUR plan?" Rae asked Scott as they left her apartment building and stepped into the California sunshine. She was still trying to make up her mind if she was glad to see him or not.

On the one hand, the idea of having someone along while she tried to track down Jackson—her agenda for the day before Scott arrived—was agreeable. Man, as Scott had said, was a dangerous animal to hunt.

On the other hand, she wasn't sure she liked Scott wedging his way into her life. Granted, part of it was business. He was trying to convince her to become a bounty hunter, a prospect that could put a few more dollars in her bank account, but he wasn't with her just for that reason or because he wanted to help out the LAPD.

Scott's motives were personal as well as professional, and the steady hum of sexual awareness buzzing between them was enticing. Arousing. She liked it. She liked him, and she was being drawn to him even though she wasn't sure she wanted to be.

Still, if ignoring him was an option, she wasn't sure it was the right one. He was fun to tangle with, and the man could kiss the socks right off her.

"I don't have a plan," Scott said from beside her. The red tee shirt he had on hugged the hard lines of his chest, and his jeans were a second skin coating his legs. It was a struggle to keep her gaze steady when he looked at her much less keep

her hands to herself. He shrugged. "Seeing as you're so much more familiar with Jackson than I am, I thought you'd take the lead."

Surprise made her eyes widen. He didn't want to be in charge? Pleased at the prospect, at his concession to her, she held up her keys. "Do you want me to drive then?"

He dropped his own ring back into his jean's front pocket, which, to her way of thinking, was a tight squeeze. The denim he wore was already well packed. "Sure. Why not?"

Feeling slightly at a disadvantage, having assumed taking him as a partner meant fighting for control, she led the way to her truck. "I don't really have a plan either," she admitted when he climbed in beside her. "I'm just going to ask some questions."

"It's as good a place to start as any," he agreed as she started the pickup and backed out of her parking spot. "You want to visit his old hangouts?"

"His old neighborhood," she corrected and didn't bother to tell him it was hers, too. One she hadn't been back to in a long time. Not since she'd fought her way out of it and left all the bad memories behind. At least she had temporarily.

Yet recall returned with a rush when she made that final turn—the one that put her back on the street where she used to live, and she stared out the windshield in silent amazement.

It looked much the same. The storefronts might be different. Owners had come and gone, but the changes had produced no real visible effect. The neighborhood was as it had been, perhaps as it always would be. Gritty.

The roadways and sidewalks were clean, but poverty lingered nearby. It hovered on the fringes of a quiet desperation and reflected in the chipped paint on windowsills and on the faces of those who walked along the curbs. In this part of the city, life was a struggle. Making ends meet was, too. Here people fought hard to keep their heads above water, and they battled gangs and drugs for possession of their children.

Parking near a corner, she was slow to leave the Dakota and meet Scott at the curb. It was all too familiar and yet entirely strange. Years might have passed since her last visit but, somehow, it felt like yesterday.

Pushing away the bitter melancholy playing with her mind, she caught the eye of a young Hispanic boy standing nearby. About ten in actual age, his attitude was much older and his stare was bold. He might be young, but he was sure of himself and of the concrete they were standing on. The block was his turf. What was on it was his to take or to protect.

A jerk of her head was all it took to get him to come toward her, and she recognized his approach. His walk was a swagger, the chip on his shoulder bigger than he was, and the shadows lining his face dark with knowledge and pain beyond his years.

She held out a twenty-dollar bill to him when he stopped before her. "Keep an eye on the truck," she said rather than asked. "If it's still here and in one piece when I get back, I'll give you another twenty."

Careful not to take the twenty too quickly, the kid moved bony shoulders in a careless gesture. "What makes you think I care?"

She snatched the twenty back before he could blink. "If you don't, I'll find someone who does."

He grabbed the twenty from her fingers once more and swiftly shoved it in a pocket of his baggy cargo pants. "I'll be waiting."

She hid her smile and met his glare of grudging respect with a nod. "Later."

Not looking back, she fell into step with Scott who coughed on what could have been a laugh. "You handled that well."

"I just hope the money puts food on the table instead of crack in his veins."

Scott's arm came around her to bring her hip bumping comfortably against his. "I hope you're right."

Startled by his sudden quest for familiarity, she started to protest against any attempt at intimacy, but he leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "I'm just playing the part, sister. If we walk around here like two strangers, we're going to get tagged as cops."

"I am a cop," she reminded him, but enjoyed the lingering scent of spicy aftershave as he pulled away to wink.

"A damn good-looking one, too."

Pleased by the compliment and by the soothing warmth seeping from his body into hers, she couldn't find any fault with his reasoning and so lifted her arm to loop it around his waist. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

"Not even another kiss?"

"You have to earn that."

"Yeah? What do I have to do?"

"I'll let you know." She gestured to a doorway up ahead. It was a local hangout where kids could play pool, talk trash and maybe score if they were lucky. "Let's try in here."

Yet their first stop wasn't their last, and the afternoon plodded slowly past as they watched, listened and asked the occasional question. But no one admitted knowing Joey Jackson. No one confessed to having ever heard of him. At least, not to two strangers.

"I don't even know if he's come back here," she grumbled to Scott hours later as, with the sun dipping toward the horizon, they headed toward the truck. "This could all have been a big waste of time."

"Maybe." Moving with her down the walk, his arm was hanging with limp comfort over her shoulders. "Maybe not. It would make sense, if he's back, for him to stop in to pay a visit to old friends."

"Would it?" She stopped to confront him. "Joey hasn't followed the typical pattern of behavior so far. He took off, leaving a profitable drug operation behind without so much as a backward glance. He didn't try to keep control long distance or appoint a lieutenant to run it for him while he went underground. He just split. He left everyone and everything behind. Why, after all this time, would he come back?"

"Because he thinks it's safe."

Anger had her gritting her teeth.

"And because he has something to gain."

Temper sparking, she scowled. "Like what?"

"I don't know for sure," Scott admitted. "But I think I can make a pretty good guess."

"I'm listening."

He raised a hand to tick off points on his fingers. "We know Jackson was a smooth operator, and he was smart enough never to get caught. Somebody would have appreciated that."

She nodded agreement. "The somebody whose pockets he was lining by selling drugs."

"When Jackson came under fire, that someone probably would have hated to see him go—maybe would have offered to help Jackson find some place safe from the law."

"For two years?"

"Why not? We may not know exactly where Jackson's been all this time, but we know what he's been doing. A leopard can't change its spots even if it moves to new territory."

She bit her lip as she considered. "His supplier helped set Jackson up somewhere else?"

"There were rumors saying Jackson had gone south to San Diego."

"There were also rumors saying he was in San Francisco."

"Maybe he was in both. Maybe he became a traveling salesman, serving as a link for his grateful supplier who appreciated his talents."

"And he's come back here because?"

"Because he needs to connect his pipeline."

The idea surprised. It also alarmed because Scott's theory made sense. There was honor among thieves, especially those thieves who proved valuable, and Jackson knew how to land on his feet. She'd watched him do it his entire life, but

the implications of Scott's logic were far reaching. "If that's true, if he's returned to muscle his way back into his old operation, the narcs might know something."

"I'll check my sources if you check yours."

The idea was sound, but pushers weren't the only ones with territories. She sighed. "I'm a cop, not a detective. The suits aren't going to want me nosing around, and if I ask for information, they'll want to know why I'm interested—and tell me nothing."

"Maybe I can help. I still have friends in San Francisco."

"And San Diego?" she asked doubtfully.

"Griff will know someone."

"But will he share what he knows with me?" Suddenly she wasn't so sure he would. She wasn't sure at all either Scott or his boss would share what they discovered. Why would they? Bail Busters didn't need her. Not if she didn't have anything useful to offer to the investigation, and once they realized she didn't, they could decide to continue digging without her. They could pursue and take all the credit for helping the LAPD bring Jackson in and leave her out in the cold, and that was a possibility she didn't like. Jackson was hers.

Yet Scott wiped away her suspicions with a smile. "I'll share if you have dinner with me tonight."

Her mouth dropped open in disbelief, and he reached out a finger to gently lift her chin up.

"I'll buy."

She stared. And hesitated. He was entirely too attractive for his own good. Perceptive, too. She liked him for it. Maybe too much. "Do I get to pick the place?"

"What'd you have in mind?"

"Chinese?"

"I knew we were made for each other."

Without warning, the space between them seemed to shrink. He was too close. It was impossible to breathe. The air was gone from her lungs. He stole it by bending and putting his lips to hers.

He didn't touch her anywhere else. He didn't have to. The explosion caused by the brush of his mouth on hers ricocheted through her system and glued her to the spot. She couldn't move. She couldn't think. Overwhelmed, enveloped and invaded by wave after wave of sensation, she could only feel and wonder how it seemed as if she was drowning when she wasn't even standing in any water.

When he pulled back, it was a moment before she could open her eyes. It was several seconds more before she could make her mind work, and gazing up at him and into the lazy green depths of his gaze, it was a struggle to resist the urge to lick her lips. Instead, she managed to find her voice. "You wanted to know how to earn the next kiss."

"Name your price."

"You can pay the kid another twenty bucks."

Scott didn't lose a second to hesitation. He simply reached for his wallet. "Consider it done."

She did, and climbing into the waiting truck, she watched him approach the boy with the bill. Yet one greenback wasn't the only thing he passed over and into the waiting palm. He slipped at least a twenty more, and the unexpected tip wiped,

if only briefly, the street-wise boredom from youngster's eyes and filled them with innocent wonder.

Scott's generosity made her grin, and his wink, when he turned away from the kid, made her sigh.

The man was definitely going to be a problem. He was cocky, cute, and he could lip-lock with the best of them. A dangerous combination.

Starting the engine as he got in the cab, she knew without a doubt that she was going to have to put an anchor and chain around her heart. Otherwise, some day soon he was going to sail away with it when he left her port in search of a new landing.

* * * *

"SO," SCOTT SAID, pushing his plate aside. He was seated with Rae at a restaurant they both knew and enjoyed. On a Saturday night, the place was busy, but their table was off the beaten path and allowed them a generous measure of privacy.

After working his way through his meal, he was full and relaxed, and sitting across from him, Rae appeared to be, too. The shrimp stir fry she'd ordered had all but vanished from her dish, and the shadows haunting her eyes all afternoon were no longer visible. The past was once again behind her, but her journey into it during the day had stirred bad memories. Not that she expected or wanted him to recognize the symptoms. He just did, and he wanted to know why the trip home for her produced such agony.

Taking a sip of his wine, he cocked his head at her. "What was it like going back to the old neighborhood?"

"It was—"

He tried not to smile when her admission brought her up short. A confession wasn't on her menu, but pinned where he sat by an accusing glare, he ignored it and her irritation for being tricked into a slip of the tongue and pressed on. It was time for some answers. "How long has it been since you've been back?"

"Not long enough."

Short, sweet and to the point. He sat back when the waiter returned to clear the table. "You don't have any family there any more?"

"No."

Recognizing getting information out of her was going to be like pulling teeth, he settled in for the long haul by sipping more wine and admiring her over the rim of his glass. She'd yanked her hair into a ponytail again, but during the day, some of the strands had escaped the tie to hang loose around her face—and it was a good face.

Her forehead was just short of broad, her chin bordered on pointed, and her nose was straight and dotted with a smattering of freckles. Her eyebrows were dark enough so she didn't need a pencil to enhance their arch, not that she bothered trying. Her skin was without makeup save for some mascara, making it safe to assume Mabelline wasn't going to make any money off of her. But that was okay. She didn't need artificial enhancement.

He set the glass back on the table, aware of her resentment for his intrusion into her life, but he was used to storming gates. "You're really going to make me guess, aren't you?"

Her arms settled on the table in front of her as she held his stare with quiet determination. "Maybe I don't want to talk about it."

"Now?"

"Ever."

He picked up the spoon the waiter had left behind and ran it through his fingers. "So where is your family?"

She glanced away, and he waited for her reaction. Defense or capitulation? She wasn't someone who liked to be pushed, but she also believed in fairness. His past was something he'd freely shared. Her sigh of annoyed resignation said she accepted something had to be given in return. "Gone."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I lost them a long time ago." She reached for her own glass, her gray gaze a stormy sea of an unhappy past. "My Dad left us when I was young. He wanted a son and was disappointed he didn't get one."

"Daughters have their advantages," Scott offered, and she shook her head in denial.

"He didn't see it that way."

"His loss." Scott sat back in his chair again, taking his nearly empty glass with him. "What happened to your Mom?"

"She worked herself to death. With the old man gone, it was on her to take care of me and my sister, and she did the best she could." Rae sipped caffeine and what he suspected

were bittersweet memories. "She saved enough money to get me out of the neighborhood and into school and the Academy."

"Your sister is gone, too?"

A shadow flitted across her face. "Yes."

"The two of you were close."

"We were all each other had." She pulled away from him by looking at the other patrons around them, but he knew she wasn't seeing her surroundings as she continued. "Our mother worked so much, holding two or three jobs at a time, we hardly ever saw her. We took care of one another."

"She was younger?"

"Prettier, too."

"Now that's hard to believe," he denied and was glad to see the humor abruptly return to her eyes because he'd found out what he needed to know. She was one of the walking wounded. Her past had left scars that, while healed, were still raw to the touch so he changed the subject. "I bet the boys were lined up outside your door every Saturday night."

"You'd lose the bet."

"Your mother chased them all away?"

"If she didn't, I gave them a black eye."

"Tomboy, huh?" And he could see it. Red hair, freckles and a temper. She wouldn't have been inclined to back down when confronted, and as a youngster, she would have been hell on wheels—and more inclined to swing first and ask questions later.

"You know what it's like on the streets," she dismissed in way of explanation, and he nodded.

"Only the strong survive." But it would have been harder for a girl, especially when adolescence hit and the boys on the block were besieged by raging hormones. "You were probably quicker than they were."

She wrinkled her nose. "Smarter, too, but the boys didn't try too hard. I was all arms and legs and bones right up until I graduated from high school."

"Late bloomer?"

Her shoulders moved in easy dismissal. "Going to the prom was never that important to me."

"Learning law was?"

"Yeah, and I can't say why." Shoving her unfinished wine aside, a line formed between her eyes as she considered. "Maybe it was the age-old fascination of good and bad. I wanted to be one of the good guys, to help put wrongs right."

"Living on the street, you can see a lot of wrongs that need to be put right." Abruptly he found himself confronting some memories of his own. Not all of them were pleasant. "The discipline of law makes it feel as if that can be changed."

"Sometimes it can."

He sat forward again to put his glass on the table and reached for the bill the waiter had left behind. "It's not a perfect system, but..."

"It's the best we've got," she finished in unspoken agreement and rose with him to head for the door.

"So what's next?" he asked her minutes later as, back in her truck, she threaded the way through traffic toward her apartment.

"I don't know."

The admission was grudging and underlined with unspoken frustration, but he wasn't about to let her give up. Not that he expected she would. "You know more places Jackson used to hang out? Other people he might contact?"

"You've read his record. He was part of a gang. Most of the kids he worked with are dead. Those who aren't have operations of their own now and won't welcome him back with open arms."

"We should check them out next," he suggested. "As you said, competitors won't be happy about his return and might be inclined to talk."

"You're optimistic," she said, tossing him a grin. "Gangs don't use the police to fight their wars or to hold onto their territory, and you're also presuming Jackson is back to set up a pipeline. We don't know that. Not for sure."

"We don't know he isn't either and until we do, it's as good a motivation as any—and the most reasonable explanation for his return. He sure didn't come home for old time's sake."

"No, if Jackson's back, he's after something."

Unspoken fury vibrated in her voice, and even in the dark filling the truck's cab, he saw her knuckles were white as she gripped the steering wheel while they sat at a stop light. He turned his head to study her profile. "Probably money because he's already gotten his revenge against those who tried to hurt him."

"And I'm going to get mine."

Her declaration was underscored by the squeal of tires when the light turned green. He was thrown back in his seat, but he remained silent. The rage burning in her was palpable.

He wanted to know its cause, but poking at it while it was so hot wasn't wise. He wanted it to cool a bit first, and he wanted to give her a chance to regain some control.

He understood what it was like to be helpless. He also knew how heavy the burden of guilt could be, and that emotion drove her to find Jackson. She'd just confessed it. Payback for a wrong done was what she wanted, and he could help her get the results she was after. If she'd let him. But she wasn't ready to. Not yet—even if he wished otherwise. Trust wasn't something Rae would give readily.

When he left the truck with her, the night air was cool , and the silence between them wasn't quite comfortable as he walked her to the front door of her apartment building. She stopped to face him at the door, and he reached out to tuck the loosened strands of hair behind her ear. "You want to talk about it?"

He felt rather than saw her flinch, but he didn't back away.

"I'm a good listener," he offered, shoving his hands into the front pockets of his jeans to insure he kept them to himself. It was tempting to reach for her, to offer comfort, but the wariness in her expression said she wasn't ready to accept it yet. "As a matter of fact, some people think I'm kind of charming."

Her lips twitched, and the tension gripping her eased. "I hadn't noticed that about you."

"I'll have to try harder then." He nodded toward the waiting door. "What would you say if I asked for a night cap?"

"I'd say it wasn't a good idea."

He took a half step closer. It was all it took to bring him right up to her. "What if I disagree?"

She didn't pull away as he lowered his head towards hers, and she didn't object or try to speak. At least not until his mouth was a breath away from hers. "Don't you want to know what this one is going to cost?"

"I don't think I care." And he didn't. When his lips met hers, when her hands lifted to his shoulders and her body curved into his, she could have asked for the moon, and he would have found a way to get it for her.

He needed to taste her again. He needed to touch her.

Drawing her to him, somebody moaned. He wasn't sure if it was him or her, and it didn't matter. The only thing that did was her being closer to him, if that were possible. She was already clinging to him like a second skin, but that wasn't enough. He wanted more.

Taking the kiss deeper, he reveled in the different flavors of her, the feel of her thighs against his, and the scent of her that was a mixture of perfume and night and something more.

Yet suddenly she was slipping away, easing out of his grasp and away from his touch—except for her fingers. They stayed intertwined with his as she stood in the moonlight staring at him. "You should go."

"I could stay."

His offer made her smile, which caused his heart to thump against his ribs.

"I could at least walk you to your door," he amended, unexpectedly feeling like an awkward adolescent instead of a

grown man whose hormones were stampeding through his bloodstream.

She shook her head and took a step backwards. "Grumpy and Dopey are waiting."

"Lucky cats."

She stilled at his murmured words and at the way the tide ebbing around them made the sands of desire they stood on shift with temptation. "I'll give them your regards."

"I'll pick you up in the morning. Ten o'clock."

She frowned.

"You are off?"

She nodded.

"Then we can keep hunting—old game or fresh." He flashed her a smile. "You could help me keep my job by nabbing a skip with me."

"We could do both."

Her proposal warmed him. She was willing to share. His mission and hers. "We could."

She turned and headed for the front door but stopped just before reaching it to look over her shoulder at him. Her expression was unreadable with the lights behind her. "And thanks."

"For?"

Her shoulders moved. "The dinner, the company, the offer to listen."

He pulled the keys from his pocket. "Any time."

"Good night."

He didn't answer as she disappeared into the hallway beyond the security entrance. He simply waited until the lights in her apartment came on, and he sighed.

He'd never met anyone quite like her before. Fire and ice. Passion and prudence. Wanting to hold her close, he was afraid she'd shove him away, but she hadn't. Not completely anyway.

She still had her secrets. Her trust was something he hadn't quite gained, but he was wearing her down. Or, he wondered as he climbed into his Jeep, was it the other way around?

Starting the engine, he shook his head because he had a feeling the only one who wouldn't be getting any sleep tonight would be him.

Chapter Five

RAE CLIMBED INTO her truck the next morning and ignored the pangs of guilt that chased her into the driver's seat. It was nine thirty. Scott would be by in half an hour to pick her up—only she wouldn't be waiting.

Starting the engine, she quickly backed out of her parking space. Her original plan hadn't included skipping out on him. When dropped off the night before, when told he would come get her for another day of hunting, her intent had been to go along. The desire was strong to remain his partner, as it were, because the chase wasn't as frustrating with him beside her. It wasn't as hopeless. Or, as lonely, but lying awake in the cold hours of pre-dawn she'd realized she needed to be alone on this particular mission.

The obligation to find and bring down Joey Jackson was hers. The promise to catch him was, and it was a promise she intended to keep—without involving anyone else in her personal obsession. Finding Jackson was her responsibility, her duty, and she couldn't take the chance of somebody else being hurt because of what she did—or failed—to do.

Fighting black memories, she aimed the truck down the street with determined calm. She, of all people, knew how dangerous Joey was. She knew how tenacious, how wily and how good he was at getting his way—no matter what the consequences or who stood in his way. He was without morals, without scruples and he always won.

Her jaw clenched with inner rage. Hate was the wrong word to describe what she felt for Joey John Jackson. Her feelings for him were more complex. She despised who he was, loathed what he was, and she detested—abhorred—the way he used people to gain his own ends.

She was also afraid of him. She would be a fool not to fear him. He had power, and he knew how to use it. Joey was smart—not just a back alley criminal. He knew how and when to hide, and he knew when and how to come out of hiding to strike.

His record spoke for itself. Joey wasn't someone to be taken lightly. He never had been. Not even when he was a boy living just down the block...

The street of the old neighborhood, when she reached it, was deserted. At least of those she was looking for. The early hour after a Saturday night of carousing had those she wanted to see out of sight, but they wouldn't be hard to find. She knew exactly where to look.

Locking and leaving the Dakota at the curb, she headed for the alley and the hideouts of the local gang members—the places she'd always avoided as a young girl—and as she went, she ignored the tide of emotions surging inside her.

For the second day in a row she was back where, for her, life had begun, but it wasn't the time for reminiscing or reflecting. She hadn't returned out of a sense of melancholy. She was on her old turf again for a purpose. She was where she'd grown up because indecision was no longer a problem. She knew what she had to do next.

The day before had left her feeling uncertain of what more she could do. Where should she go? Who should she see? Was there someone who might give her a lead on Joey? Someone who would be willing to talk?

While staring at the ceiling hours earlier waiting for the sun to rise, an answer had come to her, and the danger of the avenue she was pursuing was further reason to follow it alone. Her battle wasn't Scott's. He might want it. His boss Griff might, too, but this particular war was hers to wage—and she didn't want any more casualties on her conscience.

She liked Scott. She also appreciated his offer of assistance, but if she was tempted to accept his help, if she wanted to give in to the less-than-professional angle of their relationship, she couldn't. Wouldn't. After two years, revenge—justice—was in reach, and she wasn't about to let anyone distract her from what needed doing.

The scent of garbage grew stronger as she strolled deeper into the network of alleys that lay beyond the streets, and no one appeared to greet or challenge her. Still she wasn't fooled. She knew she wasn't alone. Eyes followed her. People did.

Silently, with innate stealth, someone was stalking her. Members of the local gang, she could feel their presence, and the hair on the back of her neck raised in silent alarm. Yet she ignored the fear, the desire to turn and look as well as the urge to run. Instead she kept her hands in the pockets of her Dodger's jacket and her palm curled around the thirty-eight she was carrying.

Her automatic was at the apartment. It was too big, too heavy and too hard to conceal. Besides, if things went bad, she'd be lucky to get off six shots much less empty an entire clip.

Abruptly, several feet ahead of her, someone stepped out of the shadows and into the sunlight. In baggy khaki pants, an overly large black tank top and a baseball cap turned backwards, the kid was probably sixteen. At least in years. In experience, harsh reality had already aged him beyond the number of days he'd actually lived. It showed in the hard edge of his blue eyes as he watched her approach and in the tattoos etched on his arms.

Tattoos were like a flag of loyalty. The person wearing them was pledging allegiance to a gang, and the colored patterns made it easy for the police to spot members—and to determine how deep into the operation the member was.

The kid's brands were light. He was on the bottom of the food chain yet. That would change with time—if he lived, but it was her survival, not the teenager's, Rae was worried about.

Not slowing her pace at his appearance, continuing on without hesitation or sign of recognition, she braced herself for confrontation. It wasn't long in coming.

"Lost?" His posture was belligerent, his expression insolent and his leer insulting in inquiry, but she wasn't offended.

Slowing as she neared him, she also didn't have to turn around and look to know other gang members were closing in behind her. "No, I'm looking for Rick."

Surprise flittered across the teenager's face, but it was quickly hidden. "What for?"

"I'm an old friend," she shrugged and stopped to face him with the same arrogance he was trying to use to intimidate her.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she agreed with a bored roll of her eyes to the teen who appeared to her right, but it was a lie. She and Rick weren't and never had been friends. Acquaintances, yes. They'd gone to the same school but run with different crowds. They'd lived on the same street, but their lives never intersected. Except once. She smiled at the memory. "I gave him a bloody nose."

"And that made you friends?" the sixteen-year-old scoffed, and snickers came from behind her. Four others she figured but kept her focus on the teen she was facing.

"That made me unforgettable."

The blue eyes locked on hers reflected amusement and curiosity. "Why you want to see him?"

"Take me to him, and you'll find out."

"We don't take no lip from no crazy women," sneered the teenager hovering at her right elbow. He was about the same age as his friend but taller, broader and his skin was ebony black.

All's she had to do was pivot on the ball of her foot to go nose-to-nose with him, and she did with a sneering grin. "If you're going to start calling me names, you better be able to fight."

He lifted his hands and rolled his eyes in mock terror. "Oh, you're scaring me."

It took less than a heartbeat to sweep his feet from under him. It took another for him to land hard on his back on the alley floor. Smiling down into his stunned face, still with her hands in her pockets, she didn't bother to bend over. "And you're boring me."

She swung back to the sixteen-year-old who immediately jumped backward in wary alarm. His uncertainty made her lips curve in appreciation.

"What's wrong? Afraid I'm going to give you a bloody nose, too?" She took a step toward him before he could answer. "Now take me to Rick or get out of my way and I'll find him myself."

Quick glances were shared, a mixture of anger, surprise, grudging respect and uncertainty, and she waited for a decision. It wasn't that she really needed their help to find Rick. She might not know exactly where he was, but it would make her search quicker and easier if they pointed the way.

The old haunts were basically unchanged from years before. That was a fact gleaned from scuttlebutt shared between station houses and from asking questions of the right people. Since Joey'd disappeared years before, her thumb had remained on the pulse of the old neighborhood in the hope he'd return one day to take back his old operation from his good buddy and ex-lieutenant. *Rick*. "So what's it going to be?"

The lead teenager shrugged. "It's your funeral, but we're going to have to search you for weapons."

Keeping her hands fisted in her pockets, she held out the unzipped jacket so they had a clear view of the tee shirt tucked into the waist of her straight-legged jeans. "What you see is what you get. If you touch me, I'm going to have to hurt you."

Glancing nervously at his friend who'd ended up flat on his back, the teen sloughed off her bravado with some of his own. "Yeah, right. Like you could take on all of us." He turned his back on her and waved for her to follow. "Come on."

The walk was short and silent. Going deeper into the alleys and into the private places the cops weren't supposed to know about, they eventually arrived at a derelict building with a staircase leading down to what she suspected was an empty basement.

"What's your name?" the teenager asked her. "I have to introduce you."

"Rae. What's yours?"

Her question brought teasing taunts from the other gang members, but the kid ignored them even if he couldn't hide the heat that crept into his cheeks. "Tony. The guy you put on his butt is BJ."

She sent BJ a conciliatory smile. "You fall down good, BJ. Just don't make a habit of it."

He made a face and dodged a shoulder punch from one of the others, but she wasn't watching. She was going after Tony and into the black confines of the headquarters of the Pit Bulls—where she nearly got bitten by one.

A vicious snarl had her sidestepping and the others laughing, but the big dog leashed and baring its fangs at her

was no laughing matter. Dogs, she was too well aware, were sometimes used by gangs to keep the police at bay. This particular animal would be a formidable opponent during a midnight encounter. "Nice pet."

"He ain't no pet."

The comment came from behind her, and she turned to face the man who'd spoken—the one she'd been hoping to meet. "Hi, Rick. Long time, no see."

Surprise made his jaw drop, and the cigarette hanging from his mouth nearly fell to the floor. Only quick reflexes caught it, but his amazement rapidly turned to anger. He spun on Tony. "You idiot! She's a cop!"

"It's nice to see you, too," she interrupted as shocked silence was followed promptly by hisses of displeasure. It sounded as if she'd walked into a snake pit, and the King Cobra was eyeing her with wary suspicion. "You look good, Rick. You haven't changed much."

And he hadn't. He was still tall and thin. His face had filled out some, but the pointed chin, the scar over his left eye and his black gaze were all the same.

"You cut your hair."

His dark ponytail had been forsaken for what could pass for a new-age crew cut.

"And I like the earring."

Self-consciously, he lifted a hand to pull at the gold ring hanging from his left lobe and watched her wander past him to look around.

"You wearing a wire?"

"My badge and gun are at home, Rick," she told him, searching the shadows and faces in them before turning to confront the man and his followers who had closed in a circle around her. "I'm here for personal reasons."

Having recovered from the initial jolt of her arrival, his lips curved into a smile, and he did a slow circle around her. His gaze was carnal. "You still fill out denim with style, Rae."

"And I can still give you a bloody nose if you try for another feel."

Rick laughed, and some of the tension in the room eased. "You were always feisty."

"You were always smart enough not to make the same mistake twice."

Radar humming, Rick stopped before her to meet her direct stare. "What mistake is it you're afraid I might make again?"

"Trusting Joey Jackson."

Something moved in the dark depths of his eyes. A shadow of fear, a gleam of speculation, a glimmer of resentment. She couldn't be sure as he snorted in derision. "In case you haven't heard, Joey's gone."

"I hear he's back." She took a step closer to him. It put her squarely in his face. "In fact, I know he is because I saw him."

Rick didn't back up. Age and experience and the ability to control others gave him the backbone to stand up to her advance—and hide any reaction to her quiet declaration. "Yeah, so what if he is?"

She moved her shoulders and kept her voice low. "I hear he made some good connections while he was gone. Up in San Francisco, down in San Diego. I'm thinking he's back to take over where he left off—in his old territory."

Rick's smile was cocky, and he lifted a hand to jerk his thumb at his chest. "He isn't going to take what's mine. This is my turf now. He left it, I claimed it and I'm running it. I'll tell him just that—if he shows up."

"You mean he hasn't stopped by to say hello yet?"

Rick's lips peeled back in a grinning snarl. "Nice try, cop, but I'm not telling you nothing. Why should I?"

"Because we could help each other."

"I don't help no cops." He turned and spit onto the cracked cement of the basement's foundation, and rumbles of agreement echoed around them but she didn't let up.

"Cops are people, too. I think you'll remember that Joey and I have some unfinished personal business."

Rick's gaze slammed, once again, into hers, and a silent understanding trembled between them. "I remember."

"Then you know I'll take Joey any way I can get him. As a cop or just as me, a person."

Rick nodded and glanced around at the faces watching them. "I know, but it doesn't matter to me. I still have no reason to help you."

"I think you do."

"How's that?"

"If he tries to muscle in again, you're going to have to fight him. That means you're going to lose some people, some profit, and a lot of time. If you help me find him, you won't

have to go to war." She offered him a conciliatory smile. "Besides, who would you rather be charged with murder? You? Or me?"

"I'd never get caught."

"Yeah, because you won't pull the trigger. You'll have someone else do it, but me, I'll take my own revenge. I want to see if it's as sweet as they say it is."

He didn't answer. He simply stared, perhaps weighing the truth of her intent, but when he didn't speak, she blew out a breath of disgust.

"Forget it. I don't need your help to find him." She spun on her heel to head toward the door, but he stopped her.

"What makes you think I know where he is?"

Turning slowly back to face him, she gestured with her hands that remained in her jacket pockets. She wasn't taking any chances. "Like I said before, you were never as dumb as you look."

Rick laughed at her insult. "So you know I can take care of business?"

"Yeah, but can you hold off Joey on your own or would you like a little help?"

Rick's nostrils flared. "I can watch out for what's mine, but if he shows up, maybe I'll let you know."

"You do that. You know where I work."

"I know where you live, too."

"So where's the problem?" she demanded, undaunted by his veiled threat. "If you find Joey, let me know, and we can both get rid of him. He'll be off your back and in jail or in the ground depending on my mood when I meet him."

"Yeah, and when you're done with him, you'll come after me."

She snorted at his sneer of distrust. "Don't flatter yourself. You're not my job. You're not in my beat. I don't care what you do as long as you don't get in my way."

He didn't try to stop her when she left. Neither did Tony, BJ, or any of the other gang members. They parted before her, and she headed back out into the alley and fresh air and sunshine.

The light was blinding after being inside the dark basement, but she was grateful for the glare. It helped her ignore the reaction that came after confrontation. Her knees were trembling, her heart stuttering, and her hands, when she finally pulled them from her pockets, were sweaty.

Wiping her palms on her jeans as she strode away, she sucked in deep breaths to settle jangling nerves. The meeting had brought better results than she could have expected. Rick hadn't flat out turned her down, but that was why she'd gone to see him. She'd hoped he wouldn't. He had good reason to resent Joey's return. More than one.

She nodded to herself and crossed the sidewalk to the Dakota, which, she was glad to see, still had all its hubcaps and pieces. Glancing up and down the street for anyone who might be watching, she wondered if she was only grasping at straws by going to Rick, but yanking her keys from her jeans pocket, she didn't think so.

Word on the street was quicker and more efficient than a radio broadcast. Information passed through contacts and down alleys more swiftly than any telegraph wire ever strung.

It was a jungle beat that helped keep the gangbangers aware of what was going on, of who was doing what, and if Joey was in town, his name would be filtering down the line.

Climbing into the cab, she wondered if Rick had been lying. Had he already seen Joey? She didn't think so. Rick had never been a good liar. That meant she'd only confirmed the rumors he had, no doubt, already heard. Joey was back, and his return had to make Rick wonder. And worry.

Joey and Rick had been friends once. Joey had taught Rick, and Rick had supported Joey in all things. Except one. The disagreement hadn't caused a split, but Joey's departure and the circumstances leading up to it had. When Joey left, Rick took over. Rick had the power now, and he wouldn't want to give it up.

The engine growled to life, and she put the pickup in gear. It was time to hit a couple other spots she knew of and to bend the ears of a few more sources. She aimed to use the jungle beat to her advantage and in two separate ways.

The news it carried could come to her. Rick or the snitches who wandered the beach could tell her what she needed to know. Or the system could work in reverse. The word that she was looking for Joey could be carried to him, and that was a good thing. She wanted him to know she was after him, and this time, he wasn't going to get away.

* * * *

"WHERE HAVE YOU been?"

To her credit, Rae didn't jump at the unexpected demand. Stepping into her apartment where early evening shadows

darkened the rooms and hid his presence, she didn't even flinch. Yet Scott wasn't impressed with her calm. He was struggling to hold on to his own.

The entire afternoon he'd been sitting and waiting for her to show up, and his emotions had been swinging from anger at her desertion to worry for her safety.

When he'd arrived and found her gone that morning, it hadn't taken much deduction to figure out where she'd gone—off to make good on her personal vendetta. The terrifying part was his being helpless to go after her. He could only stay and hope she would return unharmed, and she had.

Her search hadn't resulted in injury. No bruises marred her face. She wasn't limping or showing any ill effects from her hunt. Although, fatigue was dragging at her. It showed in the slump of her shoulders and the weary resignation on her face, but at least she was in one piece—and quick to recover from the shock of finding him waiting inside the apartment she'd locked him out of.

"I went to the station."

Surprised she didn't demand an explanation for his illegal entry into her home, he rose to his feet, setting Dopey who'd been curled up sleeping on his chest aside. "No one at the station's heard from you all day."

She stiffened. "Have you been checking up on me?"

"Have you been lying to me?"

She hesitated, holding his stare, but finally shrugged indifference. "I've been out taking care of personal business."

"You've been out searching for Joey." The truth shone in her eyes and set his teeth on edge, but he hung on to his temper. "So what'd you find out?"

"Nothing."

His hiss put him in front of her in a second flat. "We had a deal, Rae. We're partners. I help you, you help me, but you broke the agreement—you broke the rules. You went out hunting alone."

"I never agreed to anything. I didn't ask you to come with me yesterday." She tried to turn away, but he caught her arm and spun her back to face him.

"I thought you were smart. I also thought you were honest."

Dark regret flickered in her gaze. She was quick to cover it up. "Think what you want."

"What I think," he said, fighting to keep frustration at bay, "is that Joey Jackson is more than just another felon to you, and that you're so obsessed with catching him that you're going to get yourself killed."

"If you have so little faith in my abilities, why would you recommend I join you bounty hunting?"

"I have faith in you as long as you're thinking with your head instead of your heart." Releasing her, he blew out a breath to help relieve the tension knotted in his stomach.

"Who's Joey Jackson to you?"

For a minute, he didn't think she'd answer. Glaring at him with her chin tilted at an angle that dared him to take a swing, she seemed determined not to speak, but unexpectedly she broke eye contact. "We grew up together."

"An old flame?"

"An old enemy." She stepped around him, and he let her go. "Joey lived on the next block. He was my age. We even played together when we were young, and I used to feel sorry for him."

"Why?"

"He'd come to school with black and blue marks that he didn't get from falling down."

"His parents beat him?"

She shrugged. "Joey's father was a jerk. No one liked him, and because he was big, everyone was afraid of him. When he lost his temper, he got violent. He hit things—like Joey, but Joey didn't want anyone feeling sorry for him. He was tough."

"And he set out to prove it."

She nodded. "On the playground he was the one the others looked to for guidance. At least until he started showing the same mean streak his father had."

Scott nodded understanding. "He became the bad boy."

"The bad boy who was smart," she corrected. "He never did the dirty work himself. He had someone else flat the tires or beat someone up or play the trick, but I think he's the one who killed his father."

Her accusation put Scott back on his heels. "What?"

"I can't prove it, and the death was ruled an accident."

"But you don't believe it?" Scott asked.

"Joey's father was always working on his truck. He made Joey help him. One day I saw the two of them working, heard the old man yelling at Joey, and the next day Joey came to

school with a black eye. The day after his father's truck crashed. Word was his brakes failed." She glanced at Scott. "The cops came to the school the day it happened, and Joey got called to the principal's office. I was in the hall when he came out. He'd been crying, but as soon as the door closed behind him, the tears stopped and he smiled."

Scott watched her shudder.

"I'll never forget that smile."

"That's not why you're after him."

Grumpy appeared to weave in and out of her ankles, and Rae used the distraction to look away from him. She reached down to pick the cat up. "Maybe it's part of it."

"Part of it," he agreed, but the wound forcing her to try to hunt Jackson down was more personal. It had to be. "What's the other part?"

Silence stretched between them again. Silence punctuated by the continued sharp thrust of her chin as she glared at him. "His father might have been the first murder he committed, but it wasn't the last."

"Someone else you knew?" Scott pressed, ignoring her irritation as she turned away to set Grumpy down on the back of the couch.

"A lot of someone elses."

"Such as?"

She paced away from him. "In sixth grade he started bringing drugs to the school. He'd been hanging out with the boys from the high school, and he became their pusher. At least until he got others to sell for him."

He watched her take a deep breath.

"I had a good friend. Lori. When we got into high school, Joey took a fancy to her and started giving her free samples. One hot summer night when we were up on the roof trying to beat the heat, she decided she could fly thanks to the pills he gave her."

"She jumped off the top of the building," Scott said more than asked. "It wasn't your fault."

"I was with her, Scott," Rae denied. "I should have been able to stop her, but I couldn't. When I tried, she knocked me down."

Scott took a step toward her. "It still wasn't your fault."

"She was sixteen, Scott. Sixteen, and do you know what Joey did when he heard about it? He laughed."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not sorry. I'm mad, and I'm going to make Joey pay."

"You don't have to do it alone."

"Yes, I do. I made a promise."

"Then you're going to have to break it," he told her without any measure of sympathy. "Joey Jackson isn't your problem. He's everybody's, and you're not the only one who wants to see him punished."

Her gray gaze was stormy when she swung around to face him once more, but he wasn't going to let her win the argument.

"You may think you have a better reason than anyone else for tracking him down, but you don't. And you may catch him all by yourself if you keep trying. It's a possibility, but it's also possible you could end up dead. I'd rather that not happen."

"Why?" she demanded. "What do you care?"

"Damned if I know," he admitted and dragged a hand through his hair. "You're pig-headed, stubborn, you don't take orders very well, and you stood me up."

A smile played with her lips. "Bruised your ego, did I?"

"What you did is scared the hell out of me, Rae."

His honesty made her smile disappear.

"I've said it before, man is the most dangerous prey to run to ground. Jackson's already proven he's smart, and if he's hip deep into the drug trade like we think he is, he's got plenty of muscle. He's killed before, and he won't hesitate to do it again."

"I know it, and—"

"You'll go out on your own again." Scott fisted his hands on his hips to stop himself from reaching out to grab and shake her until her teeth rattled. "That leaves me no choice."

She sputtered when he turned and walked away. "What do you mean?"

He stopped with his hand on the doorknob to look back at her. "I mean, you either work with me and we do this together, or I get myself another partner and find Jackson before you do."

"You can't!"

"I can, and I will." He opened the door. "Think about it, Rae. Think hard, and I'll see you tomorrow on the beach. Then you can tell me what you know and I'll tell you what I know, and we'll form a plan. Or we can go our separate ways, and Griff can have a chat with his friends at the station about vigilantism."

She hissed. "That's blackmail!"

"That's my offer. Take it or leave it." He didn't give her a chance to say anything further. He stepped into the hall and shut the door—and winced as something breakable smashed into the wood behind him.

Red hair. Hot temper. She was his kind of woman, and he liked her, damn it—even if she was *still* holding out on him.

Skiping down the stairs, he headed for his Jeep. He didn't know what it was, but something more lay between Rae and Joey Jackson. He didn't know what, but she wasn't telling him the truth. Or at least not all of it. The promise she'd made had nothing to do with an old friend named Lori. Something else was driving Rae, and he was going to have to find out what it was before it got her killed.

Chapter Six

IT WAS NOT starting out as a good day.

Rae slammed out of her truck to glare at the sun shining in a bright blue sky. She was late. And it was Scott's fault. Again.

What right he had to give her ultimatums, she didn't know, but she didn't like it. She didn't like him forcing his way into her life. Granted it was partially her fault. She'd let him through the door. Probably because he was such an attractive boy toy. All charm and yummy to look at and fun to spar with, but he was more than a pretty face.

Under different circumstances, she wouldn't have minded the attraction or his interference. At a different time, she wouldn't have cared, but no one got in between she and Jackson—yet there was Scott.

Hissing frustration and swearing under her breath at his tenacity, she yanked open the Venice sub-station door and went from blinding brilliance to fluorescent dimness. She pulled off her sunglasses and glanced at her watch.

She'd prowled the floor most of the night, laid in bed staring at the ceiling for nearly the rest of it—and had finally fallen asleep just before dawn when the alarm was supposed to wake her up. Only she'd forgotten to set it. *Thanks to him.* So she was late.

"Nice of you to join us, Rae."

She curled her lip at Lewinski who was about six foot and two hundred pounds of solid muscle. His neck was as thick as

his head, and his shoulders as wide as his hips. He was a big barrel of a man, and one of the best cops she'd ever met.

"Damned alarm didn't go off."

"Speaking of alarms," he said and jerked his thumb to the door up the hall. "They're waiting for you in the Captain's office."

"Who?" she said, and glanced at her watch again. She wasn't *that* late. She'd missed roll call, but not by much.

"Dwyer."

Her head shot up, and Lewinski aimed a warning finger at her.

"Keep your hands at your sides."

She snarled around a smile. "Aw, Lew, you think I'd hurt him?"

"I think you'd like to and I'd like to let you, but he's not worth your career. He retires in another three years."

"Not soon enough," she grumbled and stalked toward the door. Her day had just gotten worse. Scott, being late, and now, Dwyer. Bad things came in threes. Or so they said. If she just got past this latest hurdle, she might make it through her shift without killing somebody. Muttering under her breath, she continued down the hall and almost slammed into Jodi as her partner came striding around the corner. "Here."

Jodi accepted the knapsack Rae shoved at her but raised an eyebrow in question. "What'd you do to get Dwyer to come down here?"

"Got out of bed."

Jodi's grin followed her to the door where she knocked sharply before being ordered inside.

Captain Perry Crockett was the Venice sub-station commander. Tall and thin with a trim mustache, his hair was brown, his eyes blue and his disposition easy. Married, with three kids and a dog, he demanded and got respect and performance from those who served under him, and he was waiting for her behind his steel gray desk when she stepped inside.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?" she asked, pointedly ignoring the other man in the room.

Robert Dwyer was a short five ten, had thin, once-brown hair, wore wire-rimmed glasses and saw the world with a beady black gaze. His jaw was square, his nose long, but it was only the latter that had a kink in it. She figured it was from someone giving Dwyer what he deserved—a knuckle sandwich.

"Grayson," Crockett began, rocking back in his chair to pin her with a frown. "Deputy Chief Dwyer here brought me some disturbing news this morning. He tells me you were over in Pit Bull territory yesterday meeting with gang members."

Not sparing Dwyer so much as a glance where he sat watching with ill-disguised glee, Rae swallowed surprise and annoyance at getting caught. "I didn't know what I did on my day off was of interest to Mr. Dwyer, sir."

Crockett shot to his feet. "Don't get lippy, Grayson, or are you looking for a charge of insubordination?"

"No, sir."

"Good, then tell me what you were doing there."

"You're aware we caught Sandra Povlaki this last week," Rae provided. "Jackson was with her."

"It was in your report," Crockett confirmed, folding his arms over his chest. "Why is that relevant?"

"Jackson's old stomping grounds are with the Pit Bulls."

"How do you know that?"

Realizing it was better to come up with a truth than a lie, certain by doing so no one would go digging, she shrugged.

"Because I grew up on the same block he did, sir."

Crockett's eyes on hers widened slightly in surprise, but she kept her own expression carefully neutral. He cleared his throat. "You still have old contacts back there?"

"No, sir. I wish I did, sir, but I thought a visit to the old place wouldn't hurt—knowing how bad Jackson's wanted by the DA, sir."

"So you know his history?" Crockett demanded with a brief look to Dwyer.

"I was already at the Academy when things came to a head, Captain, but I heard about what went down before he disappeared." She shrugged. "I didn't think I'd hurt anything by going back and asking some questions."

"You thought wrong," Dwyer protested and pushed himself out of his chair and into the conversation. "We have people in that part of the city who are perfectly capable of asking questions without your help."

"I was only trying to show some initiative ... sir."

Her hesitation was brief but had Dwyer's gaze narrowing as he stopped directly in front of her. "You're a police officer not a detective."

"I know that ... sir."

"Then act like it and stay on your own turf."

Dwyer started to turn away, but she stopped him. "Even on my own time ... sir?"

Dwyer turned back to confront her. "I don't like you, Grayson. You're a loose cannon. You could get people killed, and if you start poking around where you don't belong, you could screw up certain ongoing investigations. Am I making myself clear?"

She looked past him to Crockett who was glaring at her in silent warning. "Yes, sir. Am I cleared to go on duty now, sir?"

"You're dismissed," Dwyer said and put his back to her.

She resisted the urge to stick her tongue out and focused on her commander who wasn't prepared to let her off so easily.

"You missed roll call today."

"Yes, sir. I apologize, Captain Crockett, but someone forgot to set my alarm."

His lips twitched. "See it doesn't happen again."

"No, sir."

"Hit the beach."

She didn't have to be told twice. She was out the door in two seconds flat, and she had an audience waiting as she pulled the door closed behind her. Looking from Jodi to Lewinski who were loitering in the hall with long faces, she shrugged. "I still have a job."

Lewinski grinned, and Jodi sighed heartily. "Thank God. I don't have to break in a new partner."

After a quick change into uniform while Jodi briefed her on any alerts or news passed on during the morning's report,

Rae was ready to escape into the ocean breezes and the morning sun, but the day had its shadows. Dwyer and Scott.

Dwyer, unless she missed her guess, was satisfied she'd been put in her place. Scott, on the other hand, wasn't going to be so easy to deal with. He was pushing, and he was going to keep pushing whether she pushed back or not.

Standing on a rooftop overlooking the beach, taking a turn with the binoculars to scout the sand for any suspicious activity rather than patrolling it on foot, she gnawed at her lower lip. At least he'd bought her story about Lori. He'd taken the half-truth and swallowed it. Or, at least, he'd appeared to.

His lack of insight bothered her. Worse, it worried her because it was out of character. In the short time she'd known him, Scott had proven particularly perceptive when it came to reading her. That he so simply and easily accepted her tale seemed a contradiction, but it was one she had probably succeeded with because the story was true. Perhaps that's how she'd slipped past his radar. That or because of his anger.

"We're getting nothing," Jodi commented. "We should move out on the sand soon."

Rae nodded silent agreement without taking the glasses from her eyes, but she wasn't really concentrating on what lay beyond the magnifying lenses.

Scott had been ready to strangle her the day before, and she couldn't blame him. Maybe she hadn't exactly promised to be his partner when it came to catching Jackson, but her agreement had been implied by her actions. She had, after

all, allowed him to go along with her on her first visit to the old neighborhood.

She glared at the waves lapping the shore. Still, even if she regretted ducking out on him, she wasn't going to apologize. She'd done what she had to, and she'd do it again if the opportunity came—even if she didn't like lying to—or at least not telling him the whole truth considering he'd been so honest with her. She just wasn't ready to admit the rest of it. She wasn't ready to talk to him about Vicky.

Following Jodi out onto the beach minutes later, guilt weighed heavily on her. Guilt for letting down Vicky. Guilt for deceiving Scott—and worry for what he'd do.

Her Sunday trip hadn't brought her any leads. Rick might or might not come through. The jungle grapevine might or might not work in her favor, and it was possible she would come up with something or nothing on her own.

Scott could bring more contacts, more resources, and he could also give her anonymity. Having been spotted once by watching eyes—a plant inside the gang or a snitch in the neighborhood—she wasn't going to be able to wander the streets of her old home any more. Dwyer would be laying in wait for her. The arrogant rat.

That meant working with Scott would be better than working without him—especially if he was going after Jackson.

Smiling at a juggler, one of the many artists who always lined the beach trying to impress passersby with their skills, she smothered a sigh. Any alliance with Scott was going to be

uneasy. It had to be if secrets lay between them, and they did. Dark secrets even Jodi didn't know about.

Jodi silently rolled her eyes at Rae as they passed a trio of male body builders pumping iron and preening for any interested females, and Rae smothered a grin.

Jodi didn't know about Vicky either. She knew about Rae's past, about how she grew up and all the rest of it—just as Rae knew about Jodi's hang-ups and background. They were friends. She and Scott weren't. Not exactly. But they could be. They could be more, too, but she didn't know if she wanted to get in any deeper with a man who was so good at breaking into people's apartments.

Autumn at Venice Beach wasn't as chaotic as Summer. The boardwalks were still crowded, but with college and city schools back in session, the weekdays were more peaceful—if never dull.

The shoreline never lacked for people. Struggling artists, vacationers, businessmen and women with laptops and cell phones in their laps were always present in varying numbers, but they weren't usually a problem. The people who could be were those with no place else to go.

Ninety percent of her job was policing the homeless who lived on the streets around the beach. Ranging from runaways to drunks to wanted criminals, the long length of sand and shore provided a great place for them to hide while remaining out in the open. Part of her day was always spent trying to determine who was harmless and who wasn't, and part of the challenge was remembering the names of those

who remained in the area despite the relentless march of time.

Community style policing was a friendly way to keep things under control, and women officers were a big part of the city's effort. Most of the police at the Venice sub-station were female. Not seen as threatening as men in uniform, the regulars on the beach accepted the presence of the women officers and even looked forward to seeing them every day. Or at least some of them did.

Others remained leery of the police, especially those who came to LA with dreams of a new life only to fall into the trap of addiction and abuse. Lost souls, she watched their numbers for minors who'd tried to escape parents only to be corralled by pimps—or by those like Jackson who hooked them on drugs that sucked away the will to do more than get high.

Noon hour came on a restless note. No crises erupted for her to handle. No arrests were made, and the inaction made her edgy and left her too much time to wonder about Scott. Every time she turned around, she expected to see him, and conflicting emotions made her jumpy.

"Something bothering you today?" Jodi finally asked as they sat with their feet propped up in the sun while taking a break and eating lunch. "Besides Dwyer the Dick, that is?"

Rae grunted and eyed with disgust the chili layered hot dog she'd only taken two bites of.

"Another man, maybe?" Jodi prompted and grinned when Rae scowled. "It's your bounty hunter, isn't it?"

"He's not mine," Rae denied emphatically, and Jodi gave a hoot of laughter.

"I knew it! I knew it! Nothing can make a woman more moody than a male!"

"You don't have to sound so happy about it," Rae told her friend, rising to toss the rest of what was supposed to be her lunch into a trash bin.

"Did you get him into bed yet?"

Rae glared, but Jodi didn't blanch. She just shrugged.

"What are you waiting for?"

"Maybe I don't want to go to bed with him."

"Yeah, right, and pigs fly."

"He's not my type," Rae justified and earned a snort.

"Too bad I'm engaged. I'd take him off your hands."

"Yeah, well, you can have him anyway," Rae said and tipped her head back to enjoy the heat of the sun on her face.

"You can take possession when he shows up later today."

But he didn't appear. By the time their shift ended and she and Jodi were heading out to the parking lot, Scott had yet to be seen, and that surprised her. He wasn't the type to make empty promises, or threats, and so his not showing up further annoyed her.

He'd said he'd meet her on the beach, and she'd spent the day thinking about it. About him. And as much as she didn't want to admit it, she needed his help. He had the connections to see that she nailed Jackson.

It really griped her that she had to rely on someone else to fulfill her promise, but it wasn't like she was going to let him do all the work. She was just going to use him to find out

what she needed to know to get the job done, and if he was around when the confrontation occurred, fine. As long as he stayed out of the way when the moment came. Jackson was hers, and Scott had to understand that.

Yet if she was ready to set out conditions of their partnership, if she was ready to take him on as a partner when he came to cement the deal, it didn't happen because he hadn't done what he said he would. Come to the beach.

Drumming her fingers on the steering wheel as she sat at a light, silently she fumed. If he wasn't going to show, he could have left a message, but he hadn't. No, instead he just left her to sit and wait and wonder where the heck he was—and she figured he better have a good explanation.

The light turned green, but her foot hesitated before it hit the gas pedal. Maybe he did have a good reason. Maybe it wasn't that he didn't come but that he couldn't.

He did have a job, after all. Maybe it wasn't a nine to five type situation, but he had a clock to punch. Or maybe someone punched him.

Without thinking, she grabbed the cell phone from the seat beside her, but even as she flipped it open, she snapped it shut again. She didn't have his number. She didn't have Bail Buster, Inc.'s number. She had to wait until she got home to find out if he was okay—not that she was really worried. Or that it mattered.

He was a nice guy. Cute. And he could kiss. Still he wasn't anything to her. They weren't involved. For her, he was just a means to an end. An irritating one—but she sure hoped he was all right.

Pressing the pedal to the metal, she defied all speed limits and bumped into her apartment house's parking lot with a screech. Swearing at herself, at him, and wondering why panic was making her blood race, she hustled up the walk toward the door and abruptly stopped and stared at the man waiting before it.

"I thought you might be hungry."

Shock made her stammer, relief made her grin, but irritation made her snarl. "You were supposed to meet me on the beach."

"Yeah, well, you were supposed to meet me at your apartment yesterday morning," Scott retorted, and she jammed her hands onto her hips to glare.

"So this is payback? You didn't show up just to prove a point? You left me to worry and wonder if you were okay—"

"You were worried about me?"

His smile made her hiss. "You wish."

"Peace," he offered and held up some white bags between them. She recognized the red insignia on the side. And the smell of chicken. The finger-licking kind.

Her stomach growled in response. What'd she'd had for lunch wouldn't have satisfied a bird, but she wasn't prepared to surrender. "My mother always told me to beware of those bearing gifts."

"O'Malley told me never to look a gift horse in the mouth."

"Maybe not, but look what happened to the Trojans. They lost their city."

"Dinner won't cost you more than a few minutes."

She sniffed indignation, her stomach growled again, and she decided to relent. After causing her a night's sleep, after making her late for a day of work and for making her day miserable with wondering what she was going to do with him, the least he could do was cop for a meal. "Fine."

Stomping into the building, she led the way into her apartment where both Grumpy and Dopey stood just inside the door waiting. Grumpy took one look at Scott and headed for cover. Dopey, on the other hand, got one whiff of what was in the bag and instantly became Scott's best friend.

"I'll grab plates and beer, and we can eat here," she told him, gesturing to the collection of couch and recliner and coffee table set before a television. Danged if she was going to be formal with him and get out her best silverware so they could sit at the dining room table.

He didn't argue. He just started emptying bags as she grabbed a couple cans from the refrigerator. "I hope you like coleslaw."

At his call, she picked up forks as well as plates and returned to blink at the spread he had on the table. Chicken, coleslaw, mashed potatoes and gravy—not to mention buttermilk biscuits. "What'd you bring for dessert?"

He grimaced. "I forgot about that."

She shrugged and plopped down on the floor beside the table. "I've got cookies."

"Chocolate chip?"

"Homemade," she confirmed, and he sighed.

"I think I love you."

Not wanting to be charmed, she shoved a plate at him.
"Here. Dig in."

He did. They did, and Dopey tried to.

"You give him a piece, and you'll never get rid of him," she warned Scott when he started to hand over some of the Colonel's original recipe.

Scott hesitated. "Do you mind?"

She knew she should, but she didn't. The plaque hanging in her hallway was true. Her house was ruled by her cats.
"Not if you don't."

He obviously didn't and promptly sent Dopey into ecstasy by handing over some meat.

But fair was fair, if one cat got some, the other did, too. Yet Grumpy wasn't where Rae thought she would be. Grumpy wasn't hovering near her elbow. She was advancing on Scott, and he saw her coming.

Carefully, slowly, he pulled free another piece of meat and held it out to the reluctant feline—and Grumpy quickly reached for and took it.

Scott beamed, looking for all the world like a man who'd just won a gold star, and Rae stared in disbelief—and chagrin. If Grumpy could forgive him for being an annoying man, she could, too. "She likes you."

"What about you?"

Eyeing him over the chicken leg she was gnawing on, Rae shrugged. "I'm still making up my mind."

"I like you."

She reached for her beer. "I like the way you kiss."

"Is that an offer?"

"I'm eating."

"How about after dessert?"

She licked her fingers and watched Grumpy move in for another sample, vying with Dopey for Scott's attention. "I'll think about it."

Scott set the chicken aside to dish himself up a healthy helping of potatoes and gravy. "You'll let me know when you make your decision?"

"You're at the top of my list."

He grunted. "How many lists do you have?"

She grinned and accepted the plate loaded with coleslaw and potatoes from him. "You don't want to know."

Watching her over the rim of his beer can, he took a swallow. "So are we partners?"

Not breaking the intense scrutiny of his emerald gaze, she picked up another leg. "Sure."

"We share equally? You tell me what you know, I tell you what I know?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay, so share."

Recognizing the test, she shrugged. "I don't know anything."

"Where'd you go on Sunday?"

"To visit the Pit Bulls."

Scott's eyebrows went up. "Into the den alone?"

She tossed her head to get the hair out of her eyes. "Why not? I'm old pals with the top dog."

"Anyone I know?"

"Rick Marchetti. We went to school together."

"And was he happy to see you?"

"Not exactly, but I made him a proposition."

"You haven't heard back from him?"

"I don't know if I will."

Scott nodded. "He's old buddies with Joey."

"His ex-lieutenant."

"You asked him to help you find Joey?"

"So he wouldn't have to fight for his position."

Scott swallowed coleslaw and beer. "Joey might not ask him to give it up. Joey might not want to take over. He might just be looking to form an alliance."

"I know," she agreed. "That's why I don't know if I'll hear from him."

Scott stared, and she fought to maintain her calm. He was sensing it again. That she was holding back on him, and try as she might, she couldn't maintain her silence.

"Rick might not want to renew his friendship."

"Why not?"

"He had a girlfriend. Joey took her away from him."

"Rick's not the kind to forgive and forget?"

"I don't know. That's another reason why I don't know if he'll call or not." She sighed. "An alliance with Joey could bring him more money than he's already pulling in."

"But it could strip him of power. Joey would call all the shots."

She didn't comment. She couldn't. She didn't know if Rick would commit to Joey again. Her hope was he wouldn't, but he might be more willing to forgive Joey than she was.

"So this girlfriend," Scott pressed. "Her name wouldn't happen to be Vicky, would it?"

Chapter Seven

SHOCK VIBRATED THROUGH Rae. Scott could feel it. See it. Even if she was quick to cover it up—and the emotions that followed.

Surprise, resentment, anger and sorrow—all reflected in the turbulent gray of her gaze, if only momentarily, but he ignored the flash of vulnerability. Or at least he pretended to as she quickly hid her feelings behind a composed mask.

Acting nonchalant, as if he hadn't noticed the stampede of uncertainty that had just surged through her, he pulled a chicken breast from the striped cardboard bucket. "Vicky Roth, I think her name was."

Rae reached for her beer and took a healthy swallow. "It was, and yes, she was Rick's girl."

"Until Joey took her away."

Rae shrugged and grabbed a biscuit. "So the story goes."

"You think Rick's feelings for her might interfere with his willingness to let Joey back inside the Pit Bulls?"

Recovered, back in control of herself again, she squinted at him across the table. "I don't know. You tell me. You're a man. If someone stole your girl, would he still be your friend?"

"Depends on if she was more than just my girl. If she was my love, I don't think I'd be too happy to see Joey again. No matter what the circumstances."

"Even if he offered you a lot of money?"

"Maybe, but I wouldn't trust him. I'd never trust Joey again if he did that to me. In fact, I'd always be wondering what else he might take that was mine." Scott accepted half of the buttered biscuit she handed him. "But then I'm not Rick. What do you think?"

She tossed Dopey a piece of chicken that the agile feline caught in mid-air. "I think I don't have a clue. Men are a complete unknown to me."

"That's what makes us so interesting."

"That's one word that could be used to describe your species."

He winced. "Species? Why do I suddenly feel like a bug?"

"Afraid you'll get squashed?"

Watching her lick her fingers, he struggled to swallow the sudden lump in his throat. "I can always hope."

Her ready smile made his pulse hop. "Who knows? You might get lucky."

Sputtering as she abruptly got to her feet, he nearly dumped his plate upside down trying to follow her. "I might?"

She grabbed a cookie jar off the counter. Shaped in the form of a cat, it meowed when she opened the lid. "Have a cookie."

"I don't mind if I do," he agreed as she turned to face him, but it wasn't sugar he reached for. It was her, and she didn't protest.

When he brought her to him, when his mouth closed over hers, she didn't try to pull away. She stood still, and the impact from the embrace rocked through her to him on a groan.

The sound shivered between them, and he inched closer. She tasted good. He wanted another helping, and she didn't object. She held her ground and met him nip for tuck. At least until the plastic cat between them unexpectedly meowed in sudden protest. He lifted his head from hers, and she stared up at him.

"You were supposed to take a cookie."

Unfazed by her calm reprimand, he drove his hand blindly into the jar. "I'll take two." But his gaze he kept on her. The heat still shimmered between them. It shifted like a restless tide, and caught in the swirling surf, she didn't back away to find safer ground. She tossed anchor and stayed where she was.

"You can take more."

He grinned. "Don't make an offer unless you're ready to back it up."

She sniffed. "Maybe you can't handle it."

"Maybe you should let me try."

"I'm still making up my mind."

Jamming a cookie in his mouth, he watched her sashay away. "I wish you'd hurry up and come to a decision."

She studied him over her shoulder as she put the jar back before helping herself to a chocolate chip. "Some things shouldn't be rushed."

Wishing it was otherwise but knowing it was true, he was distracted by the explosion of taste in his mouth. Lifting the cookie he was still holding, he looked from it to her. "These are good."

"You sound surprised."

"Pleased," he corrected. "Can I really have more than two?"

Smiling, she grabbed the jar to hold it out to him again, and he didn't hesitate to come forward for another of her culinary delights.

Having selected what he was sure was the one with the most chips, he pulled it out to examine its golden brown texture. "You haven't asked me what I know yet."

"I can be patient."

And she could trust. Him. Pleased by the precious gift she gave, knowing it wasn't given lightly or easily, he accepted it on a casual shrug. "I checked sources in San Diego and San Francisco. It took some digging around, but it seems a mystery man has been in and out of both areas over the last couple years. The cops call him 'The Shadow' because that's all he is to them. No one undercover's been able to get close to him, and the gangs on the street protect him—at all costs."

She frowned. "You think he's Joey?"

"Let's put it this way. The only handle anyone's heard him labeled with is JJ. Kind of a coincidental, wouldn't you say?"

"Joey John Jackson. JJ." Munching on a cookie of her own, she nodded. "But what's it all mean?"

"It means that Joey's a smart man. When he went underground, he knew enough to drop his name or at least change it. That way no one could track him. It also means it's a good thing you went back to see Rick—even if you shouldn't have gone alone."

Her eyes narrowed, but he ignored the invisible gray darts she zinged his way.

"Because I think Joey's back to make peace—and to offer Rick a piece of the pie. It's the only way he can connect his pipeline."

Nodding understanding, she leaned back against the counter. "So it would be really good if we knew what Rick was going to do because he could help us track down Joey."

"But will he?"

Shaking her head, she pushed off from the counter to make her way back into the living room to begin the clean up. It was a process both cats sat back to watch in silent anticipation. "I wish I knew what Rick will do. I wish I could go ask him."

Alarm skittered through him. "You won't..."

"No." She straightened to face him. "Rick has to come to me."

Satisfied she recognized the truth of her own statement—going back again would be taken as a sign of weakness and an admission of impotency to act—he bent to help her collect the plastic and cardboard containers strewn across the coffee table. "If he's going to come, it should be soon. Joey doesn't strike me as the type to waste time."

Back at the sink, separating leftovers from refuse, she scowled. "What do we do until then—and how long before we figure Rick's not going to come over to our side?"

"No way of knowing for sure. We're just going to have to wait and watch."

"That's it?"

"That's it," he confirmed, dumping chicken bones into the garbage bag she had out.

"But it can't be," she objected. "I've been waiting and watching long enough. I want to do something."

"What would you suggest?" Shoveling half-filled containers of coleslaw, gravy and potatoes into the refrigerator, he turned to watch her sputter.

"I..."

"Well?" he prompted. "I'm all ears."

Her epitaph was sharp and violent, and striding past him, she slammed cupboards as she put the rest of dinner away.

Watching her, appreciating her frustration, he also wondered at it. She was still holding out on him. Another secret existed that she wasn't revealing, but it wasn't because she didn't want to. It was because the pain, and the guilt, were so deep, she couldn't come clean. Not yet.

To find out what personal obligation was tying her up in knots, he was going to have to prove he deserved to hear the rest—and that they could work together.

"We could do more than just wait."

She swung on him. "Like what?"

Resting a hip against the counter, he crossed his arms over his chest. "We could go hunting."

"For Joey?"

"For other game." And when she scowled at him, "Unless you'd rather just sit around and feel sorry for yourself."

Her hiss sent Grumpy and Dopey slinking for cover.

"You said you wanted to learn about bounty hunting. We could hit the streets, keep our ears to the ground and maybe catch a felon or two while waiting for our real target to put his head up again."

Recognizing what he did, knowing investigations took time, she shut the refrigerator on the last of the chicken. "I have to work tomorrow."

He glanced at his watch. "I'll have you home by ten—unless, of course, you want to stay here and do something else."

His leering grin had her rolling her eyes. "Who are we going after?"

Disappointed in her answer, he resorted to name-calling. "Chicken."

Unfazed by his accusation, she headed for the door with haughty dignity. "I'm not chicken, I'm choosy."

"Yeah, you're picking a lawbreaker instead of a—"

"Heartbreaker?"

"So you *do* think I'm charming," he challenged, skipping down the steps once she'd locked her front door behind them.

"I think you have your charms."

He threw an arm around her shoulders as they moved outside and toward the Jeep. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

She rolled her eyes, but the distraction he provided was something she needed. He knew it. She knew it, and he was rewarded for his efforts by her enthusiasm once she got into the chase.

Patience was a main part of the hunt. Prowling haunts of the prey, following or questioning known friends for leads or visiting recorded hangouts were the active end of pursuit. The inactive end took up as much time and required little more than a tolerance for sitting and an ability to stay focused when boredom came knocking.

Having a partner helped the latter. Having a partner also insured back up when something finally went down—which appeared about to happen when, parked in the night and among the shadows a few doors down from their skip's home, a car pulled up and their man climbed out with some of his friends.

Rae sat up straight in the passenger seat. "There he is!"

"Yup, and he's going home for the night."

She sputtered. "He's not even trying to hide! He's just going to his house like..."

"He doesn't have a warrant out for his arrest?" Scott reached for and stuffed the paperwork giving him the authority to take their man into his jacket pocket in case he needed to show it. "That's because he knows the police are too busy to come looking for every two-bit hoodlum who knocks over convenience stores for extra cash, especially when he's no real threat. Last time he staged a hold-up it was with a squirt gun."

"How do we play this?"

"We know he's inside. We can knock, or we can walk right in."

Her teeth flashed in the blackness between them. "Let's walk right in."

"All right," he agreed, willing to go along with the break in her usual following of police procedure—waiting to ask for entry. "I'll go in the front. You go in the back. We don't want Raymond trying to slip out the rear door."

Stepping out of the Jeep to meet him by the bumper, she paused. "What do I do if the door's locked?"

"Kick it in—on my signal."

"Which is?"

"I'm going to walk in and announce myself. That'll be your cue to come running."

"I'll be there."

"I didn't doubt it for a minute. Just watch your six." His caution brought her solemn nod as she disappeared into the shadows. It was no game they played. They were both wearing bulletproof vests and prepared for the worst. Raymond Guadalupe wasn't known to be violent and most skips gave up without a fight, but some didn't. Some panicked when confronted. A few turned deadly, and there were Guadalupe's friends to consider.

Approaching the house, Scott counted seconds off in his head. He needed to make sure Rae had time to get into position. He also wanted to assess the situation.

Guadalupe had gone into the house with his girlfriend on his arm and a buddy by his side. The house had already had lights and movement before they arrived. That meant a minimum of four people inside. Possibly more.

Surprise would be on his and Rae's side. Authority, too. Most people balked at the flash of gun and badge, and any hesitation would work in their favor. The take-down would be as swift and as efficient as possible. A minimum amount of time in the home, and they would be out again.

Reaching the cracked concrete porch of the small house in Oakwood, he took a deep breath. The television blared behind the closed door. It was show time.

Palming his Glock and his badge, a quick search behind him showed his rear was clear, and he reached for the knob.

One twist and he was inside. One glance and he spotted Raymond. Raymond was standing to the side and facing three people. One was sitting. The other two, including the girlfriend, were on their feet, too. At the motion from the entrance, everyone turned, and everyone froze when confronted with the muzzle of Scott's gun.

"Scott Logan, bail enforcement agent. Raymond Guadalupe, you're under arrest."

Shock descended with silence. The only noise in the room was from the TV in the corner.

"Put your hands on your head, Raymond. Everyone else, stay where you are and keep your hands where I can see them."

The man on the couch did as he was told. The girlfriend glared, Raymond's buddy hesitated, and Raymond looked ready to bolt.

Scott could sense it, see it in the nervous dart of Raymond's eyes, and when Scott glanced away to insure no one was coming up behind him, Raymond made his break for the back hall.

Leaping forward, he started to run—but stopped instead when Rae stepped into the room with her gun leveled. "Going somewhere?"

"Hell, no," Raymond denied, and his hands shot into the air in surrender.

"Cuff him," Scott ordered, but before she could move to comply, Raymond's girlfriend let out a shriek and charged.

The assault came without warning. It took Scott by surprise and, not wanting to shoot a civilian, he tried to dodge and duck. It didn't work.

She stayed with him and let loose a wicked swing. The clip to his jaw made stars dance in front of his eyes. The kick to his shins made him grunt, and the red fingernails reaching for his face had him stumbling backwards—and worrying about Rae.

She was now facing three men alone. Yet it was himself he had to protect. The she-demon attacking him was trying to tear him to shreds, and he could only offer a one-handed defense while trying to keep his gun out of the way. The effort took him to the floor where he managed to pin the woman who, screeching like a banshee, bucked beneath him in protest.

"Need some help there, partner?"

The comment came from Rae, and twisting to see her, Scott found her standing beside a humbled Raymond who was now in handcuffs. His two friends were standing with their hands on their heads watching the sideshow. One of them was grinning, but then so was Rae. "No, thank you," Scott managed through gritted teeth. "Are you ready to go?"

"Whenever you are."

Raymond's girlfriend was running out of steam. The thumping beneath him was diminishing to an occasional bump, but the volume was still intense—and vulgar. "Fine. Raymond, tell her to cooperate, or she's going to jail with you."

"She don't never listen to me!" Raymond whined, and Scott glared.

"Try!"

Raymond did, and his girlfriend, worn out, complied with a disgusted oath.

Scott gratefully rolled off of her, scooted out the door after Rae and Raymond and limped his way to the Jeep. His jaw hurt, his shins throbbed and his ribs ached. Fortunately, no blood had been drawn, but he'd have bruises in the morning. Plenty of them.

"That was great!" Rae beamed when he finally joined her in the Jeep once Raymond was securely situated in the back seat. "No knocking, no waiting, no reams of paperwork. When do we get paid?"

"As soon as the bondsman gets the receipt for us bringing him in," Scott said, shoving the key in the ignition.

"That quick?" she asked and glanced at her watch. "Wow, it's only nine o'clock. Maybe we can catch someone else before I have to get home."

Groaning at the possibility, wishing he had an aspirin for the headache brewing behind his eyes, he started the engine and wondered—as she began babbling about their chances of apprehending another suspect before the night was over—if he'd created a monster.

* * * *

"IT WAS FUN," Rae told Jodi the next morning as they cruised the streets along Venice Beach. For the day the two of them were on bike patrol, riding rather than walking the beat.

It was a part of the variety in scheduling she liked about working out of the Venice sub-station which also included four-wheeling the beach in an SUV or taking the patrol from sand to concrete in the big black and white.

"You just walked in the back door?"

Rae nodded at Jodi's disbelief. "Yup. No knocking, no asking for entry—or waiting for a court order because no one will let us in."

"Wow," Jodi said, taking a gulp of water from the bottle strapped to the bike when they paused on a corner. "It seems unfair somehow, though. We should be able to do that."

"We should," Rae agreed, "but we can't. I'm just glad the skip's girlfriend decided to take her anger out on Scott rather than me."

"She really went after him?"

"With manicured nails curled for the kill."

Jodi grinned. "She knocked him down?"

"It was kind of a mutually agreed upon collapse," Rae smiled in remembrance. "He had to get her down somewhere so he could sit on her."

"I would have paid admission to see that."

"Me, too, but I don't think he found it as funny as I did. He was limping when we left the station."

"Poor baby."

"He's tough. He'll live," Rae assured her partner but felt regret, again, for him. He'd looked miserable when he'd dropped her off at her apartment, but he hadn't complained. Getting mauled, apparently, sometimes came with the job.

"You could have invited him up to your place for some home health care."

"I did. He said he'd rather lick his wounds in private."

"Ah, the male ego," Jodi commiserated with understanding and sighed. "Just as well he went home when he did, though. If you're going to get him in bed, you want him in peak performing condition."

"Jodi!"

"It looks like he might be recovered already."

Following her friend's gaze, Rae recognized a familiar Jeep cruising their way, and her heart skipped an excited beat—which, to her way of thinking, wasn't a good sign. She was beginning to like Mr. Scott Logan a bit too much for comfort, but then who wanted to be comfortable all the time?

Pushing off from the curb, she wheeled around the Jeep when he stopped so she could sit beside his open driver's door window on her bike. "Out schmoozing?"

"Out looking for babes," he denied, "and I think I might have just spotted one who's exactly the type I've been wanting to find."

Smiling as she watched him push his sunglasses down his nose to look at her over their rims, she leaned closer. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Liking the comfortable chemistry bubbling between them, she angled her head to get a better look at the dark spot on his jaw. "Looks like Raymond's girl left her mark."

Scott grunted. "She left more than one."

"I'd offer to kiss them and make them better, but I'm on duty."

He sighed. "So am I."

Surprised and disappointed at his reaction, she frowned.

"What's up?"

"Griff has a friend down in San Diego who's tracking a skip from up here. I've got to go down and help him bring our guy in."

Regret settled over her. "You going to be gone for a day or two?"

"Why? You going to miss me?"

She matched his grin with one of her own. "You're going to miss me worse."

"Then I'll hurry back," he told her. "Hopefully it won't take more than a day. Here's my numbers if you need to reach me."

Accepting the business card he handed her with office and cell and home numbers, she slipped it into her pocket. "I hope this guy doesn't have a girlfriend, too."

"Naw, he's got a rotten disposition and no tolerance for women."

Understanding dawned. "Assault and battery?"

"Aggravated assault and possible attempted murder. The soon-to-be ex-wife is thinking about helping the DA put her hubby away for a while."

"I hope she does it."

"So do I," Scott agreed and watched a car slide carefully around them. "I better get going. I didn't want to leave without telling you."

She reached through the window to brush his bruised jaw. "You're okay, Logan."

He caught her hand and pressed his lips to her knuckles. "You're better than okay." He let her go and put the Jeep back in gear. "Think of me."

"It'll be hard not to," she conceded as he pulled away and knew it was true. She would think of him. Often. "Damn men, anyway."

Joining her in the street and hearing the muttered curse, Jodi glanced after the disappearing vehicle. "Problem?"

"Yeah. He's too damn cute for his own good."

"And yours."

Laughing at her friend's wink, Rae had to agree. "And mine. Let's roll." Pushing off again, together they continued to weave through the streets and along the walkways lining the beach.

They broke up an argument, reunited one lost child with her mother but had no pursuits—for which Rae was thankful. She'd only had to chase a suspect on a bike once, and while it had ended successfully, it also, in her opinion, had ended badly.

Flying down an alley full speed ahead, a collision with some rolling debris had sent her over the handlebars and into an unplanned tackle via a rough skid over the pavement. The incident left her firmly believing the best and only way to win a race was on foot.

"See you in the morning," Jodi told Rae in the parking lot that evening, and Rae eyed her with envy.

"Going to meet Roy?" Jodi's fiancée was a motorcycle cop working out of the Rampart Division, and he and Jodi spent

most of their off-duty time together fixing up the condominium they'd just bought.

"We're going to try to finish the painting," Jodi agreed and lifted her hand to frown at it in dismay. "I don't think I'm ever going to get that stuff from under my nails."

"It adds character," Rae assured her and waved as she ducked into her truck where she grimaced at her reflection in the rearview mirror. Her plans for the evening were simple. Go home, feed the cats, and flop in front of the television. Alone.

Wondering where Scott was, she was tempted to call him but didn't want to take the chance. She might interrupt him while he was working and, too, she didn't want him to know she was already missing him. Why she wasn't sure. It wasn't as if they were involved, and they certainly hadn't known each other long. Still she liked the idea of having him around and could wish for his presence for other reasons besides Joey John Jackson.

Thinking of her nemesis made her grip tighten on the wheel. She'd nosed around the detectives before leaving the station, pretending to apologize for any intrusion into the Pit Bull territory and pumping them for information at the same time, but they had nothing. No sightings on Jackson. No leads. Just like her and Scott.

Frustrated at the lack of progress, irritated at her inability to locate Jackson when she knew he was close, she slammed the truck door hard when she reached her apartment lot and stalked to the door. Yet before she got to the entrance, she felt a presence.

Love's Bounty [Book 3 in the Hunter Series]
by Kimberly Grey

Someone was close. Watching. And sensing danger more than seeing it, she spun and confronted a familiar face. "You!"

His grin was clear even in the dark. "Hello, Rae. You looking for me?"

Chapter Eight

RAE DIDN'T ANSWER. She stared at the man who came out of the shadows to stand before her. In a black tee shirt and dark jeans, with gold glittering in his ear, he blocked her view of the parking lot behind him and made retreat her only option. Except there was no place to go. She was hemmed in by the door, the bushes, and him.

"You still have good instincts, Rae," he told her when she didn't speak. "You could always tell when trouble was coming."

She shook her head in denial. "If that was true, Rick, Vicky'd still be alive."

The smile left his face, and he glanced away to the street where traffic rumbled past. "If anyone's to blame for that, it's me."

"You didn't stick the knife into her," Rae denied and ignored the flash of pain that came with the memory. Vicky— young, fragile, beautiful, with a six-inch blade shoved into her gut.

"No, but I should've known it was coming."

She watched his jaw work.

"I should've never let her get close to Joey."

"You think you could have stopped him?" Rae asked, unwilling to let him take on the guilt. It wasn't his fault Joey became obsessed with having Vicky or that Vicky had fallen for his line and his charm.

"She was my girl. She was dating me. I let him take her away."

Rae heard the echo of torment and recognized a kindred spirit. "You really did love her."

"She was just a babe," Rick excused with a sniff, but she knew the truth. She had for a long time.

Rick had been a bad boy, but he had been a good bad boy. One with a conscience. He was the single member of the old neighborhood gang who many had hoped would escape to a better life. Unfortunately, Joey's sudden departure had insured Rick wouldn't. When the temptation of money and power came his way, Rick wasn't strong enough to walk away.

"But we were good together."

Rae didn't try to deny it, but she did wonder. Again. If Vicky had lived, if Rick and she had stayed together, would they have gotten out of the old neighborhood and found a different life? Grief grabbed her by the throat, but she shoved it away with ferocious tenacity. She'd played the game of 'what if' too often. "So Joey came to see you?"

Rick's dark gaze returned to her. "I could lie to you."

"But you won't because he did, and you're here."

"I don't know why." Rick held out his arms and let them drop again to his sides in silent resentment. "Why should I come here to see you? A cop."

He said it like a dirty word, but he didn't walk away. He stayed to stare at her and to offer an explanation.

"Maybe I feel like I owe you."

"You don't owe me—" she tried to deny, but he interrupted.

"Joey knows you're looking for him."

A chill shivered down her spine. She ignored it. "So?"

"You know what he's capable of. You of all people know."

"I'm not running."

"You should."

"I won't."

Rick snarled and bent close to shake a finger in her face.

"You were always stubborn!"

She only smiled. "That's why you liked me. You couldn't stand that I said no to you."

"I wish Vicky had."

Sorrow punctured her heart, and he loomed close.

"Don't be foolish, Rae. He'll hurt you if he can."

"Did he tell you that?" she demanded, anger vibrating through her with dark intensity. Was Joey making threats? Was he after her like she was after him? Part of her hoped so. Another part, the one with common sense, prayed he wasn't.

"No," Rick denied. "Not yet. Right now he thinks it's funny that you're trying to bring him down. He doesn't think you can do it."

"Can I?"

Her quiet demand echoed between them, and Rick took a step away. "I can't help you, Rae."

"Can't or won't?"

"He's offering me a good deal."

"He's offering you blood money."

"Which I already earn enough of," Rick spit and swore.
"I'm not a boy scout, Rae."

"You could still get out."

His snort was disbelieving. "The only way a gang member gets out is in a coffin."

"If you believe it, then it's true."

"Don't you play your mind games with me!"

His shout followed him back to her, but she didn't run when confronted. She stood her ground. He didn't frighten her. He never had. "You can walk away right now, Rick. I'll help you."

"Sure you will," he sneered. "All's I have to do is tell you where Joey is, right?"

"You don't have to tell me anything."

Her denial made him blink. "You'd help me anyway?"

"Everyone deserves a second chance," she told him and believed it was true. The trouble was most people never got the opportunity. Besides, she knew the risks he ran by coming to see her. If Joey found out, Rick could end up like Vicky. Dead.

He caught her chin in his hand. "I always liked you, Rae."

Silently they waged war as he stared down at her. Without words she willed him to confess what he knew. Without speaking he held out from a blind sense of loyalty or from fear or desperation or because he felt he had no other choice. He was trapped in a world of his own making. He didn't like it but, even so, he was afraid to give it up and leave the known for the unknown.

He inched closer when she didn't try to pull away. "Maybe if you and me could have gotten together, things would be different now."

His head started to dip towards her, but she stopped him with a hiss. "I can still give you a bloody nose."

He hesitated, his mouth a breath's width from hers. "You would, too, wouldn't you?"

"You may be bigger than I am, but I still know how to punch." Nevertheless a silent sigh of relief shuddered through her when he let her go. Talk was cheap, and he could run just as fast as she could—even if she could get past him and try to get away. "Are you going to help me?"

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his baggy jeans and nodded. "I'm helping you by telling you to back off. Joey'll leave you alone if you don't keep digging."

"Vicky wouldn't want me to give up."

The accusation made him flinch, but his jaw clenched in a determined line nevertheless. "Vicky's dead. Unless you want to be, let someone else do the dirty work."

"I can't do that," she told him, not breaking eye contact with him and wishing she could force him to talk—to tell her what she needed to know: Joey's location.

Rick's nostrils flared, and a long, silent moment passed as years and emotion swam between them. Time and tears. But he wasn't going to do what she wanted him to. "You take care of yourself, Rae. I won't be back."

She watched him turn to leave. "Vicky deserves better from you."

Rick stopped but didn't look back at her. "No, she deserved better *than* me. I let her down, Rae, but I can help save you—if you'll listen."

Frustration and buried feelings made her vision blur. "I made a promise."

"Some promises are better left unkept."

She wanted to deny it as he started off down the walkway. She wanted to shout and scream and run after him and beg, but she didn't. It wouldn't do any good. He'd made up his mind.

Clenching her fists, biting her lip to hold back angry words, she stayed where she was and watched him go, but tears swelled in her eyes. Rick wasn't going to help her. He had chosen sides, and it wasn't the one she was on.

Swearing as the night abruptly swallowed him, she took two steps in the direction he had gone, but stopped, spun around and whirled to stride bitterly up and down the sidewalk in the front of her building.

No one was outside with her. Nobody lingered in the parking lot nearby or in the tiny patch of green that served as a yard, and none of those who lived in the building paused to look out a window or cared that her heart was breaking. Again.

Vicky. Young, vibrant, and lovely was dead. Rick. Born on the wrong side of the tracks, having fallen into bad company and having learned to work against the law was lost. She couldn't save either one of them. She wasn't even sure she could save herself.

Stopping to stare at nothing, her surroundings were lost to her in a blur of misted vision. Not keep her promise? It was unthinkable. Undo-able because it was her fault Vicky was dead. Hers. Not Rick's. Not Joey's. Hers. It had been her responsibility to take care of Vicky. It had been her job, her duty, her privilege, and she should have seen it coming. She should have been able to stop it from happening.

A sob locked in her throat, and loneliness crushed in around her. She wished for one person she could talk to. If only there was someone she could call someone who would understand—who would help ... then he was there. *Scott* was.

Standing before her, she stared at him in abject misery, not caring why he was suddenly there. "I was supposed to take care of her."

The words trembled off her lips, the tears slipped free, and he stepped closer to cradle her cheek in his hand. "I know."

He caught her without question. He held her without protest. As the flood washed over her, he didn't demand answers or try to make her explain. He stood straight and tall and strong. An anchor in the storm, he kept her from drifting away, and working the keys from her nerveless fingers, he got her inside the apartment when the raging of emotions dwindled to an occasion hiccup.

"Sit here."

He put her on the couch, and if she didn't want to sit down, she didn't have a choice. Not only did he not give her one, her legs wouldn't hold her up any longer. Shaking and weak, they gave out as she fell onto the cushions where she was quickly joined by Grumpy and Dopey.

Honing in on her anxiety, desperate to help, the two cats pushed against her, trying to offer comfort—and protection when Scott returned. Timid Grumpy didn't retreat when he came back. She stayed to give support, and Rae gratefully accepted the blind loyalty and the glass of water Scott handed to her.

She drank without encouragement, and the soothing liquid brought relief to her burning throat. Yet the ache in her heart didn't ease. It couldn't. Not when the toughest test still lay before her. Scott.

Confession, they said, was good for the soul, but looking at him, she wasn't sure that was true. Because when he found out she'd still been holding out on him, she was going to be alone again. He would give up on her and walk away, and she couldn't blame him.

Swallowing bitter defeat, she watched him take a seat beside her on the couch. "You're back."

Accepting her stall with a solemn nod, he reached out to brush some hair from her face before tucking it behind her ear. "He got the skip without me."

"Is Griff mad?"

"Griff doesn't believe in getting mad. He believes in getting even."

Having met Griff, seen him, she believed it and sighed soft regret for what was about to follow. Searching his face, she managed to hold his steady stare. "I haven't been totally honest with you."

"About Joey?"

"About him and Vicky," she admitted and glanced away. A lump formed in her throat. She was having a hard time getting words past it. Wiping at her eyes, she sniffed and struggled with her own pride. "I could use a Kleenex."

His handkerchief appeared before her. "That was Rick who just left?"

Surprise had her gaze colliding with his as she accepted the white cotton cloth to blow her nose. He must have seen the conversation from the parking lot. She nodded. "Yes, Rick Marchetti." She took a deep breath. It was time Scott heard the whole story. "I told you about him and Vicky."

"She was his girlfriend."

"She was his love," she corrected. "I realized that years ago when I found out Vicky was going out with him." She shook her head at the memory. "I was home for a visit from school. Vicky told me they were dating, and I went to see him."

"You didn't trust him?"

"No, I didn't, and I was going to tell him to leave her alone, to find someone else, but I didn't. Not after listening to him talk about her. It was pretty obvious how he felt."

Scott said nothing as her fingers strangled the glass she held.

"That was a mistake. Maybe if I'd told him to back off, Vicky would still be alive."

"Vicky was ... your sister?"

His insight didn't surprise her. She closed her eyes briefly and nodded once. "Yes."

His sigh took him away from her and back against the couch.

"I should have told you before," she quickly tried to explain. "But I couldn't. I ... Vicky..."

"You said it was personal from the start."

His calm acceptance of her purposeful omission made the tears return to her eyes.

"Her name was Roth. Your Mom remarried?"

Rae nodded but wouldn't look at him. "My father died shortly after I was born. My mother remarried almost immediately. She was lonely, I think. And desperate." She sighed. "My step-dad hung around long enough to see if he had a son before taking off."

Scott said nothing as she paused to look back on a past only she could see.

"Vicky was a couple years younger than me, but age didn't matter. Nothing did. She might have really only been my half-sister, but it felt more like we were twins. We were inseparable. At least until I went away to school."

"Your mother was still with her?"

Rae snorted. "As much as Mom could be between jobs. She was always working, trying to bring home the money so Vicky and I could have a better life." She glanced at Scott. "It's not that I don't appreciate her sacrifices. She put me through school, the Academy, but there were times when..."

She shrugged, and Scott gave understanding. "It felt like she was a stranger."

"I knew she wouldn't be around much for Vicky. Vicky was going to be home alone a lot, and I was worried about them sniffing after her."

"Rick and Joey and the gang?"

"Joey was gone already. He graduated when I did, but Rick was Vicky's age. She knew he wasn't the kind of guy she should be hanging around with, but Rick..."

"You like him."

She blew out a frustrated breath. "I liked who he was, not who he pretended to be. Tough guy. Mr. Macho. If Joey hadn't pulled him under..."

"But he loved Vicky?"

"Oh, yeah, he had it bad. I thought, at first, he was just after her because she was pretty and popular and she was something he couldn't have, but he really cared for her. When I got all over him about him chasing her, he swore he'd never hurt her."

"Or you'd bloody his nose again?"

Her smile trembled. "No, I told him I'd rip his balls off with my bare hands."

Scott winced. "That got his attention."

"Unfortunately, she got Joey's when she was hanging with Rick."

"She didn't know about him?" Scott asked, doubt in his voice and his gaze, and she shook her head.

"Oh, she knew, and she avoided him. Or at least she tried to. What I didn't know and she didn't tell me was Joey made a thing of going after her. It was like a bet he had to win, and

that's how he finally got her to go out with him. A dare." Rae shook her head. "Vicky never could say no to a dare."

"She sounds like her sister."

Rae choked on a bitter laugh. "No, she was prettier, smarter, and she had her whole life ahead of her." With her elbows on her knees, Rae let her head sink against the cool surface of the glass. "I was the oldest. She depended on me. I was supposed to take care of her, but when she needed me most, I wasn't there for her."

Scott sat forward but didn't touch her, and he didn't offer any sympathy. "Let me guess. Joey got her hooked on drugs."

"He gave them to her for free. Anything she wanted, but I didn't find out about that until later. Too late, it seems."

"It wasn't your fault, Rae. Vicky made her own choices."

"But if I'd been there..."

"It wouldn't have made any difference," he denied firmly. "Vicky would still have taken the dare and hid it from you even though she knew what she was doing was wrong."

Rae opened her mouth to protest, ready to fight for her sister, but he wouldn't let her.

"You turned your back on it," he insisted. "She could have, too."

"But..."

"When you were growing up, who told you not to take drugs and hang with Joey?"

"Our mother..."

"Your mother told Vicky the same thing?"

Not liking his logic, still feeling it was her own inadequacy that had led to her sister's downfall, Rae remained ready to argue. "She was so young."

"So were you." He shoved to his feet. "Did you know she was going to the DA?"

"No," Rae denied, remembering the last time she'd seen Vicky alive. They'd fought, then cried, then made up with the promise of beating her addiction—and Joey—together. "I was going to get her help. I was going to get her into a drug rehab program, but she didn't wait. Maybe she couldn't. Maybe she felt she let me down and wanted to make it up to me. I don't know. I never will."

"She went to the police, Joey found out..."

"And he killed her." Anger and pain shuddered through her. Anger at the loss, pain at having to go to the coroner's office with her mother to identify her sister. She squeezed her eyes shut. Laid out on a cold metal table, Vicky's skin had been white, her lips blue, and her stomach ripped and red from the hole in her chest. Rae shuddered. Her mother had screamed on seeing Vicky. It was a sound Rae knew she'd never forget.

"That's when you made your promise."

Rae opened her eyes once more and stood, too, to face him and the anger she was sure he was holding back. She hadn't been truthful with him. She'd abused the trust he offered, but whether he stayed or left, she knew what she had to do. "Rick told me some promises weren't meant to be kept, but I'm going to keep this one."

"Would you like some help?"

Surprise made her gawk. "I lied to you..."

"You didn't lie. You just didn't tell me everything." His grin flashed. "And I knew it."

Her mouth worked over a protest. "You did not."

He arched a haughty eyebrow. "Are you doubting my instincts?"

She tried to tell him she did, but she couldn't. With him still standing by her, she didn't think she could ever doubt him again. "No."

"Good. Now do you have anything to eat in this place?"

She blinked at the abrupt change in subject and stammered. "Why? Are you hungry?"

"No, you are. You're also exhausted. You need food and sleep."

She tried to object, but he didn't stand still to listen. He swung away toward the kitchen. She followed, and as he browsed through her cupboards, her freezer and bent to examine the contents of her refrigerator, a strange feeling trembled through her. It was a blend of confusion and wonder and, perhaps, a touch of fear. "Are you trying to take care of me?"

He glanced at her, all male superiority and efficiency. "Somebody better. How about an omelet? We've got eggs, cheese, ham and milk. Quick and filling."

Before she could agree or disagree, he was pulling food out to stack on the counter, but it was hard to see exactly what because something was in her eye. It was making tears form again. How long had it been since someone had worried about her? Tried to look after her? Had anyone ever?

She remembered taking care of Vicky when she was sick, and she also remembered being sick herself. Sick and alone because her mother couldn't afford not to go to work.

Suddenly feeling inadequate, not certain she liked the idea of someone taking over and telling her what to do but not sure she didn't either, Rae sniffed, shuffled from foot to foot in the doorway and cleared her throat.

"Can I help?"

"No." He pulled a frying pan out of the cupboard.

She glanced down and found Grumpy and Dopey sitting on the floor beside her. They were both staring at Scott as he bumped and banged his way through drawers, too, but their expressions were more hopeful than baffled. "The cats are hungry, too."

He paused long enough to look from her to the two felines at her feet and back again. "Okay, you can feed them, but then I want you to sit down."

Feeling she should protest the order but not quite able to muster any sense of outrage, she obeyed his command. She dumped food into dishes for her pets and took a seat at the dining room table to watch him work—and was amazed to realize he really knew what he was doing.

Eggs were cracked, cheese shredded, and ham chopped with cool expertise, and they were mixed together with confidence before being tossed in the pan. Obviously, he was a bachelor who could cook. No fast food for every meal or dinners out of a box from the freezer for him.

Curiosity got the better of her when he paused long enough to pour and carry two tall glasses of milk to the table.

"Did O'Malley teach you how to fry an egg as well as pick up skips?"

"O'Malley taught me things that would make Mrs. O'Malley blush."

His wink made her grin. "I think I would have liked him."

"You would have," Scott agreed, returning to the stove to flip the omelet with terrifying expertise. In minutes he was back at the table with two dishes holding two perfectly formed ham and cheese omelets with toast on the side.

Her stomach growled as he put one plate before her. "I'm impressed."

"You should be."

She looked up to catch his gaze as he sat across from her and felt oddly humbled. "You didn't have to do this."

"I know."

Something warm passed between them. It made the blood roar in her ears and her toes curl, and it also nearly made her sigh in contentment. "You're a nice man, Scott Logan."

He speared some egg with his fork. "Don't spread it around. You'll ruin my reputation."

"What reputation?"

The banter that flowed between them was light and companionable. He was an easy man to talk to, but if together they ate and relaxed and temporarily forgot the mission they were going to undertake together, eventually, Joey slipped back into the conversation.

"Rick said he wouldn't be back," she told Scott when the meal was done, and he nodded quiet understanding.

"He's not going to help us."

"I think he wants to."

"But he's in it too deep." Scott pushed his empty dish aside. "It's hard to walk away."

"You did."

"I was pulled out, caught by the system when I was arrested for shoplifting." He shook his head. "If I hadn't gotten caught and if the social workers hadn't found out my parents were unfit, I might have ended up like Rick. It's easier to stay where you are and where you know the enemy than trying to strike off on your own."

"Gangs give members a sense of belonging," she agreed.

"They also lend a sense of power. As part of a group, you feel invincible, and if you're one of the leaders, you're in the position of being obeyed."

She remembered confronting Rick in the basement, how the circle had closed around her. No one would have hesitated if he had given the order to kill. A chill shivered through her.

"He said Joey knows I'm looking for him."

Scott's eyes caught hers.

"He said Joey thinks it's funny."

"You're the one who'll be laughing when he's in jail."

She chewed at her lip. "Getting him behind bars isn't going to be easy. Even if we find him, all we have are suspicions..."

"Are you giving up already?"

The challenge had her eyes narrowing and her chin lifting. "We have to do more than figure out where he is."

"We have to catch him in the act—or with the goods."

She nodded. "I have some snitches who might help."

Scott grinned. "So do I."

Awareness shimmered between them again. Hotter this time, it made her pulse race. "Are you going to stay the night?"

Reaching across the table to catch her hand in his, he turned it over to use a finger to trace the lines running across her palm. "No."

Surprise had her jerking her arm back, but he didn't let her go. He held on until her gaze collided with his.

"You've had a hard day," he told her, and electricity snapped from him to her.

Crackling between them like a live current, she felt the power and understood it—and why he was backing away. It wasn't that he didn't want to be with her. He was just giving her space and time and a chance to make sure she was asking him to remain for the right reasons. "I still know what I want."

"So do I." Rising to his feet without releasing her, he brought her up to stand before him. "I want you wide awake and ready to rock and roll when the moment comes."

"You play music in bed?" she asked as he drew her into his arms.

"I play," he clarified and captured her mouth with his.

The kiss was a promise, and it shook her to the core. It also made her hesitate when she threw the lock behind him when he left minutes later.

His support and understanding were more than she could have hoped for. He was, and blowing out a shaky breath, she knew she was in trouble—and so was her heart.

Chapter Nine

THE TELEPHONE'S RING woke him.

With his eyes still shut, Scott grabbed for the cordless off the nightstand beside the bed and caught it on the first try. The accuracy of the blind snatch came from years of experience. "Yo."

"You awake?"

Recognizing Griff's voice, Scott peeled an eye open to look at the digital clock glaring at him from a couple feet away and the nightstand. It was five twelve a.m. "Yeah."

"You alone?"

"Uh-huh," Scott confirmed, rolling over onto his back to drag a hand over his face and stare at the hairline cracks in his apartment's ceiling.

"Too bad."

He could almost hear Griff's grin. "You're calling me because you're interested in my sex life?"

"I want happy employees."

"I'm happy."

"You won't be soon."

Dread dribbled through the blinds with the sunlight covering his window. "What happened?"

"Trouble in Pit Bull territory."

Rae's old neighborhood. Scott sat up and tossed the sheet covering him aside. No way was he going back to sleep. He was wide-awake now. "Joey John Jackson trouble?"

"The name came up."

Scott swore softly. "He moved back in, didn't he? He staged a takeover."

"It looks like he tried," Griff agreed grimly. "Shots were fired, some gang members are dead, and nobody's talking."

Scott stood to wander into the bathroom as naked as the day he was born, but when he stopped at the sink, it wasn't his image he saw in the mirror. It was the streets where blood spilled too easily and young kids gave up their lives too quickly over turf wars. "That's not a surprise. I'd be amazed if someone *did* say anything. It's going to take the cops a while to piece it all together and find out who won the battle."

"Is it going to take you that long?"

Remembering Rae and Rick, Scott could only guess at the possibility. "Maybe not."

"Your friend, Rae, went to see the Pit Bulls a few days ago."

"I know."

"Good, but did you also know she got called on the carpet about her visit by Dwyer the Dick?"

"Not again," Scott whined and once more wondered at the history between cop and bureaucrat. "He bust her chops?"

"He tried. She spit in his eye from the scuttlebutt going around, but she's *persona non grata* in Pit Bull territory."

Scott didn't say anything, and Griff put what he was thinking into words.

"She didn't mention the dress down?"

"No, but we had other things to talk about."

Griff sighed. "I'd ask, but I'm not sure I want to know."

Scott grinned, satisfied the secrets between he and Rae were all uncovered. "Don't worry, boss. I'm on it."

"Then why are you sleeping alone?"

Scott sputtered, and Griff's chuckle rumbled over the phone.

"Watch your six, and keep me in the loop."

The line went dead before Scott could comment. Sighing, he hung up, too, and set the phone on the shelf next to the sink. A fight with the Pit Bulls. He frowned and looked again into the mirror to run his fingers over the whiskers lining his jaw. Why go to war if Rick was going to join Joey?

Rick had told Rae he wouldn't be back. He wouldn't help her bring Joey down. That would imply Rick was going to link up with Joey instead, but the union didn't take. Or could the battle have taken place for other reasons? A territorial skirmish perhaps?

Turning from his reflection to step into the shower, Scott yanked the curtain closed and turned on the water. No, if another gang were involved, Griff would have mentioned it. That meant the only gang in the fight had been Pit Bulls, and that pointed to an internal conflict. Over leadership?

But why? Joey wouldn't be in LA to stay. He would just be around long enough to set up the network, wouldn't he? Scott paused in mid-scrub. Or was part of Joey's plan really to remain—to return to where he'd left off? Was he back to pick up his reins of power? Had he come home to retake what was his and thumb his nose at those who'd driven him out?

Joey knew what everyone else did. The only charges the DA could bring against him were drug related, and those

charges were old. Murder had no statute of limitations and the State would try to put him away for something so serious, but no one could pin a death wrap on Joey John Jackson. Therefore, it was doubtful the district attorney would even want to try to bring Joey in for lesser past crimes, especially when all the witnesses were dead.

The DA would have little chance of winning a case. Not when Joey would have the means and ability to hire a clever and very expensive lawyer to drag any trial out for years—and keep his client out on bail. The question for the prosecutor then became: Why bother?

Shutting off the water again minutes later, Scott pushed the curtain aside, grabbed a towel and glanced at the phone on the shelf. He could call Rae. She would be up. Probably getting ready for work, but what he knew, she would find out shortly. She would report for duty, and the morning briefing would fill her in on the details of any gangbanging the night before.

Stepping out of the tub and onto the bath mat, he reached for the medicine cabinet and his shaving cream. No, calling her would only be an excuse to talk to her, to hear her voice, and as he picked up his razor, he sighed.

He could have stayed with her the night before. He'd wanted to and she'd asked, but it wouldn't have been right. And he wouldn't have been sure she wanted him to remain because she cared or because she needed someone to hang onto after the day's events.

The meeting with Rick had shaken her. The past had come up and clobbered her right between the eyes, and the blow

had nearly knocked her down and out. She'd been staggering when he'd found her. She'd been drained and beaten until he'd propped her up again—and listened to her tale. All of it.

Running the blade down his cheek, he didn't doubt she'd laid herself bare to him. She'd finally admitted to someone the guilt that was eating at her soul. He doubted she'd ever told anyone else. She wouldn't have—perhaps she had been afraid to. Her friends, the people she worked with, were all cops. She wouldn't have wanted them to find out about her connection with Joey.

The difference in surnames with her sister would have protected her from discovery years before. The DA and the police covering the case when Vicky died would have assumed her name was Roth, too, or if they knew it wasn't, unless she told them, no one would have cared much. They would have been concentrating on Vicky and on what Vicky knew—on what Vicky took to the grave with her. Once they realized neither Vicky's mother nor sister could help them, they would have left her alone, and she would have been free to pursue her promise of justice.

Scott bent to rinse his face in the sink. Unfortunately, getting Joey to answer for his acts wasn't going to be easy, but Scott was ready to see that it happened. For Rae. To give her peace and closure. And for the kids who Joey hooked on dope or sent to their deaths on mindless gang missions.

Scott used a hand towel to wipe his face and hands and headed back for the bedroom and his dresser. He wasn't going to call Rae. Not yet.

At the moment he could tell her nothing. With a little time, some phone work and some legwork, by the end of the day, he could tell her more. They could make plans then. Set goals, lay out a trap, and wait for Joey to step into it.

A smile brought a tuneless whistle. If he was lucky, during the strategy sessions, maybe she'd ask him to stay again. Next time, he didn't plan on saying no.

* * * *

RAE SKIPPED DOWN the steps to the front door and hit the sunshine humming. A night's rest had revitalized and replaced lost energy, and coming clean with Scott had lifted a big weight from her shoulders.

She wasn't sneaking around on him any more. She wasn't using him. They were really working together. A team, and she couldn't ask for a better partner—in looks or ability.

Coming around the front of the Dakota, she reached for the door but abruptly stopped. Something was in the back. In the flat bed. Something she hadn't put there.

Suddenly cautious, putting a hand on the gun strapped to her belt beneath her jacket, she edged her way to the rear of the truck rather than risk sticking her chin over the side—and gasped.

"Rick!"

She hurdled the tailgate on a wave of adrenaline and landed beside him, but he didn't answer her cry. Curled on his side, his eyes were shut, and his blood was everywhere.

"Rick!"

He groaned when she touched him, and she pulled the cell phone from her pocket to punch 911. Snapping out her identification and her address, she hung up.

"Rick!"

His eyes fluttered open, but he was pale. Deadly pale, and blood continued to ooze through the fingers that clutched his stomach. "Rae..."

"Don't try to talk," she ordered, but he wouldn't listen.

"It was Joey, Rae. He found out..."

A cough doubled him over, and she frantically tried to apply pressure to the wound robbing him of life-giving fluid.

"Rick, save your strength." But one look at the slit in his skin that exposed internal organs brought sudden doubt as to whether he'd have enough strength to survive. Bile rose in her throat, and she struggled not to gag. "Rick..."

"He knew I came to see you."

The hoarse words made her heart stutter.

"He used you to try to turn..."

Rick coughed again, and she hung on to him as guilt hit her hard. She didn't have to hear the full explanation to understand what he was trying to say. Joey'd used Rick's visit to try to take over, to turn the gang members against Rick. It had, no doubt, resulted in a fight. Those loyal to Rick against those inclined to follow Joey. "Just hang on, Rick. Hang on."

He grabbed her arm. "Listen to me, Rae. Listen."

Dragged down beside him by a brutal and desperate grip, she did as he asked.

"You stop him, Rae. You stop him." Rick's teeth clenched over a wave of pain. "For Vicky."

Hearing the sirens coming, she covered his hand with hers. "For you, too."

In seconds the parking lot was a mecca of flashing lights. The ambulance came first, but it was rapidly followed by a squad car. A second squad came after it, and Rae stood aside with those in uniform as the paramedics leapt into action.

The cops on duty were familiar to her. They were from Pacific Station, too, the unit over Venice in hierarchy and where she attended roll call each shift. She quickly filled her comrades in as the two medics worked on Rick with frantic efficiency.

"I found him in my truck when I came out to go to work."

"You know him?"

"Yeah, his name is Marchetti. Rick Marchetti. He's from the Pit Bull gang. I saw him over there a few days ago. He told me this is retribution."

Sergeant Cal Hobson frowned as he stood beside her and watched Rick lifted from the bed of the pick-up and onto a stretcher. An easy six two, Cal's skin was burnished mahogany, and his knowledge of gangs was firsthand. He'd grown up on the streets. "Retribution for your visit to the hood?"

"Apparently Joey Jackson tried to tell the Pit Bulls that Rick was a snitch. It started a fight." Rae squinted up at Cal. "Anything go down last night?"

Cal sighed. "In the Pit Bull territory. Now we know why. This Jackson probably tried to stage a take-over."

The stretcher rolled toward the ambulance. Against the white sheets, she saw Rick was still conscious. He was getting

fluids. Professional aid. But would it be enough? Or was it already too late? Were they trying to save a dead man?

Regret washed over her. Guilt did. She'd asked him for help.

She stepped away from Cal and after Rick as another car pulled into the lot. Unmarked, she knew the two people who got out of it, too. Detectives. They'd have more questions, but she'd let them talk to Cal first. Striding to the paramedics as they were about to lift Rick inside, she stopped them and bent over the man laying on the gurney. "Don't you die on me, Marchetti. Don't you dare."

A weak grin was her reply. It gave her hope. However slim. He wasn't going to give up. He was still fighting.

The ambulance rolled away, sirens humming and lights flashing, and she watched it go until someone stopped beside her.

"He said it was Jackson?" Sandra Jenkins asked. Slim and blonde with brown eyes, she was in her standard uniform of pants, blouse and blazer, and a notebook and pencil were in her hand. She'd worked in homicide for more years than Rae had been on the force. She was also the detective Rae had talked to after her visit to the old neighborhood.

"He said it was Jackson," Rae confirmed.

"Retribution for your visit, Cal says?"

Rae nodded, not bothering to correct the assumption. Sandra didn't need to know about her second meeting with Rick. She didn't need to know Rick had come to see her the night before. Saying something about it would only complicate things and remove the focus from the

investigation from where it belonged. *On Joey.* It looked like Joey was back—and it looked like he wanted to stay. "He used me against Rick, saying Rick was a snitch, and it apparently started a fight."

Sandra wrote a quick note before slapping the notebook shut. "It did. It was a busy night in the Pit Bull neighborhood. The coroner is still counting bodies." She nodded after the ambulance. "You think Jackson had Rick knifed and dumped in your truck?"

"Seems like," Rae agreed and didn't doubt it. Rick hadn't said as much, but it was Joey's style. Joey liked to flaunt his victories, and this would be his way of telling her he was still laughing at her attempts to get at him.

"We'll ask around. See if the neighbors heard or saw anything. We might get lucky, and we might have more questions for you later," Sandra said and gestured to Rae's bloodstained hands. "You all right?"

The adrenaline was leaving her system and reaction was starting to make her nerves dance, but she was still standing. "I'm fine. Just late."

Sandra reached out to offer a reassuring squeeze to Rae's shoulder. "The watch commander knows why. Take your time getting in. Grab a shower, enjoy a few deep breaths."

Rae took one, appreciating the understanding and the support, and glanced down at her stained jeans. She'd have to throw them out. Rick's blood was all over them. She looked again in the direction the ambulance had gone. "Sandra, if Marchetti lives, do you think it'd be better if we let the world think he died?"

Sandra's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Why?"

"I'm just wondering if he would testify against Jackson. Aren't all the witnesses the DA had against him dead?"

"They are," Sandra agreed, telling Rae what she already knew. "And as I recall Marchetti was Jackson's former lieutenant."

Rae shrugged in apparent disinterest. "It could be he was only talking because he thought he was dying, but then again, he might know something helpful."

Sandra pursed her lips as she considered. "I'll kick around the idea with the commander."

"I hope it works out," Rae told the detective and meant it. If Rick lived, if he talked, if he testified, he might get that second chance. A lot of ifs and a big maybe. Given the opportunity, could a leopard change its spots? She wanted to believe so for his sake. She nodded toward her apartment building. "I better get cleaned up. I'll be at the station later if you need me."

Sandra offered a smile of encouragement and turned away to join her partner who was talking with the other uniforms on the scene. Watching her go, Rae sighed silent relief. She wasn't a suspect, and she wasn't in any trouble. Dwyer's spy catching her in Pit Bull territory days earlier was going to prevent that and save her from some harsh questioning.

Retribution for her visit was a believable motivation for Rick to be dumped in her truck. That should mean the investigation, as it involved her at least, was over. But the heat would be on Joey—and the flames would be higher than

he was prepared for. She was going to make sure of it because she knew something Sandra didn't.

Moving back to her truck, she found Cal beside it with a garden hose. "We'll wash it out for you once the detectives give us the all clear."

Her sigh of gratitude was heartfelt. Cleaning up after Rick wasn't something to be looked forward to. "Thanks, Cal."

"Don't mention it." He scowled down at her. "You okay?"

She nodded and blew out a breath to keep herself steady, but she was shaking inside. With knowledge and possibilities as well as from the aftermath of finding a man bleeding to death in the Dakota. "It's just a heck of a way to start your morning."

"I hear you." He nodded toward the apartment house's front door. "We'll wait until you get back before we leave."

Smiling appreciation once more, she headed inside where Sandra was already talking to one of the other residents. Slipping past them and into the hall, Rae jogged up the steps and hurried into her place where she stripped and jumped in the shower.

The blood came off easily enough. It washed down the drain with a little soap and water, but she scrubbed anyway. At her skin and at the guilt. For Vicky. For Rick. For all the other people Joey had hurt...

Abruptly she stopped rubbing the bar of soap over her stomach. Joey had hurt them. Joey had. Not her. She wasn't the one trying to cheat people, to hook them on drugs or pull them into a life of crime. She wasn't responsible for killing anybody. It was him. *Him!*

Slapping the soap back into its dish, she stood in the steam and the water and felt anger start to burn. Hot and bitter, it scalded. It also clarified.

She wasn't the guilty party. Joey was. Scott had been trying to get that through her thick skull the night before, but she hadn't wanted to listen. The blame was something she felt she needed to hang onto, but it didn't really belong to her. That burden rested at someone else's door. Joey's. And, at last, she was going to make him pick it up.

Banging back the shower doors, she grabbed a towel but strode out of the room without drying totally off. That she did as she went into the bedroom to yank clothes out of the drawers and closet and pull them on.

The cats stayed out of her way. It was as if they knew she was mad. They could feel the fury and the grim determination vibrating from her. Her mission to get Joey wasn't personal any more.. It was just necessary. He was a menace. A murderer. Slime.

In minutes, her still damp hair pulled back in a short ponytail, she was ready to go out again. She was ready to go to work, to do her job, but her mind was working on other things. On what Rick had told her and on what she hadn't told Sandra.

A knock sounded on the door. Fearing the detective had returned with more questions, Rae pet both cats, grabbed her gear and answered the call, but it wasn't Sandra outside. It wasn't a cop. It was the man she was thinking about finding, but he spoke before she did.

"It's not your fault."

Rolling her eyes at Scott who'd obviously heard about Rick via a police call scanner, she slammed and locked the door behind her. "I know that."

"You do?" he asked as she stormed off down the stairs. He rapidly followed, but she stopped him at the door.

Aware other officers waited outside, sure Sandra was somewhere in the building with her partner, she caught his arm and pulled him close to whisper. "I need to talk to you, but it can't be here or now."

He said nothing as she glanced outside, but he smiled. "Rick told you something."

She grimaced at his usual quick insight. "I forgot to mention it to the detectives."

A door opened on the next level, and he stepped back from her. "Bail Busters after work. I'll meet you."

She nodded silent agreement and pushed out the door as he scurried down the steps to the basement and laundry room. Yet out of sight wasn't out of mind.

Walking outside to give Cal a big hug and peck on the cheek—and grinning as the big black man blushed, she got in the truck and headed for the station thinking of Scott and of what Rick had said.

Guilt was something she should have felt for not passing on what she'd learned to Sandra, but sharing wasn't something she wanted to do. Not within the system. Not when those within the ranks were bound by the strict boundaries of the laws they upheld.

She needed someone who could operate on the edges of right and wrong. The ally she wanted was somebody who

could go in the door without knocking, who didn't have to report and coordinate and get permission from others to act—like Scott. And maybe Griff and David. She and Scott were going to need help if they were going to make sure Joey was taken down.

Hours later, after her shift was over, she got out of the truck to take the elevator to the tenth floor of the building that housed Bail Busters, Inc. Her determination to get Joey was still running high. Possibilities were circling around in her mind, scenarios that included premeditated plans to make Joey pay. Big time.

The car bell rang, the doors swished open, and she stepped out into the hall and toward the entrance of Bail Busters. In a hurry to see Scott, to tell him what she'd told no one else, she didn't waste any time. She burst inside, ready for action but was stopped dead in her tracks by a glare from a woman behind a desk.

With dark hair except for a single streak of gray running back from her forehead, she was big boned and had a stare powerful enough to fill Superman with envy.

Hesitating over a greeting, Rae felt her throat clog and her Adam's apple bob, but the woman spoke first.

"Are you Rae Grayson?"

It was more a demand than a question, and the innate authority with which it was made Rae's nod quick and respectful. "Yes, ma'am."

The woman whose desk name plate labeled her Tiny Broadway jerked her thumb over her left shoulder. "They're waiting for you."

Side-stepping the desk and the intimidating guardian behind it, Rae edged toward the first open door she could find and was relieved to see a familiar face just inside. "Scott."

Standing just out of sight, leaning against the jam, he quickly straightened to hold out his hand to her. "Rae," he greeted. "Welcome to our circus."

* * * *

SCOTT GRINNED AS he pulled her inside and watched her jaw drop in surprise. No doubt prepared to meet he, Griff and maybe David, Rae suddenly found herself surrounded by more than men—the entourage waiting for her included women and beasts as well.

"Let me introduce you," Scott said, staying close to offer reassurance when he felt her hesitate. "You already know Griff and David."

She nodded to Griff who rose from where he sat behind a big oak desk and to David who leaned against the far wall bordered by windows.

"This is CJ, Griff's wife. She's a bounty hunter, too," Scott explained the presence of the petite woman with chestnut hair who was seated in one of the chairs set before the desk. "The two mutts at her feet are Samson and Goliath."

"Samson and Goliath," Rae repeated and gawked at the woman and the two Rottweilers sprawled across the carpet while Scott tried to smother a grin.

"Delilah's at home with the puppies," he offered.

"Puppies," Rae echoed, and trying not to laugh, Scott saw Griff's lips twitch.

"This lovely lady is Christine Maverick, David's wife. She's an attorney."

"An attorney!"

In the second chair before the desk, blonde and beautiful Christine sighed at the exclamation and looked to David.

"Another lawyer fan."

"We love you," Griff assured her, and to Rae, "She keeps us out of trouble."

"She got me out of jail," CJ offered, and Rae looked to Scott in confusion.

"Do I want to know why?"

"It's a long story," he assured her. "I'll tell it to you when we have more time."

"Don't let us intimidate you," Griff said, gesturing her into the third chair Scott grabbed from next to the back wall to push her way. "We've just found that when it comes to figuring things out, the more brains present, the more ideas we get."

"We might need a lot of ideas," Scott told her. "Do we?"

She looked from him to each of the others. "Yes, and we're going to need help, too."

"Why?" Griff demanded before Scott could.

"I think I may have a way to catch Joey Jackson."

"Why tell us and not the detectives?" Griff's glare was narrow with suspicion, but Rae didn't flinch under his scrutiny.

"The same reason you're a bounty hunter instead of a cop. You can do things they can't."

"We don't do anything illegal," Griff qualified. "And we don't work for revenge."

"Good," Rae assured him. "Because I don't want revenge. I want justice."

Griff looked from her to Scott. "I knew I liked her."

Scott winked at Rae. "Tell us what you've got in mind."

She took a deep breath. "I want to hurt Joey John Jackson. I want to hurt him bad. Him and those he works for. Then I want to toss him in jail and throw away the key."

Scott shrugged acquiescence and looked to his boss. "Sounds like a plan to me."

Chapter Ten

"NERVOUS?" SCOTT ASKED Rae as he followed her into her apartment hours later. After meeting with Griff and the gang, the two of them had gone to get something to eat, but the meal hadn't done much to soothe the excitement and the hope he felt vibrating from her. The guilt for events of the past, at last, was gone, and he was glad.

"No," she denied, clicking on a light before scooping up Grumpy and then Dopey for quick hugs. "I'm not nervous. I'm wired."

He couldn't argue. Energy radiated from her in waves. "Adrenaline is a wonderful thing," he observed as she paced the room. "Except it usually prevents sleep."

"Sleep? Who wants to sleep?" she demanded and spun to face him.

Abruptly an electric charge exploded between them. Spitting and hissing for attention, it snapped with intimidating power, and he felt its sting. It made his stomach flip and his hands, in the pockets of his jacket, knot, but it only made her smile.

"There're other night time activities to be had."

The coy twist of her lips sent hot need shooting into his groin. Still, he managed to hang on to control as he stared back at her from across the room. "Such as?"

She licked her lips and nearly made him groan. "We could watch a movie."

He shook his head. "We'd never agree on what type."

"We could go for a walk."

"Why leave the comfort of home?"

She sidled toward him, hips swaying and eyes dancing. "I have one other idea."

"Yeah?" he asked when she stopped before him. The anticipation growing in his belly was akin to pain.

"Yeah," she agreed and, without breaking away from his gaze, leaned over to open the drawer of the end table. When she straightened again, she was holding a deck of cards. Popping them out of their box, she fanned them with intimidating skill. "Poker?"

Without so much as a blink, he shifted his shoulders so his jacket slid down his arms. He tossed it aside without bothering to watch where it landed. He was ready to play whatever game she wanted. "Five card?"

"Strip."

His pulse gave a giddy hop as she turned to sashay away, and he tried not to swallow his tongue. "Okay."

Dropping the cards on the kitchen table, she slipped out of her jacket, too, as he joined her in the dining room. "High card deals."

"You draw first," he encouraged, and in minutes they were in battle. In an hour they were both down to their underwear, and he liked the view. She had nice cleavage, smooth skin, and all that exposed flesh was making it hard to concentrate. Not that he cared if he won the game or not. He was in a win-win situation, and a man would have to be crazy not to like those odds.

"Full house," she announced and, as the chime clock across the room struck midnight, slapped her cards on the table.

"Royal flush," he denied her victory and sat back with a sigh. The way he figured it, she was down to the essentials. Two pieces of clothing. "Top or bottom."

"Which do you prefer?"

Desire shifted inside him at either possibility, and he was abruptly glad for the cover of the table to hide his growing interest. "You pick. I'll watch."

Her answering pout made it hard to sit still. The come-hither-don't-dither glow in her eyes made it difficult to remain seated. And she knew how to draw out the suspense.

Standing slowly, she stepped away from the table to give him a full frontal view as she lifted a finger to count out loud.

"Eeni," she said, pointing to her lacy bikinis. "Meeni," she went on, touching her bra. "Minie. Mo."

The bra. He nearly groaned out loud as her fingers settled on the front clasp. It snapped open, he held his breath, and she spun around to give him a back view.

Letting it slide slowly down her arms, she caught the white garment in one hand before raising and dropping it to the floor. She grinned at him over her shoulder. "Do I have your attention?"

"Absolutely," he promised and tried not to lick his lips.

"You know," she said, not moving. "This leaves us both with one item of clothing a piece."

"Uh-huh." Drool was threatening to run out the sides of his mouth. He managed to swallow. "One."

"Rather than playing any more and making one of us win and the other lose, we could just call it a draw."

"But whatever will we do for the rest of the evening?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something." Her fingers slid into the elastic of her bikinis. "Won't you?"

He was on his feet without knowing how he got there. He was behind her before her panties hit the floor, and she was in his arms a second later.

Hot flesh. Smooth skin. She smelled of sin and of flowers. She felt like molten lava, and she was making his blood boil. When she settled against him, pleasure rocketed through his body with a frightening roar. It made him tremble, but he wasn't afraid. He was hungry. For her.

Bending his head toward hers, she rose up to meet him—and was nearly consumed. The heat and strength of him was overwhelming. He overpowered, not with brute force, but with scalding passion—and she was prepared to burn.

Having waited all night for his taste, his touch, she wanted the flames. She wanted him, and wrapping herself around him, she moaned surrender even as he staggered against her assault.

Her hands were quick and greedy. Her mouth generous and clever, but he was ready to give as good as he got. He was prepared to conquer and capitulate. Yet, heart pounding inside his chest, he suddenly found it hard to think. He could only feel.

Her fingers dove through his hair. Her teeth nipped at his jaw, his ear lobes, his neck. She was driving him mad, but he wasn't going over the edge alone.

She shuddered beneath his caresses, arched against his strokes, and abruptly swore frustration. "Bedroom."

The one word galvanized him into action. Scooping her up, he nearly ran down the hall with her, but he couldn't see. She was kissing his eyes, his nose, his forehead, and how he hit the bed instead of the wall, he didn't know. Blind luck, but the frame wasn't prepared for the sudden weight.

Bucking as they hit, the support boards beneath the box spring gave a mighty groan, cracked and broke.

The bang as they hit the floor was deafening. It echoed through the apartment. It also, no doubt, woke the neighbors on the floor below hers. Not that he cared. And she didn't, either.

Giggling hysterically she rolled with him over sheets and pillows. "Someone's going to call the cops."

"Lewd and lascivious behavior," he assured her as she straddled him. "I plead guilty."

Grabbing his wrists, she pinned his arms to the mattress. "You're under arrest."

"Good. Please take me away, officer."

And she did. Dipping to kiss him, she started him down the path of insanity. With a skilled tongue and warning growls, she teased and tempted and tried to keep him in place, but he wasn't ready to let her have all the fun.

Wrestling free of her grip, he flipped and followed her into a crazy romp across the bed that pitted them one against the other. Chasing her, following the mood of playful exploration, the game was one of growing wonder.

For her, his body was an incredible melding of hard muscle, smooth flesh and occasional scars from harsh lessons learned. For him, her body was a mystery of soft skin, sinuous curves and intriguing valleys. He wanted to examine them all even as she conducted her own thorough investigation.

Yet, soon, touching wasn't enough. Seeing wasn't. Not when need was growing and the hunger with it. Deep and consuming, it sapped patience and demanded fulfillment.

"Now," she told him, wrapping her legs around him as he hovered above her, but if he was ready to answer her demand, if he was prepared to lose himself in her, something held him back.

"No. Not yet."

Hissing frustration, she tried to pull him to her, but it was his turn to pin her.

Catching her questing fingers, he pushed her back against the mattress and leaned forward to plant a kiss on her nose.

"No. I'm not done."

She tried to protest, but he swallowed her words with a mouth that robbed her of both speech and the capacity to resist. He wasn't going to give into her demands. He was only going to give her what he wanted—her satisfaction.

Gasping, she was helpless against his ministrations. Moaning, she trembled under his teasing fingers and shuddered against his astute touch. Each caress was devastating. Each stroke shattering, and his resourcefulness seemed never ending.

"Scott..."

His name was a plea, and he wanted her begging. He wanted her total surrender so he could, in turn, surrender to her. To his need of her. Bending to taste her mouth again, he settled himself over her. "Do you want me, Rae?"

"Yes."

Her response was a whisper, an intimate confession of longing, and the joining between them came on a sigh. No mindless plunge into passion. No insane race into oblivion. He led her instead into a linked lope to ecstasy.

She reached for and laced her fingers to his, and he held on until, as one, they leapt over the edge together.

* * * *

"DON'T LET ME fall asleep," Rae told Scott as they lay sprawled together. Hours of talking, napping, and making love were behind them. She was exhausted, elated, and disappointed that dawn was beginning to paint the sky.

Beyond the windows, the black of night was fading to gray. The time of quiet and intimacy shared was almost over, but she didn't want it to end. With the heat of his body warming hers, with the steady beat of his heart thumping in her ear as her head lay on his chest, she wished the night just past could be stretched out forever.

She sighed. It was a bad sign. Her regret. Liking Scott was easy and, she feared, so was loving him. Falling for him was something that wouldn't be too hard to do, and she was afraid the tumble might already have begun.

"Why shouldn't you sleep?" he protested. "You need some rest."

"I also need to go to work, and I don't want to be late again," she told him. "You've already made me late once."

"I did?"

"Yes," she admitted, seeing his teeth flash in the shadows nestled around them. "You don't have to sound so happy about it."

His fingers reached out to comb the hair back from her face. "Are you happy?"

She didn't try to misunderstand him. She knew he wasn't looking for compliments from the hours just passed. He was looking instead into her past and wondering how she was feeling about it. "I'm okay."

"You never should have blamed yourself."

She caught and entwined his fingers with hers. "I'll always wish..."

His grip on hers tightened. "Vicky made her own choices. We all do."

She closed her eyes briefly, reluctantly accepting the truth. Finally. "My mother never got over the loss. She died a few months after Vicky. It was as if she just gave up on life afterwards."

"Vicky was the favorite?"

"I don't know if my mother saw her as the favorite," Rae denied without malice, envy or condemnation. "I think it was just that I was older, and so she saw me as more responsible. When Vicky died, I guess my mother felt she'd already done all she could for me. Her reason for living any longer ended with Vicky's death."

Soft silence settled over them, but he broke it short minutes later. "I've wondered about my mother."

Rae stilled beside him, wondering, too, about the woman who had left a small boy behind. "Have you ever tried to find her?"

"I've thought about it. I figure she might want to know how I turned out, but then she might not or I might mess up whatever new life she found for herself by showing up on her doorstep unannounced."

Rae lifted their entwined hands to kiss the back of his. "I think she'd be pleased with you."

His grin was quick. "I'm pretty pleased with myself right now."

She didn't protest when he rolled to pin her beneath him. She just grinned, too. "Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah."

His mouth settled over hers, and she swallowed a sigh. He was what she wanted. Needed. The consequences didn't matter. A broken heart didn't. Not if she could be with him for however long he'd have her. Framing his face in her hands, she stared up at him. "Just don't make me late."

"Promise," he agreed, but she wouldn't have cared if he did, not when his lips melted over hers again.

The lovemaking this time wasn't a marathon run at a high pace. It wasn't a languid trip of exploration either. Instead it was a devastating dive into sensation ruled by tender touches, soothing caresses, and kisses of feather light understanding.

As she followed him down the road to oblivion once more, she saw the journey for what it was. A trip taken by two souls who, battered by life, found peace with and in each other. They fit, she and he. They fit perfectly, and when he slid inside of her moments later, for her it wasn't just a joining of two bodies. It was the union of one, and as pleasure rippled through her, she knew it was already too late.

It wasn't a matter of falling. It wasn't a tumble she needed to be wary of. She'd already tripped and was head-over-heels crazy in love with him.

* * * *

SCOTT STOPPED HIS Jeep outside the station house a couple hours later. "Are you sure you're going to be able to get some time off?"

"No problem," Rae assured him as she grabbed her knapsack from the backseat. Fresh from a shower, her hair was braided and still damp. No makeup adorned her face, not even a hint of blush colored her cheeks, but she didn't need it. When she straightened to look at him, she was flushed with life, and the strength and beauty of who she was made him want her all over again.

He reached out to pull her close and plant a possessive kiss on her mouth. "I'll be here to pick you up this afternoon."

She nodded and lingered long enough to run her fingers along his jaw. "Just don't be—"

"Late." He grinned. "I won't be."

"See that you're not," she ordered primly as she slid out the door, but the smile on her lips belied her tone as did the

glow in her eyes. Yet it was the little look she threw him over her shoulder, as if assuring herself he was still there or as if she needed to see him one more time, before she disappeared into the building that nearly did him in.

He sighed and lifted a hand to rub at the ache in his chest. Centered over his heart, it spelled trouble. Shaking his head at himself and at his whimsy, he reached for the shift and put the Jeep into drive. "You've got it bad, Logan."

But if he did, he wasn't too unhappy about it. Humming as he headed for downtown LA and Bail Busters, Inc., he figured a man would have to be crazy not to be a little nuts after spending a night with Rae.

She was wonderful, beautiful, and she'd nearly done him in during the hours after midnight. Laughter rumbled in his throat, though, when he thought about her bed. It wasn't only the base boards that had been broken. The headboard had been cracked during the crash, too—which meant he'd have to replace it for her. Something in brass maybe. Something that was shiny and classy like her.

Stopping as he ran into the early morning gridlock that always plagued the City of Angels, he drummed his fingers to the beat blaring from his radio and thought about Rae. She was some kind of woman. His kind, but glancing at the street around him as traffic started to move again, he gave himself a mental shake.

It wasn't the time to be daydreaming. Not about her or anything else. He had work to do. For her. He was going to help her catch her man—the bad man who'd messed up her life and the lives of so many others. He was going to make

sure that she took Joey John Jackson down, and he was going to enjoy doing it.

The trick to getting the ball rolling was in the coordination. Once at the office and then out of it again, his job was to accumulate data, sort it out and pass it on before gathering more up again. But he had help.

Griff and David went out to talk to the cops and detectives they knew, and CJ helped him hit the phones and the alleyways to chat with the snitches and paid informants. The result was pay dirt. By late afternoon, when they all returned to gather at Bail Busters, Inc. again to compare notes, the players and pieces to the game were all falling into place.

Rick Marchetti's names, numbers, and allegations had all been verified. What he'd told Rae while lying in the back of her truck bleeding looked to be the real thing. His tips were confirmed by everyone in the know. That meant they had the keys to start taking Joey's network apart one chunk at a time.

"You going back to get Rae?" Griff asked, walking with Scott out of his office and glancing at his watch late that afternoon. He knew her shift was about over.

Scott looked at his watch, too. "Yeah, and I better not be late."

Griff's eyebrows rose in mocking inquiry.

"Personal fetish for her," Scott confessed and stopped by the front desk for a sneak attack on Tiny. Her prickly front was hard to get past. She intimidated most, terrified some with her manner and her efficiency, but to him, she was just an old softie. Planting a kiss on the back of her neck, he

darted away as she growled and whirled in her chair to swing at him. "You have to keep the ladies happy."

"You do that," Griff told him and quickly held up his hands and retreated a step in self-defense when Tiny swiveled to glare silent warning at him. "Just don't forget to check in tonight."

"I won't," Scott assured him and headed for the Jeep and the station and Rae who, on first sight, made him do exactly what Griff didn't want him to. Forget. Everything but her.

Striding across the parking lot toward him, her legs were long and bare below shorts that left all that wonderful skin exposed, and her smile. It was all for him as she jumped in beside him, leaned across the seat and grabbed him by the shirt before fastening her lips on his.

When he came up for air, she was laughing.

"I've been wanting to do that all day."

"Yeah?" he asked, pleased with himself and her as she sat back to toss her knapsack in the back.

"Yeah."

"How was the beach?" It was hard not to reach for her instead of the gearshift, but he managed as Jodi walked past with an-all-knowing wink.

"Busy," Rae admitted when he got the Jeep rolling forward. "We chased down a pickpocket, arrested a drunk and disorderly, investigated a break-in, broke up a fist fight and that was only what happened during the morning. You?"

"My excitement was limited to tracking down a few snitches, coordinating with Griff and the gang and thinking about you."

Silence echoed briefly through the cab. "You thought about me?" she finally asked and, not looking at her, as he navigated through traffic, he nodded.

"Yup, and I thought about your bed, too."

"Really?"

Ignoring the humor in her voice, he turned the corner toward her apartment building. "I want to buy you a new one."

"Mine's not big enough?"

"No, it's built too low to the floor."

Her laughter echoed over and rippled through him on a wondrous wave.

"What? You like sleeping at eye level with your cats?"

"No," she denied as he bounced the Jeep into her apartment's parking lot. "But being eye level with you has a certain appeal."

He shut off the engine and sat back to look at her. "You think?"

"Hmmm."

Awareness shimmered between them, but rather than react to it, he enjoyed sitting still in it with her. He liked being with her almost as much as he liked touching her, but he didn't have time to wonder about what that meant. Not with the sun slipping from the sky. "We're on for the night."

Not breaking eye contact with him, she sighed understanding. "What Rick said..."

"Should pan out. We won't know for sure, though, until we get through the end of the week."

She chewed at her lower lip. "I've got the time off. Captain Crockett wasn't too happy."

"Jodi either?"

"They think I'm up to something."

Scott grinned. "You are."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Nothing illegal."

"You're walking the line."

"It must be the company I'm keeping," she sniffed, and he reached for her hand.

"I've got some bad news."

Her fingers trembled in his.

"Marchetti didn't make it."

Her grin surprised him. "Yes, he did."

"I called the hospital, Rae"

"I talked to the detectives who talked to the DA, and Rick's only dead on paper on the chance he'll talk trash on Joey."

Her shoulders moved. "They don't know if he's going to pull out of this. He's on the critical list, but he's still alive."

Scott let her hand go to brush her cheek. "Smart girl."

"That's just one of the things you like about me."

When she pulled away to slip out the door, he was quick to follow and to worry, briefly, that she was right. He liked a lot of things about her, and he wasn't sure that was entirely a good thing—or bad either. Just unsettling somehow. He caught up to her and threw an arm around her shoulders as they approached the door. "What else do you think I like about you?"

"My chocolate chip cookies."

Taking the key ring she pulled from her pocket, he used it to let them inside. "Got any left?"

"What do I get in return?"

"I already offered to buy you a new bed."

She rolled her eyes at him before starting up the stairs.

"You're a real romantic, Logan."

"I can be romantic," he protested when they reached her door. He shoved the key in the lock. "I've been known to sweep women right off their feet."

"I'll bet."

She started to walk past him when he pushed the door open, but he caught and yanked her into his arms. "I'll prove it."

His kiss took her breath away. Just him touching her did. He could stop her with a smile, but if he made her knees knock and her heart skip, he wasn't immune to her either. She gave as good as she got and felt him tremble.

He wasn't sure where she began and he ended. When she wrapped herself around him, it wasn't to cling but to melt into him. She was liquid nitrogen ready to explode against him, and he welcomed the detonation—even if he wasn't sure he was ready for it. Or her.

When he finally lifted his head from hers, it was a moment before she opened her eyes to blink up at him. It was a moment more before she spoke. "Point taken."

Yet as she slipped away to move into her apartment to greet Grumpy and Dopey, he wasn't quite sure what he'd proven. She seemed quite steady on her feet while he, on the other hand, stood on shaking limbs.

Following her inside to close the door, uncertainty rattled through him. It couldn't possibly be that he was falling in love. No way. He was attracted, yes. Intrigued, fascinated even, by Rae, but it would pass. It always did probably because he wasn't ready yet.

Not for commitment, home, family. That was somewhere in his future. His distant future.

He was sure of it.

Wasn't he?

Chapter Eleven

IT WAS DARK inside the van. Quiet, too, but Rae liked the silence—and the security of Scott's presence.

After leaving her apartment earlier, they'd met with Griff and David and CJ and a few other hunters from the Bail Busters staff. The lone attorney in the crowd, David's wife, had stayed in her office. Her presence wasn't necessary in the conference room, but Christine Maverick's legal skills could be needed in the long night ahead. She might be required to bail one, or more, of the rest of the group out of a cell.

Yet if running into trouble or facing danger during the approaching evening was likely, none of the bail enforcement agents at the session had showed signs of worry or fear. On their faces she had seen only determination.

Most of the bounty hunters who worked for Griff were ex-law enforcement. A couple were ex-military, but that mix was typical. She knew that the statistics showed the majority of those who became skip tracers were ex-cops, in their forties and usually male. That at least three of those at the meeting were women was a rarity she liked along with the fact that all the hunters were young. Being part of Bail Busters was being part of a unique group of dedicated individuals who enjoyed making sure those who belonged in jail went and stayed there.

Glancing down the alley where she and Scott were parked, she shifted in her seat that was comfortable despite how the van looked from the outside. Battered and rusty and victim of

a bad paint job, the vehicle's ramshackle appearance was one that allowed it to fit in anywhere. No one would see it as a threat. It was the perfect cover for a stakeout, and the interior made up for what the exterior lacked.

Behind the smoky windows were padded seats up front, a small refrigerator and a couple seats with a table bolted to the floor in back, and the rear end also offered empty space. There was room to stretch stiff joints if need be, but she was happy to be sitting still.

Griff and David and the others got what she thought was the harder part of the night duty. They were out infiltrating Joey's territory, looking for Joey's pushers and making sure each and every one of them got picked up.

The crackdown was being coordinated with the police and vice squads throughout the city—a feat Griff accomplished without her or Rick's name being mentioned.. Instead Griff took the heat on himself and Bail Busters when he passed on the information received from a "reliable source."

Griff's reputation and background brought official sanction to the push for arrests, and while it would seem the effort was city-wide come morning, once dawn came again, others would know the pickups were more specific. Others like Joey.

A shudder trembled through her. A combination of anticipation and anxiety, it reflected her own uncertainty. Joey wouldn't crumble easily. His network wouldn't break overnight, but it could stutter. The hard part was going to be keeping the heat on.

As more arrests were made and the crackdown continued, the pickings would get thin, and it would become harder to

grab anyone associated with Joey John Jackson. When the word got out—and Joey would sound a warning—his pushers would start hiding in anticipation of the crunch blowing over. That was where she came in. She and Scott. It was up to them to get inside information. It was up to them to get a link into Joey's inner sanctum so they could keep the pressure on.

"There."

Scott's quiet observation echoed through the van and made her heart skip, especially when she saw the movement in the shadows, too, and recognized who it was. "It's two of Rick's. Two of the Pit Bulls."

"We need to get them both."

She nodded, understanding it wouldn't do for one to get away. An escape could cause an alarm to be sounded or it could cast suspicion on whoever was left behind once that person was released again. She and Scott couldn't risk either scenario. "I'm ready."

Scott led the way out of the back of the van. The carpeting muffled their footsteps, and the well-oiled hinges insured their exit into the alley went unheard.

Rae slipped out into the darkness to stand beside him in hushed silence. The two approaching gang members didn't know they weren't alone in the alley. They didn't know anyone was looking for much less laying for them.

She held her breath and listened. Shuffling steps drew closer, muttered conversation grew louder. She glanced at Scott, caught his slight nod and braced herself. When he jumped, she did, too.

Surprise was their ally. The two boys were unprepared for an attack. Not when they were deep in their own territory, and muffled exclamations were all they were allowed before both were swiftly handcuffed and tossed into the back of the van.

When the doors were pulled shut, the swearing started. It was laced with fear, and Rae knew that was good. Terror was an excellent motivator.

Staying out of the way as Scott stepped over their captives to the front of the van, she waited while he jerked heavy black curtains closed. The heavy drapes separated the front of the vehicle from the back. It also blocked out all light filtering in from the windshield. The result was total darkness and immediate silence. The only sound to be heard in the van was shallow breathing—until Rae snapped on a lamp.

Set on a small table beside one of the chairs, the glow illuminated her face where she sat even though the bulb was directed at the boys.

The resulting gasps were expected. Tony and BJ recognized her instantly. Who they didn't know and couldn't see was Scott. He stayed deep in the shadows. Her back-up, he gave her the intimidation she needed.

"Hi, guys. Remember me?"

Their sharp oaths said they did, and she nodded approval.

"I see that you do."

Tony spat in her direction. "You're the one who got Rick killed. You turned him into a snitch."

She lurched forward to grab him by the tee shirt. With his hands cuffed behind him, he was helpless to fight back, and she shoved her face into his. "Do you believe that?"

He didn't answer, and she pushed him away again.

"If you do, then you're not who and what I thought you were—a loyal Pit Bull."

"What do you know about being a Pit Bull?" BJ demanded, his bravado loud, but his eyes were large and very white in his dark face as his gaze darted nervously around the van. He was wondering about Scott, about her, about why he and Tony had been grabbed.

"I know anyone who believed in Rick wouldn't—not even for one second—think he would become a snitch."

Tony glared at her. "I know it."

Rae smiled. His defiance testified to his faith in his former gang leader. "Good." She turned to BJ.

"He knows it, too," Tony objected for his friend's sake. "He shed blood to prove it."

For the first time, Rae noticed the white bandage wrapped around BJ's upper arm. Mostly hidden by his baggy tee shirt, she'd missed it earlier. "I'm glad. I'm glad someone stood by Rick because he wasn't a snitch."

Tony and BJ eyed her with an equal amount of disbelief and distrust.

"You know why I went to see him," she told them. "I didn't make any secret of it, and I won't tell you Rick didn't come to see me. He did, but the only thing he told me was that he couldn't help me."

"That's what I said," Tony declared smugly and earned an elbow in the ribs from BJ.

"What? You don't believe me?" she asked BJ, leaning closer. "You think I'm lying?"

"I think you're a stinking cop who don't got no right to be snatching us like this."

She sat back to spread her arms in askance. "What? You don't get it yet, BJ? I'm not here as a cop. This guy behind me isn't a cop. We're not here for the two of you. We're here for Joey John Jackson."

Tony and BJ stilled to share nervous looks with each other, and she turned to Scott who remained in the black confines of the van and out of the reach of the light as she pointed at the two boys.

"Of all the gang members I have to pick, I have to grab the two who are rocket scientists. I told Rick and I tell them I don't give a damn about them or being a cop, all I want is Joey, and no one ever buys it. Why is that?"

Scott, as expected, didn't answer, and she turned to Tony and BJ again.

"Did Rick explain to any of you how we came to know each other?"

"He told us that you punched him when he tried to feel you up in high school," Tony relented reluctantly. If he wasn't being arrested, he wasn't quite sure why he was in the van, and his curiosity was getting the better of him—a good thing for she and Scott.

"Yup," she confirmed. "He did, and he only tried it once." She crossed her arms across her chest and sat back in the

chair to look from Tony to BJ and back again. "But he didn't say why I want Joey?"

Both shook their heads.

"He killed my sister."

Two sets of eyes widened in surprise.

"Joey knifed her just like he knifed Rick." Fury bubbling, she sat forward again. "Joey knifed Rick, didn't he?"

Silence echoed.

"Didn't he?"

Her shout echoed off the van walls and made both boys flinch, and they flinched again when she abruptly stood.

"Don't you two get it?" she demanded, hovering over them. "This isn't about justice. It's about revenge!" She grabbed Tony by the shirt once more. "How about it, Tony? Do you want revenge for Rick? Do you want Joey to pay for what he did?"

BJ cowered as she turned her wrath on him.

"Or do the two of you not care about Rick? Maybe you don't care who comes in and takes over the Pit Bulls." Disgust gurgled in her throat. "You two make me sick. Get them out of here."

"Wait!"

The cry came from Tony as she whirled away, but if she was happy he called her bluff, she was slow to turn around and face him again. Had she played the right cards?

"What do you want from us?" he asked when she was looking at him once more.

"I want Joey," she said and dropped to squat before them. "I want to hurt him like he hurt me and my sister and Rick. I want him to pay."

"I want him dead."

She lifted her eyebrows to stare at BJ. "Yeah? What'd he do to you?"

"He messed with me. He messed with the Pit Bulls. He's got us fighting each other, and he's letting the other gangs move onto our turf."

She nodded understanding. Gangs were all about territory. It's what the kids shed blood for no matter how young they were. Loyalty to the gang was at their core. "Okay," she said. "So you want him gone, too. Can we help each other?"

"I ain't no snitch," BJ denied.

She rolled her eyes. "I don't want a snitch. I want a couple of partners on the inside. I want someone who can get close to Joey and tell me what he's up to and who he's doing business with because I don't want him to go down fast. I want to take him down an inch at a time. I want to take the money out of his pockets, make him bleed, and squeeze him until he can't breath. Then I want to go get him."

"And punch him up like you did Rick," Tony suggested.

"No, I want to hit Joey a lot harder."

"What's in it for us?" BJ asked, suspicion still strong even if interest was peaking. "If we help you, what do we get?"

"You get the territory back. You get to pick your own leader, and you get the satisfaction of seeing Joey pay for getting in your way." She watched the two boys look at each other. "Can the two of you do what I want without getting

caught? Are you smart enough not to let Joey find out what you're up to?"

"We can do it," Tony declared, and BJ nodded.

"Good, because if you try and fail," she told them. "He'll kill you both."

"He can try," BJ spit, and she smiled satisfaction.

"Then we have a deal."

* * * *

"WHAT DO YOU think?"

Scott looked to Rae as they remained together in the back of the van. They were alone. Tony and BJ were gone, armed with a mission and spurred on by thoughts of revenge. They would ingratiate themselves with Joey, allow themselves to be pulled under his wing—and sell him down the river. "I think you're a hell of a salesman."

Her laugh in the dark was uncertain. "I don't want them to get hurt."

"They're in a world of hurt," he told her and sighed. "As long as they're part of a gang, the chances of their living until they reach twenty are ten to one, and you're not going to convince them to just walk away from it."

"I wish I could."

"If wishes were fishes..."

He could almost hear her smile in the blackness uniting them. "We'd have plenty of food to eat, I know."

"You okay?" He was worried about her, about the toll the chase after her sworn enemy would take even if it wasn't

strictly personal any more. She'd given up her guilt and vigilante plans.

Her sigh echoed to him. "I'm fine. Just tired. Playing the bad cop takes a lot of energy, and I didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

"Somebody keep you up?" he asked and reached out to find her in the darkness. He caught her on the first grab, and she didn't resist the tug that rolled her into his arms.

"Somebody broke my bed."

He swallowed her smile with one of his own. "Maybe I could go home with you and take a look at it."

"Maybe."

When her arms circled his neck, he found himself drowning in her, and it would have been a simple thing to take her down to the floor to finish what he wanted to start. But he couldn't. Pulling back to rest his forehead against hers, he kept her close. "We better check in."

"I suppose." Still, she didn't move. Neither did he. At least not right away.

"They're probably waiting," he finally said and managed to shuffle his feet.

"Do you think we can move the van?"

"Tony and BJ have been gone long enough," he told her and felt confident he was right. No one had paid the van any attention over the last hours. It wasn't likely anyone would whether they stayed or went.

"Okay. Let's go find out if we have Joey's attention yet."

He got the van out of the alley and back on the streets. The news on the phone was good . At the office, helping to

coordinate efforts, Christine reported the long night was paying off. With Rick's tips combined with the knowledge of undercover operatives, the cells at the various station houses were filling up.

The police might not know they were picking up those involved with Joey John Jackson, but the detectives and squads were pulling Joey's people in with helpful feedback from Bail Busters personnel who were stationed in Joey's areas of operation. Yet the battle was just beginning. The war was, and the skirmishes were endless.

* * * *

TWO DAYS LATER, Scott nearly groaned when he briefly peeled open an eye at noon and found the sun's rays pounding through the panes onto the floor where Rae's mattresses still lay. His grin was automatic. The last forty-eight hours hadn't given up any time for them to try to reassemble the battered bed rails or go shopping for a new set up. Still, he wasn't ready to complain. The old box and springs were serving them just fine.

Without moving to look, he felt her beside him. Her legs were tangled with his, and one of her arms was thrown over his ribcage as he lay on his side facing the edge of the bed. Contentment rumbled through him.

Lovemaking wasn't automatic when they hit the sack. With the hours they'd been keeping, sometimes they were too tired to do more than lie down and sleep. Either way, he found comfort in coming home with her—a concept he still wasn't sure he wanted to examine too closely. Yet he couldn't deny

the two of them fit. When he was with her, he didn't have to entertain or feel the need to impress. He just was, and she just accepted.

That was what he was prepared to do. Accept—for as long as it lasted because happily ever after wasn't a concept he wanted to find just yet. There were still things he wanted to do, places he yearned to go, and being tied down would prevent him from reaching those goals. Although with Rae...

A soft thump on the mattress made him open his eyes once more, and he found himself nose-to-nose with Grumpy who was no longer running from him on sight. She was standing still, and Scott was flattered by her trust.

He lifted and held out a hand for the small feline to sniff and was pleased when she arched her back under his palm for a caress. Too, he could feel her body vibrate with a humming purr, and he understood, at last, he was considered to be okay.

"Thrown over for another female already."

Scott didn't, at Rae's mumbled comment, stop petting Grumpy who flopped on her side next to him for a continued massage. "She likes me."

"She has good taste in men."

"You think so?"

"Fishing for compliments so early in the day?"

Hearing Rae's voice, Grumpy rose to climb over him to get to Rae, and Scott followed the cat's example. Tousled from sleep, gray eyes still heavy with fatigue, he thought Rae looked good enough to eat so leaned forward to claim a sample. "About time you woke up."

"How late is it?" she asked when he lifted his head again to stare down at her.

"From the glare, after noon. It's kind of hard to see the clock from down here."

Rolling her eyes from him and up to the clock on the nightstand above them, she nodded agreement. "Yeah, it is, isn't it?"

He took advantage of her distraction to nuzzle her neck. "Hungry?"

"I could eat."

"I'll go get the chocolate chips."

She burst out laughing and pushed him away. "Cookies for breakfast?"

He nodded. "The breakfast of champions."

She rolled out of bed and grabbed for the robe at the end of the mattress. It was the signal for Grumpy to take off out of the room and down the hall to the kitchen. "I want something besides sugar for breakfast."

"I'm available," he offered, enjoying the view of smooth skin and soft flesh before it was covered up. He swallowed a sigh. "Want to shower?"

"You go first."

"We could share."

"I have to get breakfast."

"I could wait."

Heading for the door, she threw him a lewd wink. "You're going to have to."

Hopeful for a chance of changing her mind later, he hit the bathroom for a fast scrub before joining her in the kitchen

where the cats were already chowing down. The coffee was bubbling by the time he stepped into the room, and the toast popped up as he grabbed a cup from the counter where she'd left it for him. "Perfect timing."

"I like that about you," she told him as she grabbed the food and he poured the brew. "You're punctual."

"I aim to please." He turned to hand her a cup and found her waiting with a piece of toast. He opened his mouth to accept her offering, and she smiled.

"You do."

"Flattery," he told her as he chewed. "Will get you just about anything you want." And she wanted something. He could tell by the shadows in her eyes. "What's up?"

Sipping from her mug and moving to stare out the window over her sink, she shrugged. "We haven't heard from Tony or BJ."

"It's only been two days."

She drummed her fingers on the counter. "I just wish they'd call."

"They will."

"They're going to have to if we want to keep the heat on."

He didn't comment because he knew she was right. They were beating the bushes now. Some damage had been done. Joey had to be feeling the pinch from the loss of trustworthy hands to pass his dope, but he wasn't really hurting yet. That wouldn't come until they could get to his sources, and that was one lead Rick hadn't given them. Still the coming weekend held possibilities. "In a few more days, we're going to rock his boat."

Her smile was quick and lacked humor. "I'm looking forward to it, but I still wish Tony or BJ would call."

Abruptly the phone rang, and Scott lifted an eyebrow at her. "You psychic?"

"It's probably Griff looking for you," she protested, but as she reached for the instrument, he knew it couldn't be. Griff wouldn't ring him up on Rae's phone. He'd use Scott's cell number. The call coming in was personal—and just what she was looking for. "Tony."

The one word had Scott shoving paper and pencil across the counter to her.

"You're sure?" she asked and frowned as she listened some more before scribbling down what looked like an address. "Yes, I've got it. Be cool."

She hung up, and Scott held his breath.

"It was Tony."

"And?"

"Joey's set up a lab." She ripped the top piece of paper off the pad. "This is the address."

Scott took it from her and nodded confirmation at the location. "It's a warehouse area. Perfect for what he wants."

"There's more."

Frowning, Scott looked up and saw the flush of excitement in her face. "Joey?"

She nodded, and her smile was wide. "He's going to be there tonight."

Chapter Twelve

IN THE BLACK of night, Rae felt her heart pounding in her chest. It was so loud, she was surprised the others huddled in the darkness with her couldn't hear it. Yet they gave no indication of noticing the slow, heavy beats drumming against her ribs—a steady rhythm that wasn't matched by the uneasy and rapid rat-a-tat-tat of nerves dancing just under her skin.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to quell the shivering anticipation vibrating through her. It was making her crazy. It was making it hard to sit still, but she couldn't move. She couldn't give in to the anxiety—or respond to the words echoing over and over again in her mind. *Joey was coming. Joey was coming.*

Muscles twitching, she briefly squeezed her eyes shut and tried to close out her thoughts, but calm avoided her. Tension did not. It coiled in her stomach, pulling tighter and tighter with every second that passed, and drove her to look at her watch. Again.

The luminescent dial said only a minute had passed since the last time she'd looked. Sixty lousy seconds. Her teeth ground together in silent agitation. She wanted to do something. She wanted...

Suddenly a hand reached out of the darkness. Warm and strong, it gave much needed reassurance—and sanity.

She looked toward Scott in the night, but she couldn't see his face. Still he was attuned to her. Sensing the mixture of apprehension and determination racing through her veins, the

gentle squeeze of his fingers said he understood her fear. Her hope. And his touch did for her what she couldn't do for herself. Settled her where she sat—where they all sat—outside Joey's new meth lab.

The building didn't look like much from the outside. In fact, it looked much the same as all the other buildings huddled around it. Old, weather-beaten and weary. Regardless of its age, however, it stood strong against the night, and its walls were solid barriers that hid the activity going on inside. The illegal activity.

She frowned. Finding and dismantling the labs that processed and packaged the drugs smuggled into the country was a priority for anyone involved in drug enforcement. If no one was putting the crack, meth, and smack into marketable form, no one could buy and use it, but hunting down the makeshift labs wasn't an easy task. Not when they could be set up anywhere and could be of any size.

Large enough to fill a garage, small enough to fit in a back room, complex enough to clutter basements or to completely encompass the interior of any empty building, the scope of the lab depended on who was running the operation and how much productivity they were after in cooking up their evil brew.

For the small time con artist, any place would serve the purpose. A bathtub, a kitchen sink. But Joey. He needed something like the warehouse she and Scott and members of law enforcement were surrounding.

Smug satisfaction made her lips curve. At last she was going to strike a blow that would really hurt him, really make

him stumble and, better yet, this hit would shake the faith of his suppliers. Especially if Joey got caught in the trap.

Her lips thinned. But could it be that easy? Could years of waiting be over in one roaring rush of the Los Angeles Police Department on a broken-down building? It seemed an anti-climax, but it was a possibility she could live with. She wanted to see Joey behind bars. She figured the cold metal would look good on him when she was standing on the outside of his cell.

The sudden glare of headlights slashed through the night, and instinctively she ducked even though, in her position, she wouldn't be spotted. Not easily at any rate, and the same went for the others waiting with her.

Staring over the top of a crate, oblivious to the smell of rotting garbage hanging in the air, she watched five people pile out of a big four-by-four. It had stopped at the warehouse's front door, but the lack of illumination prevented her from identifying any of the group. She couldn't tell if one of them was Joey.

The quintet disappeared inside. Less than a minute later a quiet order echoed down the line. The waiting was over. The watching was. People had come and gone for the last few hours, but enough was enough. It was going on midnight, and the unexpected arrival of a group of unknowns dictated it was time to move in.

Melting out of the darkness as one, the circle of men and women representing uniformed officers, plain-clothed detectives and a trio of bounty hunters closed in on the warehouse. She, Scott and Griff were the outsiders. They

were along because they'd supplied the tip and so were to collect any bounty on any skips snared in the trap, but their civilian status kept them from being on the front line.

If she wanted to be one of the first in the door, it wasn't to be. Yet at least she would get to go inside. She wasn't relegated to those who had to remain outside.

She didn't envy those left to try to catch anyone who might bolt and run when the showdown came. The warehouse had a lot of doors and a lot of windows. Escape would be difficult to prevent, but once the spotlights came on, the darkness would no longer be their quarry's ally. The net being tossed would be easier to keep tied shut.

She and Scott came together with Lewinski and one other officer from Pacific Station at a side door. They weren't the lead team. They wouldn't make the initial charge. They would merely echo it and kick their way inside when the call came—and it abruptly shattered the night.

A shout, an answering cry, and the furious roar of an angry gun.

Big Lew hit the locked door with a beefy shoulder. The wood was no match for his weight or his determination. The hinges gave way under the assault, and the momentum of the collision carried them all inside and into pandemonium.

Men were yelling, people running, and hot lead was whistling through the air. Rae ducked, dove and rolled as those with her scattered. It was everyone for themselves.

Spotting a shooter taking aim toward the front door, she leveled her own weapon and fired. A howl echoed, and a table filled with glass collapsed when her target fell onto it.

A motion to her left and across the room made her swing to aim again, but she was too late. The runner took a header out a window in search of freedom.

Pulling back, she watched two others make a mad dash for the stairs across the room. Why they were headed for the upper floor, she didn't know. Going up wouldn't get them out. Yet up they went, and following the progress of one would-be escapee, she saw him. *Joey*.

He stood at the railing. His face was a cold mask of composed fury. The gun in his hand was a black instrument of death—and it was pointed at Lew.

"No!"

Only feet from her, Lew jerked his head up at her shout. It didn't matter. Joey pulled the trigger.

The impact sent the big man flying backwards, but Rae was already swinging to provide cover and protection. Joey didn't get a chance to shoot again. Not before she started to fire.

Her first bullet split wood. Smashing into the railing, it made Joey duck. Her second plowed past the banister to whistle past his ear. Her third had him running, and she chased him until her clip was empty and he was out of sight.

Swearing, she didn't know if she'd hit him. He fell back and beyond where she could see so it was impossible to tell, but the odds were in her favor. Fifteen pieces of lead in a wide spread said chances were good she'd caught at least a piece of him, but she had no time to find out for sure.

It would be for the uniforms charging up the steps to do that and haul him in. She had to see to Lew.

Automatically replacing her spent clip for fresh, she ignored the tail end of the battle, the shouts of surrender, and Joey, to lunge over boxes and debris to get to Lewinski. He was out cold, but her fingers found a pulse in his neck. "Lew!"

He didn't answer. He didn't move, but a quick search uncovered no blood—just a hole in the front of his uniform where a bullet had passed through it and into his Velcro vest.

"You son of a bitch!" she yelled at him, using her free hand to grab and shake him. "You scared the hell out of me!"

He groaned, and Scott suddenly appeared beside her. "You okay?"

"Yeah, but Lew took a round to the chest." She looked up at the second floor railing where police and suspects were now mixing. "Joey."

"You sure?"

She nodded, and he sprinted off toward the steps. She wanted to follow, but she couldn't. For some reason her hands were suddenly shaking. Her body was. Trembling like a tenderfoot in the aftermath of reaction, she could only watch Lew blink back into consciousness.

"What happened?"

"You were shot, you big idiot."

A meaty hand settled over his chest where the bullet hit, and he groaned again. "Damn, that hurts."

She rolled her eyes and swallowed the abrupt urge to cry. "Yeah, well, don't expect any sympathy from me. You took ten years off my life when I saw you go down."

"Ah, he's too dumb to die," Griff declared, stepping over a box to reach a hand down to his friend. The chaos was

settling into order. Suspects were being rounded up, and handcuffs were being slapped onto wrists. The worst was over. "Can you stand?"

She helped him get Lew to his feet where he swayed until they propped him on a crate. "You want me to get a paramedic?"

"Hell no," Lew wheezed. Pain was in his face, but he wasn't going to admit to it. Glancing from Griff to her, he frowned. "You're not thinking of leaving the force to join this clown, are you?"

Relief shuddering through her, she leaned over to kiss Lew's cheek. "And leave you alone?"

Griff caught her eye and nodded toward the second floor. "You get what you were aiming at?"

"I hope so. Scott's checking."

"Let me know," he offered in silent understanding and leaned over to pull Lew on his feet. "Come on, big guy, like it or not you're going outside to let the medics look you over—unless, of course, you'd like me to give you a kiss, too."

"You do and you die," Lewinski snarled and winced as Griff led him away.

Knees still knocking, she didn't try to follow but stayed to take refuge on the abandoned crate. She needed a minute to recover, a few seconds to think. Had she taken out Joey? Was the war over?

Scott reappeared beside her. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She brushed his question aside with a wave of her hand. "Just tell me. Did I get him?"

Scott held up blood-stained fingers for her to see. "You got part of him."

She jerked her head back to look upstairs. "Is he dead?"

"He's not up there."

"He's not..."

"At least not on the landing," Scott hastened to reassure. "But they're still looking. We've got bodies and people everywhere."

And they did. Finding her feet again, she stopped to look at the turmoil around them. Lew wasn't the only officer shot, and the other side had casualties, too. In people and in wares. Her jaw dropped as she took in the size of the lab and the drugs amassed for sale in it. "Scott..."

"This one's going to make the morning papers."

She didn't doubt it, but as time passed and suspects were rounded up, she did doubt their success. Joey wasn't among those in handcuffs. He wasn't going to jail.

Standing outside as squads, ambulances, and unmarked cars slowly began to leave the scene, Scott put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "You hurt him, Rae. Personally and professionally, and we're not done with him yet."

"No," she agreed. Another weekend was coming. Rick's revenge was coming with it. "No, we're not."

"So, what do you want to do now?" he asked, pulling her with him toward the shadows and his Jeep. "It's late. You want to go home?"

"I couldn't sleep," she protested, hanging onto him and liking the familiar bump of his hip against hers as they walked.

"Good because I know something else we could do."

His declaration made her grin. "Do you?"

He stopped with her by the front bumper. "Any objections?"

"None," she told him, and she didn't. Not when he kissed her and not later when she wrapped herself around him bed. He was what she wanted, what she needed. In his arms was where she wanted to be, and as he slipped inside of her to take her over the edge once more, she wondered how it had happened. How had she fallen in love with him? When?

She couldn't be sure. From the moment they'd met, he'd stirred something inside of her, but if she couldn't name the exact moment, it didn't really matter. Only he did.

He who'd come out of nowhere. He'd who'd taken her by surprise—by storm—and stolen her heart. Yet if he'd slipped into her life silently and without warning, when he left, he would shatter her world with his parting.

When he collapsed beside her to pull her close, a quiet tear of joy and sadness slid down her cheek. He was hers for the moment. He was hers for a little while at least, but he was a rolling stone. He had no roots and never mentioned planting any. A free spirit, he wasn't ready to roost—not that she'd thought she was either. Not until him.

Enveloped in his embrace with his heartbeat echoing in her ear, she held on to him and on to hope. If she was careful, she could make it last. If she didn't cling, didn't push, didn't let him know how she really felt, he wouldn't be in a hurry to leave, and when he did, if she was careful, he would never know he broke her heart in two.

* * * *

"WHERE'S RAE?"

The demand came over the phone the next morning, and Scott recognized the voice. It was BJ. He turned to hold the receiver out to her where she stood at the sink, elbow deep in dishwater. "BJ."

Suds splashed as she grabbed the towel off her shoulder to wipe her hands before reaching for the phone. "Yeah?"

Scott watched her scowl as words echoed incoherently over the line. He couldn't make out what was being said, but Rae could.

She huffed indignantly. "I did *not* miss him. Whose bullet do you think Joey caught?"

Scott grinned as a whine of disbelief came over the line, and she made a face.

"Yes, that was me who shot him. I probably got him in the ass as he ran for the door."

Coughing on a laugh, Scott snatched the towel from her to meander over to the sink to pick up where she'd left off. He didn't stop to think about how comfortable he was with doing domestic chores with her, and he didn't stop to consider how easily the two of them had fallen into a routine over the last few days. Some things didn't bear too much scrutiny. He liked things the way they were so, to his way of thinking, the why of it didn't matter.

"Oh, is that all?"

He looked at her over his shoulder and nodded when she mouthed the word "arm."

"You can tell him the word on the street is that Rae's real sorry he got away, and that she's looking forward to meeting him again."

Scott rolled his eyes. She did know how to tempt a man.

"Yeah? And?"

Silence hung in the kitchen as she listened, and he scrubbed the dishes they'd dirtied together.

"All right, I'll work on it. You keep your ear to the ground and your head down." She grunted at the response she got. "Later."

Scott eyed her over his shoulder again when she hung up and loitered thoughtfully by the phone. "You hit him in the arm?"

"Yeah," she conceded and sighed before wiping at the wisps of hair floating around her face. The strands had escaped from the bun she'd woven and pinned to the top of her head. The style made her look more vulnerable somehow. Maybe because it accentuated her eyes. Gray pools of fascination.

"And?" he prompted, looking for details.

"Upper arm, and I guess he's not too happy about it. Or the bust." Her grin was just short of malicious. "Too bad."

Continuing to wash as she leaned back against the counter with her arms crossed in front of her, Scott waited, knowing there was more.

"BJ says something big is happening this Saturday, but he hasn't been able to find out what."

Scott's eyes met hers. "Rick was right then."

"So it seems." Her teeth caught her lower lip. "I guess he's still hanging on."

"Stubborn."

"Rick never lacked for tenacity." She sighed and cocked her head at him. "You know, you're kind of cute in dishwater."

"You think?"

"Oh, yeah," she said, sidling up behind him to slip her arms around his waist. "You look good wet."

"You should see me in the shower."

"I have."

"Want another peek?"

"I thought you said Griff wanted us to do some work today."

Scott sighed. "Yeah, I guess he doesn't think I'm earning my keep."

"Naw, he just wants me to prove my meddle."

* * * *

HOURS LATER, THEY drove down the street with a skip safely cuffed in back of the Jeep, Scott found he liked having Rae as a partner. She was quick. They understood each other without speaking—a rare thing considering they really didn't know each other. Or did.

It was weird, but he couldn't remember ever being more on the same channel with someone than with her. It was like she knew what he was going to say or do before he said or did it, and she was an open book to him, too. He scowled in uneasy reflection. It was scary, their "in tuneness," and it

reminded him of some other bounty hunters he knew. Husband and wife bounty hunters.

A chill shuddered through him, and in the passenger seat, Rae looked his way. "Someone step on your grave?"

"Naw, probably just a premonition," he denied and nearly choked. A warning portent of the death of his bachelorhood? He dragged a hand over his face. He was getting too much of her and not enough sleep. That's why he was starting to hallucinate about marriage.

He nearly shuddered again but squashed it. Still, the idea of marital bliss lingered, and he nearly groaned out loud. If he was thinking about wedding bells, things were getting out of hand. Or were they?

Glancing at Rae again, he struggled with the possibility, but he was afraid it might be a losing battle. After all, when he'd first met her, he'd pegged her as trouble with a capital T.

* * * *

SATURDAY DAWNED PEACEFULLY enough, and Rae found herself alone as noon came and went because Scott had gone home to change—and pack some clothes.

Her lips curved. Score one for her side. It was a good sign, him bringing his stuff over to her place. It meant he wasn't indifferent to her. She shook her head as she wandered out of the bedroom. He said it was "for convenience," but looking around her apartment, she was beginning to believe she might have a roommate soon.

The phone rang as she passed the cordless where it lay on the table. Grabbing the instrument, she tossed herself on the couch as she hit the receive button. "Hello?"

"I hear you've been looking for me."

She bolted up on the sofa, and disbelief made her stammer. "Joey?"

"Hey, you remember my voice—and after all these years."

Her lips curled back on a snarl. "You are unforgettable."

"And uncatchable."

She smiled. "How's the arm?"

"That was you?"

His surprise was her delight. "I was a little off center that day. Sorry."

He chuckled. "Still holding a grudge?"

"What? You think it bothered me that you killed my sister?"

His tongue clicked. "That was never proven."

"Are you going to admit it to me now?"

"I have nothing to confess."

"That's because you have no soul—or heart."

"Rae," he protested. "I have no heart because you stole it from me years ago. You never would have done me like Vicky did."

"No, I would've blown your brains out instead of turning you into the cops."

"Still sweet on me, aren't you?"

"So sweet I'm wondering when we're going to meet again," she taunted. "How about we set something up for old time's

sake? We can catch up on where you've been, what you've been up to—besides slicing up Rick to get your old job back."

"He went to see you."

"He came to see me to tell me to kiss off, and you know it," she spit back. "Rick was a lot of things but he was never a snitch."

"He was a coward. When I took Vicky from him, he never even blinked."

"He was young, and he trusted you."

"He didn't have the balls to fight."

"He had the balls to take over when you tucked tail and ran."

"I didn't run. I retreated."

"To do your dirty work in San Francisco and San Diego ... JJ?"

"I'm flattered, babe. You've been checking up on me."

"I've been waiting for you to come back."

"I'm here now."

"So am I. When and where do we meet?"

"I don't know if I'm ready for our showdown yet."

She hissed. "Who's the coward now?"

"Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me. See you around, Rae."

The phone went dead, but that didn't stop her from screaming into it. "Joey!"

The dial tone answered.

Swearing, she punched in the code that allowed her to call back the party who'd buzzed her last and waited as the phone began to ring. Once. Twice. Three times.

She jumped to her feet to pace. And wait—and stalk to the caller ID module to see what number was listed. None.

Grumpy and Dopey ran from the room on her violent oath.

But, suddenly, the ringing stopped. "Sorry, Rae. Joey can't take your call right now. He'll catch you later."

The phone went dead again, and she nearly sent it sailing across the room. Good sense restrained her. Rational thought did as logic kicked in to overturn emotion.

Joey was playing with her. Goaded her. He wanted her crazy and careless. Just like she wanted him angry and reckless. When riled up, people didn't think straight, but she wasn't going to let him win this time.

If Joey wanted to play hide and seek, fine. If he wanted to play cat and mouse, so much the better. She was ready for the game, and she was ready for something he was not. She was ready to make off with his cheese.

Chapter Thirteen

"I DON'T LIKE IT."

"What's not to like?" Rae demanded of Scott. They were in his Jeep, on the way to the docks, and she was beginning to regret ever telling him Joey had called because he'd done nothing but harp on it ever since.

"He knows where you live."

Striving for patience, she gritted her teeth. "Of course, he knows where I live. Otherwise he wouldn't have dumped Rick there."

"But..."

"If you're worried about him wanting to hurt me, he could and would have done it long before now if he'd wanted to, and he hasn't."

"That doesn't mean he won't change his mind."

"What if he does?" she demanded. "I'll cross that bridge if and when we come to it, but I still say if he was out to get me, he would have done it already so let's just forget about it."

Scott's fingers drummed in silent consternation against the steering wheel. "I can't forget about it."

Throwing her hands in the air, she turned away from him to look out the passenger window at the sidewalks they were passing, but at nine o'clock at night there wasn't much to see. Not that she was looking. She was steaming. At him.

"Look," he determinedly continued the argument. "What could it hurt if you came to stay at my place for a little while—just to be on the safe side?"

Huffing indignance, she swiveled in her seat to glare at his profile. "Scott, read my lips. Don't worry about it. After tonight it will all be over. This is the big gig. We are going to get him."

"There's no guarantee Joey's going to be at the drop tonight. None, and if he isn't or if he gets away again, he is going to be plenty pissed—and the person he's going to be pissed at is you."

"Yeah, and I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

She could almost hear him gnash his teeth together in the dark. "You don't mind if I help?"

She sniffed. "No."

"Fine."

"Fine," she echoed. "So are we done with this? Because if we are, you need to hurry up or we're going to be late."

"We are not going to be late," he growled, but his foot put added pressure to the accelerator anyway because neither one of them wanted to miss out on the night's events.

Of all the things Rick had told her while laying in the back of her truck bleeding to death, of all the names passed and tips given, the coming exchange of drugs for money was the highlight.

To try to swing Rick to his side, Joey had bragged about a coming shipment, and as an incentive to regain loyalty lost, Joey had promised Rick a cut of the distribution. Unfortunately for Joey, his sale pitch was going to help pitch

him right of business. The coming seizure could put a nail in the coffin of his operation, and that's exactly what she wanted to see happen.

Already Joey was feeling the pinch from the loss of dealers and the arrests for possession, but he wouldn't be worried about the police crackdown. The pressure couldn't last. He knew it, and he'd lived through the cycle before. Besides, he could always find someone else to move the drugs—or to buy them.

The breakdown of the lab was another matter. Just moving into the territory, getting the lab set up and running smoothly would prove to his suppliers that he was in control. The raid would indicate otherwise. Yet bad things happened, and Joey had a good track record as far as his suppliers were concerned.

However, if the shipment coming in was grabbed, if hundreds of thousands of dollars of drugs were confiscated by the police, Joey was bound to fall out of favor. It would look as if he was stretching too far, moving too fast, becoming too careless, and his suppliers wouldn't like that—and that was her goal.

Joey under fire. Joey unhappy. Joey hurting and on the run—because chances were good then that he'd make a mistake.

Los Angeles Harbor, when they arrived, was a busy place, but that wasn't unusual. Day or night ships were coming and going, and workers paced the piers and docks. This particular Saturday was no exception as Scott parked and she moved with him into the dark.

Making their way through alleys and passageways to the pre-arranged rendezvous, she was the first to enter the building designated as the jumping off point for the sting operation, and a quick glance around testified to the eagerness to wage war. Most of the players were already in place.

Police in uniform. Police out of uniform. Undercover operatives, plain clothes detectives. All were ready for a bust that could make all the effort and time fighting the war against drugs worthwhile.

Griff was present again, too. He was wandering the room and touching bases with the cops he knew—which was just about everyone—with a skill any politician would envy, but once the action was due to begin, he, along with she and Scott, were put on the sidelines. Yet again, they were back-up. They were civilians who were being allowed to participate simply because of their background and their knowledge—they were the reason the arrest was about to happen.

"You think our pal Joey's going to show?" Griff asked as, after a briefing a short time later, the three of them edged out into the night once more to take up their positions.

Hunching her shoulders inside her jacket at the damp darkness around them, she shivered. Despite all the glamour of television and movies, stakeouts weren't fun. They were tedious, the waiting was most often done in uncomfortable conditions and success was never guaranteed. Yet she wasn't worried about the outcome of the evening as she quirked an eyebrow at him. "It's his show."

"But he's one of the walking wounded."

Griff's protest came with an appreciative smile, and she gave him a toothy grin in return. "Does this mean I'm hired?"

"Considering you bagged two other skips with Scott this week, I think you might make the cut." Griff looked to Scott. "You two make a good team."

"She's okay to work with," Scott grumbled, and sensing the lingering irritation with her refusal to leave her apartment, she loudly sighed reluctant acceptance.

"He'll do in a pinch."

Griff cleared his throat, sensing the trouble rumbling between his two employees. "I think I'm getting out of the middle of this lover's quarrel."

Watching him slip away into the night and in the direction of Lewinski, who was back on the job, had gone, she followed Scott to their designated hiding place—a tight space between boxes—and took a seat next to him on a hard crate. "Are you going to stay mad at me all night?"

"You're too stubborn for your own good."

"And you're not?" she demanded, reminding him of the argument they'd had the day before, but with two strong wills under one roof, they were bound to clash. Yet compromise was something they'd managed, proving they could both give as well as take in their relationship in order to maintain peace.

His hesitation was brief. "Not that anyone's noticed."

Laughing lightly, she leaned forward to plant a kiss on his cheek. "You're okay, Logan."

The minutes crawled by into hours, but the wait was something she'd expected to endure. Needing to be in place

well ahead of time to neutralize the risk of being spotted by Joey or whoever was working with him, she figured it was a small price to pay for the positive outcome that could come out of the night. Still, as her watch indicated the appointed rendezvous was drawing near and no activity appeared at the designated spot, anxiety began to finger her skin.

"Don't let me down now, Rick."

Her whispered plea was something Scott didn't respond to, but a few minutes later he pointed to a car making its way down the docks. Dented with time and mileage, it drew no attention from the workers at the various sites along the water line, and when it stopped in the shadowy blackness next to a building, nobody gave it a second glance.

Holding her breath, hoping against hope, she watched as seconds ticked past with agonizing slowness before a door finally opened, and someone got out. It was impossible to identify who it was—or to recognize the second person who climbed out from the other side. The blackness was too complete, and the two stayed in the shadows as did the figure who melted out of the night to join them.

Too far away to do more than watch, prevented from even trying to get closer by orders it was necessary to obey, frustration skittered down her spine as she waited for a signal that would allow her to act. But it didn't come. As Scott vibrated beside her with the same desire to charge, out-of-sight money and blocks of white bricks changed hands, and when the deal was done, the police moved in.

It was a silent assault. Quick and clean, it was followed by the sudden glare of spotlights and accompanied by a yell of command to surrender.

Not a shot was fired. No one was hurt. No one tried to run away. There was no point. Surrounded, caught red-handed, four men were pulled out of the building and taken into custody with their illegal contraband.

Shouts of victory spread elation, but disappointment came rapidly on its heels when she ran forward with Scott. None of the men wearing metal bracelets were Joey. The wily Joey John Jackson hadn't risked his own neck to bring the goods in from his suppliers.

Cursing fate and him, she stared at the men being read their rights and fought the desire to weep in frustration.

"Hey, you're supposed to be happy," Lewinski told her, joining she and Scott. Red lights flashed off his face and off the buildings huddled around them. "We got our guys."

"An anti-climax," Scott offered when she didn't speak, and she was grateful for the understanding arm he put around her shoulders.

"Yeah, this was pretty quiet after the other night," big Lew agreed and touched a hand to his chest. "Not that I'm complaining."

"Much pain?" Scott asked, and as Lew grimaced, she forced herself past the futility of losing Joey to the fact that no one had been injured during the bust.

Lew moved his shoulders in easy dismissal of the bruises she was sure lie under his Velcro vest. "Just in my ego. I

never cared much for getting knocked on my ass ... and speaking of"

Following Lewinski's stare along with Scott, she hissed when she spotted a civilian in the crowd. "Dwyer."

"The one and only," Lewinski confirmed and grinned.

Beside her Scott stared across the lot to where her nemesis stood. "He doesn't look like much, does he?"

She snorted derision at her so-called superior.

"What is the story with you two?"

"He just doesn't like me," she grumbled, and Lew laughed.

"The man wants to know why, Rae. Tell him why Dwyer thinks so much of you."

Her gaze bounced off Scott's, and she shuffled her feet against his open curiosity. "It's nothing personal. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Doing what?" Scott asked, obviously determined to hear the story, and she sniffed resignation.

"He was my first ticket."

"Ticket," Scott repeated and glanced from her to Lew who was beaming from ear to ear.

"It was my first traffic stop, actually," she admitted as he dropped his arm to pull away and look down at her.

"She caught him speeding," Lew clarified when she didn't cough up the details. "Fresh out of the Academy, who does she stop for breaking the speed limit but..."

"The Deputy Chief of the entire Western Division of the City of Los Angeles Police Department?" Scott asked in disbelief. "You've got to be kidding!"

She shook her head, waffling between embarrassment and righteous indignation.

"You gave him a ticket?"

"I didn't know who he was," she protested. "Besides, it shouldn't have mattered. He was breaking the law. He just wasn't big enough to take it like a man."

Scott looked to Dwyer again, and she followed his gaze.

The Dick was walking around, shaking hands and smiling and clapping people on the back. The night's success was going to make him look damned good in the press come morning, and her lips curled back in a silent snarl at his earning and being given credit for what others deserved.

"So he holds a grudge," Scott observed.

"Oh, yeah," Lew agreed and abruptly stiffened. "He's coming this way."

Rae swore under her breath, and Scott was suddenly backing away, sensing what she knew. If the arrest had been quiet, the coming meeting wouldn't be. Whenever she linked up with Dwyer, sparks flew, but Dwyer ignored her to hold out a hand to Lewinski.

"Good job, Lew."

"Thank you, sir," Lew accepted and swallowed a grin as Dwyer, with obvious great reluctance, faced Rae.

She met his disapproving glare with a raised chin, daring him to take his best shot.

"You're out of uniform."

She shook her head in denial. "I'm not on duty."

"Then why are you here?" he asked, lifting his arms to cross them over his chest as if to ward her off. She did the same.

"I could ask you the same question." She heard Scott and Lew suck in their breath in unison but kept her attention centered on her enemy. "But seeing as you asked, *sir*, I'm here because I'm the one who gave the police the tip about this little exchange."

Dwyer blinked as if she'd slapped him and looked to Lewinski who provided confirmation.

"She did, sir."

Scott stepped into the fray. "Scott Logan of Bail Busters, Inc.," he said in way of introduction and greeting. "I can assure you that she is the one who brought us all here tonight."

"I didn't know," Dwyer managed to mumble while looking around for some avenue of escape.

"Now you do," she told him, liking the nervous dart of his eyes. She had him on the hook again, and he was squirming.

Scott slapped Dwyer on the back. "You're lucky to have her. Why, she even helped us track down that lead for the lab bust earlier this week, too."

Surrounded, confronted with a truth he couldn't back away from, Dwyer cleared his throat and reluctantly dropped his arms to offer her his hand. "Good job, officer. Keep it up."

Rae accepted his grip and his hasty retreat with a grin. "The guy just can't stand it when I'm right," she observed watching Dwyer go and swallowing a whoop of satisfaction.

"No, he cannot," Lew agreed and gave her a high five.
"Way to go!"

"Hear, hear!" Scott agreed, exchanging hand claps with she and Lew, too. "And I think we should celebrate. How about a beer?"

The impromptu party was loud and long. Everyone who didn't have to go back to the station to book the arrestees was up for participating, and the first bar of ill repute they came across when leaving the site was where they settled in. Camaraderie echoed off the walls as toasts sounded and drinks were passed, and when she and Scott left just after three in the morning, others remained to continue the merrymaking.

"You're a star, babe," he told her as he led her toward the Jeep with his arm around her shoulders. "Even Dwyer loves you."

She laughed. "I wouldn't go that far. That ticket was only our first piece of history."

"What else did you do to him?"

Tucked against Scott, she wound her arm around his waist to nestle in close. They made a nice fit, she thought. "I didn't do anything to him. I just hit a car with my squad once."

"Not his."

"His wife's."

Scott choked on a laugh. "Minor infraction."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

He let her into the Jeep. "I didn't say you did, but you and he seem to be on the same magnetic field—you attract and repulse each other at the same time."

"Maybe," she agreed and heaved a loud sigh when he climbed in beside her. "I'm tired."

"Let's go to my place then. It's closer."

Just leaning her head back against the rest to close her eyes, she blinked and scowled in the same instant. The argument was back.

"And you've never seen it."

"If you've seen one bachelor's pad, you've seen them all," she dismissed with forced levity. "Besides, Grumpy and Dopey are at my place, and they need to eat."

"You left food out when we took off," he protested, and she closed her eyes again, determined to win the last round of the match.

"And it's gone by now. They need food."

Silence filled the cab, and she could almost hear him debating how to change her mind. He gave in on a disgusted breath. "You're a hard person to get along with."

"Then don't come home with me."

"Are you kicking me out?"

The alarm in his voice made her smile. "Do you want to be kicked out?"

"No!"

"Then leave it alone, and let's go home!"

"Fine. Home it is." And standing in her living room half an hour later, he realized home it was. Home was where she was, and he was fooling himself if he thought otherwise. He wasn't just nuts about Rae Grayson. He was in love with her, but did she feel the same? Could she?

Watching her yawn as she came out of the kitchen from where Grumpy and Dopey chowed down, his heart stuttered in his chest. He was out of his league with her. Out of his depth. But he caught her to him when she came to wrap her arms around him. If he was going to drown, he'd be happy to go under as long as it was with her.

"You know," he told her. "I don't want you here because I worry about you."

Lifting her head from his chest, she smiled up at him. "You mean you'd miss me if I suddenly disappeared?"

He grabbed her by the shoulders to shake her harshly. "Don't even say that."

She reached out to soothe. "I only meant I'm glad if you would because I'd miss you, too."

Mollified but terrified nevertheless—of the possibility and of the overwhelming flood of feelings suddenly rampaging inside of him. "Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah."

Her lips under his were soft. Pliant, and so was her body beneath his hands. She was all he wanted, needed. She danced with him down the hall to the bedroom.

The beat they followed was slow. The tune of passion wasn't rock and roll but more like easy listening. Mellow blues. Quiet jazz, and the notes didn't inspire the need to rush. Rather, it was time to savor. Every touch, every kiss, every heartbeat. Each was precious. Overwhelming. Entrancing.

Falling onto the mattress with her, he was consumed by the need to learn about her all over again. He wanted to

rediscover the curve of her hip, the supple length of her limbs, and he wanted to ignite once more the fire in her soul. For him. Because he was humming with desire. For her.

She belonged to him. He wanted to tell her so, but he was afraid to put it into words. He didn't dare. Not when she was skittish.

She had been since meeting him. Relationships weren't her strong point. Not that his were particularly long-lasting either. Or they hadn't been. Not until her. With her, he could wish for forever, and if he couldn't say it, he could at least try to show her how he felt.

His touch made her tremble. The tenderness of it did for she understood what he wasn't saying. But did he? Did he know how deep his feelings were? Or was he only acting on instinct? And did it matter if he knew his own motivations yet or not? It didn't to her, but the hope his actions gave did. The hope for the future.

He might not walk away. He might not leave. He liked her, he worried about her, and he cared what happened to her. Perhaps more than he realized—perhaps as much as she wanted him to. As much as she did for him.

Yearning to give as much as she received, her fingers traced the hard ridges of his back, the flat plain of his stomach and guided him inside when she opened herself to him.

"Rae." Her name was a whisper, a plea as they became one, and she answered by wrapping her legs around him.

"I'm yours."

"Mine," he agreed and carried her out into the wild surf of oblivion.

She splashed into the water with him, waiting for and riding the wave when it came to sweep them away. They hit the crest at the same time and, crying out together, limply floated back to the shore of satisfaction where they lay entangled. Satiated. United.

Rolling to wrap her against him, he pressed his lips to her forehead. "Stay with me, Rae."

"I'm here. I'm here for you," she hastened to assure, and tears burned her eyes when he kissed her again in a way that made her soul tremble. Pressing her cheek to his chest, she blinked back the moisture and waited until he slipped away from her and into the land of dreams. Only then, as dawn came to paint the sky, did she whisper the words she wanted to say. "I love you."

* * * *

THE RINGING OF a phone woke Rae, and beside her Scott stirred. When he peeled one eye open, she groaned at the insistent whine of a cellular. His. "Yours," she muttered.

Swearing, he rolled and promptly fell off the mattress and hit the floor. His curses were black against the sunlight streaming in through the window. It looked to be about high noon, and he sounded as if he was ready to do battle at the OK Corral.

Biting her lip as he struggled to his feet and stumbled out the door in search of his jacket and the cell phone inside it, she waited until he was out of sight before laughing. The

sound brought Grumpy and Dopey running for scratches and pets, which she gave before jumping into the shower. Yet if she expected Scott to join her, he didn't.

Minutes later, shampoo and washing done, she was still alone. Puzzled but not alarmed, she stepped from the tub to dry off before donning the beat-up robe he'd left hanging on the door. In it and with wet hair hanging around her shoulders, she reentered the bedroom to find him sitting on the mattress with his back to her. He was just putting the phone aside.

"Problem?" she asked when he didn't move or speak right away.

"No." He heaved a sigh. "But I have to go. Griff is at the office waiting for me."

"Hot skip?"

"Maybe," he agreed and glanced over his shoulder at her. "Want to come?"

"You going to be long?"

"Don't know."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "I think I'll stay. I have to do exciting things like laundry. Maybe I'll even go shopping for a new bed."

"Uh-uh. We do that together," he denied and, when she approached, pulled her down beside him for a long kiss. "I wish I could stay."

"Me, too."

He made a face and tugged on her hair. "A fast shower, and I'm out of here."

"I'll make coffee." Slipping into jeans and a tee shirt, she got the pot going, but the brew wasn't done by the time he joined her. "Sorry, you're too fast."

Glancing longingly at the liquid dripping into the glass bowl, he shrugged. "Can't wait. You sure you don't want to come?"

Understanding what he was trying hard not to say, she leveled a narrow-eyed glare on him. "No, and I'll be fine."

"You'll lock—"

"The doors and the windows and cower here until you return," she promised as she pushed him toward the door, but he wasn't going to be distracted from his worry.

"This is serious, Rae. Joey isn't anyone to mess with."

"I know that better than most."

He reached out to tuck some hair behind her ear. "Just don't forget it, and don't open—"

"The door until I know who's on the other side." She rolled her eyes as he stepped into the hall. "I know. I will. Now go."

"You're—"

"Go!"

Her pointed finger sent him toward the stairs where he stopped to look back at her. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"You better hurry because I'm making more cookies."

His grin was lightning bright and as quick. "I'm going to have to get you to marry me."

"You should be so lucky," she taunted and held her breath when he hesitated and something vibrated between them. Something raw.

"I'll talk to you later."

It was a minute before she could find the strength to close the door. *The look in his eyes.* Had she imagined it? She shook her head and went back inside and to the bedroom to start stripping off the sheets. It was a more trying task than usual considering she had to crawl around on the floor to get it done, and she was just standing when a knock came.

Glancing at the window and the clock on the nightstand, she shook her head and dropped the sheets to stride to the front door. "All right," she said, reaching for the knob. "Enough is enough, Logan. You don't have to test me to make sure I do what I'm supposed to—"

But the man smiling at her from the hallway wasn't Scott. It wasn't anyone friendly. It was Joey John Jackson, and he had two men flanking him. "Rae, it's so nice to see you again."

Chapter Fourteen

SCOTT GOT OUT of the elevator on the tenth floor rubbing the back of his neck. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, and his thoughts kept drifting to Rae.

All the way from her apartment to downtown, he'd been itching to call her. Every time he got caught at a stoplight, the impulse had been to pull the cellular from his pocket and ring her up, but he hadn't.

Cursing himself for ten kinds of fool, he had ignored the sense of unease crawling down his spine, but when he pushed through the glass doors of Bail Busters, he couldn't ignore the subconscious urge any longer. Muttering an oath, he yanked the phone out and punched the numbers, and Griff came out of his office to catch him in the act.

"What? You can't be away from her for five minutes, and you have to call again?"

"Don't start with me," Scott growled and wished he could shake the sense of dread hovering around his heart. "I'm worried about her."

"Why?"

The phone started to ring, and he nearly sighed relief. "Because Joey Jackson called her."

The smile left Griff's face. "When?"

"The afternoon before the raid," Scott grumbled and scowled. She wasn't answering. The dread strangled the breath from his lungs.

"And you left her alone?"

The demand had him swearing. "She's not picking up." But he strived for calm. "She said she was going to do laundry." He hung up. She'd have to leave the apartment to get to the washing machines in the basement. That could be why she wasn't grabbing the phone. He met Griff's white-eyed glare. "I told her not to let anyone in and not to go anywhere."

"And she obviously listened."

"The machines are downstairs."

"What if she got a call from one of her sources?"

"She'd call me before doing anything."

"You're sure of that?"

"I'm sure of that." Scott paced the office. She would call. If she could, but what if she couldn't? He punched redial.

"You two are getting close," Griff observed, but if humor lingered in his gaze, concern did, too.

"I told you not to start," Scott objected, but she still didn't answer. He snapped the cellular shut. "We're in trouble."

Ready to trust Scott's instincts, Griff wasn't one to panic. "Go back to the apartment. Check. Call, and we'll go from there."

He didn't need to be told twice. Scott was out the door and flying down the stairwell to the underground garage and his Jeep in a second flat, but the drive was torturous. Even on the weekend, the traffic was murder, and the analogy wasn't lost on him. Or the fear it brought.

By the time he hit her parking lot, the redial button on his phone was nearly worn out, and the terror tickling the back of his throat didn't ease with the sight of her truck. It was still

parked where she'd left it the day before. She wasn't out. That meant she should be picking up to take his calls.

Racing into the building, clutching the extra key she'd given him, he found he didn't need to use it when he reached her front door. It was already standing slightly ajar. The sight made his heart drop to his feet. He reached for his gun.

Flattening himself against the wall, he used his free hand to push the door open wider and waited for a reaction. But nothing happened. Silence greeted him. And chaos when he chanced a look inside.

Lamps were knocked over. The furniture was shoved out of place. Magazines were scattered across the floor, and it was clear there'd been one hell of a fight.

"Rae."

The one word echoed hollowly through the room, and desperation spurred him into a search.

Terrified of what he'd find, afraid of what he wouldn't—her—he went through the apartment in record speed, but she wasn't inside. No one had slit her throat and run. Whoever had come had grabbed and taken her away.

Anger roared through his blood to extinguish the fear, and he grabbed his phone again. Griff answered on the first ring. "Jackson's got her."

"Tell me."

Scott did and knelt when a terrified Dopey appeared to lope to his side for reassurance. He caught the small feline to him even as he searched for Grumpy. Had both animals survived the fray? "We have to find her."

"We will," Griff told him. "I'll call it in. You start thinking. Where would he take her? Call me back in ten minutes, and we'll send out the troops."

Scott nodded, though Griff couldn't see, and hung up to examine Dopey. "You okay? Where's your pal?" But his mind was whirling. Where would Joey take Rae?

It took only a minute more for Grumpy to come out, and Scott grabbed her, too, for a quick once-over. Both pets were all right. They were safe. But Rae was not.

He set down the animals and wasn't surprised to find his hands shaking as he continued to stroke them in reassurance. "We'll find her, guys. We'll find her."

But where?

The question ricocheted through his brain, and it took a determined breath to make his thoughts still. He couldn't fall apart now. Not if he wanted to save her. If it wasn't already too late...

Shoving the possibility aside, he forced himself to focus. Not on her, but on Joey. Her enemy. Theirs. What did they know about him? What places did he go? Who did he see? Where did he stay?

He left the cats to pace the floor. Part of the problem with Joey was that they had more questions than answers. He was a ghost. He knew when and how to keep out of sight and when to come out to strike. Still he was a creature of habit. He was just better at hiding it than most. He was more patient in waiting. He was ready and willing to mark time until he could get what he wanted more than anything else—what he had lost!

Scott hissed recognition. The old neighborhood. His old turf. That's what Joey John Jackson was after. He wanted to reclaim his roots. His past.

Scott spun toward the kitchen and the table and the folders scattered across it. Records on Joey. His rap sheet, his history fighting the law, and all the known places he used to hang out.

Dialing the phone as he flipped through papers, he was ready when Griff answered. "He would have taken her back to where they grew up."

"Specifics?"

Scott quoted addresses and places and paused. "I don't know where exactly."

"It doesn't matter. We'll find her."

"We better because he's going to kill her."

"He won't have the chance," Griff shot back. "Where are you headed?"

Scott scanned the papers before him. "The school. It's the weekend. It'll be deserted. Empty."

"You don't go in alone. You wait for us."

Scott nodded, but he wasn't really listening. He was thinking ahead, and he wasn't planning on waiting for anyone. "I'm gone."

Shoving the phone back into his jacket pocket, he swung for the door but stopped when he found himself trapped by two pitiful stares. Grumpy and Dopey. Rae's pets. Helpless victims once again. He paused to offer comfort with a touch.

"I'll be back, and I won't be alone."

But he was a cautious man when it came to those he cared about. So, on the way back out to the Jeep, he made another call. It was to Christine Maverick's office answering machine. His co-worker's wife loved cats. If he and Rae didn't make it, Grumpy and Dopey would have a good home.

Jumping into the Jeep, he jammed the key in the ignition and felt cold determination settle over him. He was going to get Rae back, or if he couldn't, he was going to take the man who'd ripped her from him out. Either way, this was Joey John Jackson's day to die.

* * * *

"I'VE MET A LOT of annoying women in my life, but you top the list."

Rae watched Joey pace. Tied to a chair, she didn't know where she was. In a basement some place. Probably deep in Pit Bull territory, but if that was true, no other gang members were present. She and Joey were alone. The two goons who'd come with him to the apartment had been sent away.

A smile twisted her lips. His muscle men might be gone, but she wasn't somebody either of them would soon forget. She'd broken one's nose. The other, she suspected, would be avoiding the company of women for a week or more—and would be speaking in voice an octave or two higher for at least as long.

Her smile faded. She might have put up a good fight, but the wounds inflicted were of small comfort. The one person she'd really wanted to hurt—and still did—was without a mark.

She winced when she flexed her jaw. Joey had waited until it was safe to move in to take her down. Coming in from behind while she was fighting off the others, his knuckle punch had been a cheap shot, but it had dropped her like a stone. When she'd come to, she was trussed up like a pig ready for slaughter—which, she figured, was exactly what Joey had in mind. Killing her.

"Do you want me to feel sorry for you?" she sneered and watched Joey spin to glare. If she was lucky, maybe she could get him to finish the job quick because rescue was an impossibility. Scott would never be able to find her. Scott probably wouldn't even know she was gone until it was too late, and that was bad. Bad because he would never understand how she felt. He didn't know she loved him.

Joey's snarl was disbelieving. And furious. "In the course of a week, you have destroyed my life!"

She grinned and ignored the pain the action brought. "Aw, poor baby. How's it feel to get a taste of your own medicine? You've been destroying lives for years."

He stormed toward her, his arm pulling back, but the blow she braced herself for never landed. He grabbed her face in his hand instead. "I don't destroy lives. I sell people what makes them happy."

"You hook people on drugs that steal their will to do anything more than get high," she denied, jerking free of his fingers. "They'll sell their souls to get one more fix."

Joey's smile was evil. "We don't have much of a market for souls, but the children my customers sometimes bring to barter with do have a certain value."

She lurched against the ropes holding her, and Joey laughed.

"Although I like sweeter meat. Like Vicky."

The air hissed through Rae's teeth in impotent rage.

"I always thought you were the one in the family who might scratch my itch, but your little sister wasn't exactly second class."

"You killed her."

Joey leaned down so the two of them were eye to eye.

"Just like I'm going to kill you."

A cold chill slipped over her skin, but Rae held his gaze.

"And then what? Business as usual?"

"Exactly," he assured her. "You see, all I have to do is give my bosses a reason to believe in me again, and that would be you."

"Me?"

"The person who blew the whistle on the lab and the shipment."

"You'll be killing the wrong person," she objected, but he shook his head.

"It doesn't matter. All's they want is someone to blame."

"Someone other than you," she confirmed. "Like Rick."

"Rick's dead."

"You wish."

Joey froze, and she liked watching the color drain out of his face.

"He's very much alive yet, and he's the one who told me about the lab and the shipment. His information is what allowed us to break up your operation and pull in your

dealers." She smiled. "And he's the one who's going to turn State's evidence to nail your ass to the wall."

"You're lying!"

"Not," she disagreed with calm satisfaction. She might die and Joey live, but he'd never be safe again. "And you won't be able to hide this time. No one will want you because nobody will trust you. You're on your own, Joey, and if you think killing me will make it all better, you're wrong."

"Rick's dead," Joey repeated. "You're bluffing."

She shrugged a shoulder. "Think what you want. I know better and so should you. When you want someone dead, you should make sure they're not breathing before you leave them behind—and it was you who knifed Rick, wasn't it? Just like you did Vicky."

"They both deserved it," Joey spat. "They both turned on me. They turned on me because of you!"

"No, they turned on you because they recognize you for what you are. Scum."

The back of Joey's hand slammed into her cheek. It made lights flash in her head and caused pain to ricochet through her skull, but she hung doggedly on to consciousness to continue her attack.

"Prove me wrong, Joey, and untie me before you try that again."

"Bitch!" He grabbed her by the hair and yanked her head back so he could stare down at her. "You want a shot at me? I'll give you one, but not now. We'll wait until the sun's down and the moon's out because I do my best work at night."

Her spit caught him in the face, but he didn't react as she expected or hoped. He simply lifted a hand to wipe it away.

"It's too bad, you know, Rae. You and me, we could have ruled the world."

He released her with a laugh, and she was helpless to stop him from walking away. She could only watch him go and, unable to break free of the ties that bound her, she could only sit and wonder. How much longer did she have to live? How many more minutes? Hours?

Anger came and went as she waited. Hopelessness did, too, and when the dim sunlight filtering into the basement finally began to grow dimmer, tears burned her eyes. Not for herself. No, she wasn't prepared to weep for herself, but she was ready to cry for the man who would never know of the love she wanted to give him.

* * * *

SCOTT PAUSED IN the alley. He was in the bowels of Pit Bull territory, and he was on his own. His self-appointed mission was to go up and down every street until he found what he was looking for. Rae.

A pain akin to nothing he'd ever felt before throbbed in his chest. Centered over his heart, he was sure the organ was breaking—suffocating from the loss of her because he was certain time was running out.

She'd been gone too long. The afternoon was over, evening was falling, and he had no leads, no ideas, and no clues where to look next.

He stepped into a doorway and rubbed at his forehead. His mind wouldn't stop dredging up possibilities of what was happening to her. What had happened to her. Murder was the kindest. The quickest. But Joey wouldn't have taken her if all he'd wanted to do was kill her.

Raw fury soured his stomach and heated his blood, and he looked up to watch the last rays of sun fade from the sky. Dusk was descending. Night was coming. The creatures that dwelled and thrived in blackness would come out with it, and Joey John Jackson would be among them. Somewhere.

Waiting while the darkness deepened and settled, Scott let his eyes adjust to the shadows while he ignored the weight of the cell phone in his pocket. He'd shut it off. Griff was, no doubt, trying to reach him. David and the other hunters and cops out combing the streets probably were, too, but he didn't care.

Precious hours had been lost while he'd worked as part of a team, while he'd played by the book and used logic as a tool. It was time to rely on the primal. On instinct. It was what had kept him alive as a boy, what guided him still as a man, and it would take him to Rae—and to Jackson. He just had to wait and trust in it. In himself. Like Rae had trusted in him.

Silently, he cursed himself again. He should have listened to his inner voice sooner. He should have insisted she come with him when he'd gone to join Griff. He should have demanded she go to his place rather than stay at hers. He should have told her that he loved her when he had the chance.

Clenching and unclenching his fists, he shoved emotion aside and prepared to restart his search, but something stopped him. A sound. The shuffle of feet.

Retreating deeper into the doorway, he listened. Someone was coming down the alley. A gang member, maybe. It could be a lead to follow, but startled recognition came with a blink when two boys went by. Two boys determined to grow into men before their time. Tony and BJ.

Scott didn't hesitate. Leaping forward, he grabbed them both by the collars and threw them into the wall.

BJ lost his balance and went down. Tony stumbled and grabbed his head. Dazed by the collision with cement, he was easy pickings when Scott planted the Glock under his chin.

"Tony, remember me?"

He sputtered and BJ mumbled.

"Rae's friend," Scott clarified, holding the gun in one hand and Tony's tee shirt in another. "Where is she?"

"Joey's got her," Tony wheezed. "Or that's the word."

"And he can have her!" BJ spat and struggled to his feet. "She was supposed to take care of him!"

"She's still alive?" Scott demanded, hope exploding in his chest, and he shook Tony. "Is she?"

"We don't know," Tony whined. "Joey went ballistic last night. The cops took his crack."

"The cops and Rae," Scott agreed and eyed BJ. "She was there, too, looking for Joey."

BJ spit in the dirt. "He didn't go."

"But he went after Rae after the bust. Where is she?"

"We don't know," Tony whined again, squirming against the cold metal pressed against his nose and at the hard hand holding him up on his toes. "Joey's like smoke."

"Tell me where the fire is," Scott told him, drawing Tony closer and making BJ dance.

"We can only guess."

"Then guess good," Scott told him. "Because if I don't get to Rae before something happens to her, I'm coming after the two of you."

In minutes he had the information he wanted. Needed. And he and the two boys separated. He headed into trouble. They ran away from it.

But by necessity he couldn't rush. For her sake, he used stealth instead of madness to search for her, and an hour passed before he could make it through the maze of streets and alleys and around gang members and to the building it was rumored Joey used to hide.

It wasn't much to look at. In less than an upper middle class neighborhood, the paint was peeling on the trim, its railing was sagging and its walls were stained with weather and time. Yet it had possibilities because it could hold Rae.

With no time for a stakeout, he could only spare minutes to watch the windows for signs of life or movement. There were none. The place was empty. Or it seemed to be when he broke a window and crawled inside.

The only light in the place was that cast by the overhead bulbs from the street, and no one challenged him as he edged his way from room to room. The house was deserted. Silent. Still he didn't use any switches as he made his way carefully

around the first floor. He couldn't chance the glare. It would warn anyone watching or waiting beyond the building's perimeter that he was inside, but suddenly he didn't have to worry about turning on the electricity to see where he was going. Someone had left one light burning—in the basement.

The hair on the back of his neck rose in alarm. Of all the lights in the house a resident would leave on, why the basement?

The door was wide open as he approached it cautiously. Yet no sound came from the cellar. It remained quiet. Still. He chanced a look around the jamb and stepped forward, with gun drawn and aimed down the steps, to wonder. Was it a trap?

If someone was down there, they would have heard him moving through the rooms. Someone with nothing to hide would have shouted for help. Someone who wanted him to come downstairs would say nothing and do nothing.

Thinking of Griff and his friends, knowing help was a call away, he also realized any assistance was too many minutes away as well. He wasn't waiting. He couldn't. Not with Rae's life hanging in the balance.

Without thought for the consequences, he abruptly charged down the steps. He threw himself off the last stair when he hit it, and rolled to the floor. When he came up in a kneeling position, his weapon was aimed and ready, but no one loitered in the basement. Nothing was. Nothing except a chair with ropes hanging from it—ropes that would have held someone in place.

Racing to it, he checked the tethers, but the victim they held could have been anyone. Or Rae. And it seemed likely it was her who had sat in the chair. Who else would Joey have brought to his hideout?

Swearing at himself, cursing at the short moments that must have separated him from her, he spun to look for a clue. Joey was taking her somewhere. He could have left something that would give a hint as to the destination. But he hadn't.

Desperation clawing at his throat, Scott stared at the cold basement walls standing around him and tried to think. Where would Joey take Rae? Why would he take her some place else if all's he wanted to do was kill her?

Scott paced the floor. It was a family vendetta for Joey. He was going to kill Rae just like he'd killed Vicky...

His shout abruptly echoed. Scott leapt toward the steps once more. He knew where Joey was going. He knew where Joey was taking Rae.

Joey was going to execute his own kind of justice by murdering both sisters in the same place. He was going to kill Rae where he'd killed Vicky, and he was going to do it in the same way.

With a knife in the black of the night in the middle of the old neighborhood.

Using the front door instead of the window he'd come in through, Scott sprinted off the steps and into the street at full speed. He had a mile to cover on foot. A long mile, and he was going to have to break every speed record on the books if he was going to make it in time...

Chapter Fifteen

"THE PLACE HASN'T changed much, has it?"

Barefoot and with her hands still tied behind her back, Rae looked with Joey at the playground. The asphalt was deserted. No children lingered, but the beat-up swings and dented slide were resilient shadows. Quiet sentinels they looked to be the same sturdy friends she had played on long ago.

Her gaze wandered to the white lines painted on the ground where games were played, to the building where classes were held, to the fence surrounding the yard. This was where she and Joey had skinned their knees, chummed with pals, and looked forward to when they didn't have to come to school each morning, but those days were over. Her life nearly was, too.

Taking a fortifying breath, she turned her head away from bittersweet memories and toward the man who had grown from the boy she'd once felt sorry for to someone she detested. He'd brought her back to the beginning to meet her end.

"Same old, same old," he said, his shoulders moving in the dark, but she wasn't interested in his rhetoric.

"Why don't you stop talking and just get it over with?"

"In a hurry to die, Rae?"

His teeth flashed in the night, and it was a struggle to hold steady against his stare. Terror clawed at her throat. She wanted to run, but there was no place to go. She wanted to

yell, but there was no one to hear. Or at least no one who would care.

She glanced away to the street where two men waited. They weren't the same ones who'd come to her apartment earlier. These two helpers were new. Still they wouldn't come if she called. They wouldn't care if she died. Anger spun her back to face Joey with an impotent glare. "No, I'm not in a hurry to die, but I am sick of listening to you."

"Always the smart mouth," he told her and stepped closer so he could stand beside her in the moonlight. It was the only illumination available on the playground because the area was off limits after dark. Or it was supposed to be. Yet rules were something Joey liked to break along with anyone or anything that got in his way—like the lock holding the gate shut. It was supposed to keep everyone off the school grounds after hours. It hadn't stopped Joey. "Vicky wasn't so lippy when she died. She was whining and crying and begging me to forgive her until she realized I wouldn't. Then she was swearing."

The picture he painted made Rae's vision blur: her sister helpless, pleading for mercy, and dying in a pool of her own blood.

"She died damning me to hell."

Rae's lips curled back in a feral snarl. "I wish I was the one taking you there."

"I bet you do." Joey reached into his pocket and brought out a switchblade. It opened with one press of a button to gleam coldly in the night. "But I'm going to have to disappoint you."

She sneered, fighting back the fear. "You couldn't possibly disappoint me. You're such a disappointment already. All words and no action. Always letting someone else do the killing unless your victim has their hands tied behind their back."

He grabbed her by the hair. "You're a thorn in my side, Rae Grayson. A regular pain in the ass. It's going to be a real pleasure doing you."

"Then do it, you bastard, and stop talking about it."

"I've got to kiss you first, Rae. Just like they do in the movies."

Rage exploded when his head dropped to hers, and it wasn't her lips she met his mouth with. It was her teeth.

His howl of pain echoed through the night, but she wasn't through fighting. She kicked, he dodged, and his fist slammed into her cheek.

The punch knocked her off balance. It made her stagger, but she tried to stay on her feet. Yet it was impossible. Without her hands, she couldn't stay upright. She hit the asphalt with a grunt.

The collision knocked the breath out of her, but she didn't care. Joey was coming for her. She had to be ready. Rolling, she found him reaching for her. Him and the blade.

"Jackson!"

The shout shot across the playground. It shattered the night, and Joey paused to face it—and Scott.

Shock trembled through her at the sight of him. Joy did, and she twisted where she lay to stare to where he stood in the dark. His Glock was aimed at Joey's heart, but Joey

wasn't alone. He had friends. Armed friends, and they would be coming on the run.

Opening her mouth to cry a warning, she never got the chance. Joey grabbed her arm, the knife drove down, and an explosion ripped through the blackness.

Joey staggered at the impact. He let her go, but he held on to the knife. He stumbled backwards in disbelief to put a hand to his chest. It came away red with blood.

Scrambling like a crab through sand, she scurried away from him, but he wasn't the only danger. She looked toward the street for the two men by the car and gasped. They were coming, running fast and furious. "Scott!"

Blinding light glared at her call. It caught Joey's would-be rescuers in a silent cross-fire that stopped them dead.

"Police! Stay where you are!"

Disbelief came on a sob. Saved! She was saved! Scott had saved her! She got to her knees to find him, but he found her first.

A flying tackle swung her into his arms. A rock hard embrace locked her against him. She couldn't breathe under his assault, but she didn't want to. She only wanted him.

"Are you all right?"

His demand came with a frantic search. His hands were on her face, her arms.

"Did he hurt you?"

The answering gurgle didn't come from her. It came from Joey, and Scott spun with his Glock to find him once more.

Still standing, swaying in the spotlight that had come to hold him, Joey stared down at the two of them, and Rae shuddered. "Scott!"

Putting himself between she and Joey, Scott's aim was very steady. "Drop the knife, you son of a bitch!"

Joey just stared, continued to sway until, a second later, he pitched face first to the ground.

She gasped as the knife clattered free and someone else came running from the street with a gun leveled.

"Is he dead?"

Scott didn't bother looking at Griff or moving to check on Joey. Shoving the Glock into its holster, he put both arms around her instead. "I hope so."

She started to cry. She couldn't help it. Blubbering like an idiot, the tears started falling, and she couldn't stop them. She didn't even try. With his arms around her once more, she simply wept, and he held on.

"It's over, babe. It's over."

"You came for me."

He kissed the top of her head. "You didn't think I'd let you get away that easily, did you? Not after promising me some chocolate chip cookies."

Laughter came to ease the pain. She hadn't lost him. She hadn't, and his kiss helped soothe the last of the agony. "You idiot, untie me."

His smile was sloppy and his touch tender as he did as she asked, but he didn't let her go. Helping her to her feet, when Griff put a hand out to her, Scott kept her safely tucked to his side.

"You okay, Rae?" Griff asked. "We've got an ambulance coming."

She looked from him to Joey and the two officers trying to keep him alive. "I don't need an ambulance. I just need to go home."

* * * *

"WHAT DO YOU think?"

Rae laid back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. "I think I like it. You?"

Beside her, fully clothed as she was in jeans and tee shirt and shoes, Scott nodded as he admired her ceiling, too. "It's a good fit."

She grinned at his profile. The deliverymen had just left. She was the proud owner of a new king-sized mattress and box spring, not to mention a new head and footboard of shiny brass. "It's almost too big for the room."

In fact, with the bed set up in it, she was going to have a hard time getting into the dresser or the closet for something to wear, but it didn't matter. She was home. Scott was with her. Joey John Jackson was dead. Life couldn't get any better.

Sighing she found Scott's fingers with hers and liked the way he quickly linked them together. He'd been her shadow since the night on the playground. A week had passed since Joey had tried to kill her. She still bore the bruises. Bandages still covered her wrists from the rope burns, but her heart was intact and her conscience was clean.

Joey had died a day after he'd been shot. Griff thought it was a good thing. Joey's passing, he said, saved the

taxpayers money. Scott hadn't agreed or disagreed with Griff's observation when it was made, but she didn't think he had any regrets. Happily, she didn't either.

Joey had paid for his sins. A month ago she might have protested his quick release. Back then she would have preferred he suffer before meeting his end. She would have wanted to see him put in a cage to rot, but not any more.

Gone he couldn't hurt anyone else. In a grave he couldn't get out on parole or seek a pardon. For him, it was over. For Rick, on the other hand, it was just beginning.

Already "dead" to the world, he was working with the police to turn evidence on the others he knew to be part of Joey's operation, and if Rick didn't know enough to bring down any kingpins, his help meant the police were still going to inflict serious damage in the drug war. Joey would be blamed for it, and that meant Rick was free. His cooperation would give him a new start somewhere else.

"I have a solution for that."

"For what?" she asked, having lost her earlier train of thought.

"For the bed not fitting. We could find a bigger apartment."

She stilled beside him. "You mean we as in you and me?"

He turned his head on the new pillows to look at her. "You have a problem with that?"

"No, it's just..."

"Just what?"

His scowl made her chew at her lip. "It's kind of sudden, isn't it?"

He shrugged and cleared his throat before looking away. "It's not sudden. I've been thinking about it."

"You have?" The idea made her smile. "You've been thinking about living with me?"

He looked at her again, his heart in his eyes. "Would that be so bad?"

"No," she told him. "It wouldn't be bad at all considering I love you."

Shock made his mouth work. "You..."

"Is that so bad?"

"No! Not at all."

"Good," she said, rolling on her side to lay facing him. "Because I like having you around."

He rolled on his side, too, and reached out to brush some hair behind her ear. The bruises were fading. The ones on her jaw and cheek. The one on his heart was healing, too, even if he'd thought it would never mend.

Running to find her, he stumbled into Griff and Lewinski on the way. He almost hadn't stopped to talk to them. A few words, and he'd raced on while they called for help on their radios before charging after him. But he hadn't been thinking about that or them. His thoughts had been for Rae, and his fear had been that he wouldn't make it. Not in time. Not to save her. But he had.

Reaching the playground, squeezing through a chain-locked gate, he'd gotten inside and to her before Joey could use his knife. But it had been close. Too close.

"I love you, Rae."

Her smile warmed him from head to toe. "Good."

He settled his arms around her. "So if I ask you to marry me, will you say yes?"

"Are you asking?"

"Do you want me to?"

"I think so."

"Okay, I'll ask then."

"When?"

"Is now good?"

"It works for me."

He grinned. "Will you?"

"You bet."

Her lips melted under his with a sigh, and satisfaction shuddered through him when he pulled back to look at her.

"So we've got that settled, but what are we going to do about the job? Griff thinks we make a good team. He wants to know if you're going to quit the force and join us full time."

"I could," she agreed but frowned. "I just don't know if I should."

"Why not?"

"Dwyer."

"Dwyer?"

She laughed. "If I leave the force, he won't have anyone to scowl at."

Scott grinned. "I think he's done scowling. He sent you flowers, remember?"

"Roses," she sniffed in memory. "And they were thorny just like him."

"I don't have any thorns."

She didn't protest when she was pulled closer. "I noticed that about you."

"What else did you notice?"

"Looking for compliments?"

"Just for you."

"You have me," she assured him. And he did, as his mouth settled over hers in a warm caress ... he had her, and she had him. And she didn't plan on letting go. Ever.

Kimberly Grey

Kim began writing when her 9th grade teacher requested everyone write a short story. She ended up penning her first romantic suspense—a daring teenage, motorcycle melodrama. From that initial plot, Kim went on to publish books with both Leisure and Harlequin before entering the world of "e" where her books have all been well received by reviewers and readers. When not writing, Kim enjoys gardening and reading and playing with her two cats, Squirt and Small Fry, who serve as inspiration for the friendly felines who sometimes appear in her stories.

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this ebook by going back to your bookshelf: [Click Here](#)