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DEANNA LEE



BLOOD MOON

A KYRA MORAY MYSTERY

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I highly recommend this book to anyone who enjoys a good murder mystery that also contains romance and hot sex. *Still Waters* is an extraordinary story that will remain on my keeper shelf for many years to come.

-- Susan White, *Coffee Time Romance*

*Still Waters: A Kyra Moray Mystery* is now available from Loose Id.

# BLOOD MOON: A KYRA MORAY MYSTERY

Deanna Lee

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This book is rated:



For substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (homoerotic sex, violence).

# Blood Moon: A Kyra Moray Mystery

Deanna Lee

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Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29  
Carson City NV 89701-1215  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

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ISBN 1-59632-171-7

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Lorri-Lynne Brown  
Cover Artist: April Martinez



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## Prologue

October 31, 2162

New Orleans, Louisiana

In the distance, the lights of New Orleans lit the dark sky, reminding her that the world she lived in no longer slept. There were times that there didn't even seem to be a difference between night and day. There hadn't been a change in the weather in nearly fifty years unless one counted the occasional snowstorm. She could remember a time when the world around her had bloomed in the spring and summer before it would surrender to the winter months.

Her land spread out into the swamp and met with the largest nature preserves in the parish. Due to her stubbornness, the preserve was also one of the few places left in North America that allowed no hunting. Her narrow driveway twisted to the large highway, making her far more accessible than she'd ever wanted to be. Still, her status as the leader of the Voodoo faith in the area did give her a measure of privacy that Clara appreciated.

The darkness from the bayou edged against the single light on her front porch, pushing in as if it might swallow it if given a chance. There were people who considered the bayou the most dangerous place on earth, but she knew differently. The most dangerous place on earth, in Clara's estimation, was in the heart of a woman betrayed.

She carefully buttoned the new shirt she'd unpacked from her son's trunk and then straightened the scarecrow's belt. Standing back, she eyed her handiwork. Then for a moment, she reached out and closed her mind around the binding spell she'd used to keep her son's soul close. It was a selfish thing to do, she'd known it when she'd done it fifteen years before, but a part of her would never be able to let him go, perhaps not even after she had a body to bury.

“When they took you from me I tried to make people see what had happened. There were those who believed me, but even they couldn’t make sense of your disappearance.”

She rose up on her tiptoes and adjusted his hat. “Been waiting a while, but then we expected that I would. I don’t like what they did with your body. It was my right to see you buried properly.”

Clara took a few steps back from the scarecrow and tilted her head. “Think I’ll be after giving you some more stuffing next week. Willow Carson down the road had a good crop of wheat over the summer. She promised I could come around and get some straw when I was ready.” She looked upward and focused on the full, nearly red moon. “There’s blood on the moon tonight. It doesn’t speak well of what is to come.”

The song of the birds grew melancholy as Clara walked around the scarecrow, straightening the shirt in the back and then adjusting its hat a second time. “You should see the woman your cousin Alexander has taken up with.” Clara shook her head. “And a damn cop, too.” She waved her hand as she stopped in front of him. “I know, I know. I ain’t gotta listen to that. I don’t like cops, never have. I’ve lived through a world war and two civil wars; I figure I can say any damn thing I like.”

Clara pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and folded it neatly before she stuck it in the scarecrow’s pocket. “She’s Alicia Moray’s daughter. Kyra has her mother’s look; that’s for certain. All that dark hair and those jade-green eyes always bright with some bit of temper or humor. She certainly isn’t the cold thing her daddy is. I know, I know ... but the woman isn’t ready to learn about all of that. Maybe it’s best that she never know. Don’t suppose you think I have the right to keep it from her? Well, there’s a time and place for all things to be said ... and Kyra Moray will hear the entire truth about her mother when the time is right.

“You know when your daddy died; I thought I would die, too. Loved that foolish, stubborn man like no other I’ve ever known. I couldn’t imagine missing anyone the way I missed him. At least until I lost you.” She looked up at the moon again. “Fifteen years is a long time to go on as you have, baby. It’s time that we put an end to this.”

Clara carefully lit the three candles she’d prepared earlier in the day and then pulled out a fourth from her pocket. She lit the small candle and placed it with the others. “I would have loved him as much as I loved you, but you know that. I regret keeping what I knew a secret from you. I was wrong for being so against the relationship to begin with.”

She lowered her head briefly and then tilted it up to get a full view of the moon. “Blood on the moon is a bad omen to most that I know. It speaks of change and danger. Others call this moon a ‘hunter’s moon.’ If that is the case, I wish Kyra good hunting on this eve and all the eves to follow.”



## Chapter One

“Sara, are you sure you want to take this wall down?” She tied up her dark brown hair as she turned to look at her wife and wondered how on earth such a beautiful and feminine woman had ended up with her. Sara certainly wasn’t the sort of woman that she’d attracted in the past.

Sara Kingsley looked over her shoulder to her wife. “Yep. The wall isn’t there on the floor plans of the house, and it’ll make a great walk-in closet for kitchen storage.”

Magda Giroux shrugged and lifted the sledgehammer she’d been leaning on. “You’d better be sure because I’m not going to spend a week rebuilding if you change your mind.”

She laughed and walked across the room. “I promise I won’t change my mind.” She kissed Magda’s lips gently and smiled. “I want a closet.”

Magda let the hammer rest on the floor and leaned in for another kiss. “Didn’t you spend years trying to get out of the closet?” She pushed her fingers into Sara’s blonde hair and sighed against her mouth. “We could just go to bed and forget about the stupid wall.”

“If I get a closet before we go to bed ... I’ll be *really* pleased with you.” Sara wrapped her arms around Magda’s neck and grinned. “Far more pleased than I already am.”

Magda ran her hands down Sara’s back to cup her ass. “Then go back to your wallpaper while I work.”

Sara wiggled free of her hold and went back to stripping away wallpaper. The thud of the hammer hitting the wall made her jump a little. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“I’m fine.” Magda wiped dust from her face, readjusted her safety glasses, and swung the hammer again. “Say, get me a light.”

Sara turned and looked toward her. “What’s up?”

“It smells weird. I want to see what’s in here before I make a bigger hole.”

Sara walked over to the large box of equipment they'd hauled in earlier and found a LED-Solar light. "Smells weird how?" She wrinkled her nose, as she got closer. "Never mind." It smelled like nothing she'd ever known. Old, musty, and dead. The thought wasn't comforting. She gave the light over and moved to peek in.

"Do we have a real light?" Magda slapped the side of the box-shaped light and then glared at her Sara.

"It's environmentally friendly. You save the world the way you want to, and I'll save the world the way I want to." Sara reached out and turned the light on. "I don't know why you insist on being so stubborn."

Magda wrinkled her nose. "A real flashlight is big and heavy enough to knock someone out. This thing ..." She shook her head and pointed it into the opening.

They stood still for a few seconds, both caught up in the horrific display before them.

"Christ." Magda jerked the light away from the hole and pulled Sara toward the front door of the house. "Go outside and use your comm-u to call the cops."

"Cops?" Sara dug her hand into her front pocket to find her comm-u.

"Yeah, cops. You call cops when you find dead bodies in a secret room in a house you just bought."

\* \* \* \* \*

Senior Inspector Kyra Moray of Major Crimes for District 4 paused briefly behind the wheel of her vehicle and stared at the scene. The two-story house in one of the few historic neighborhoods left in New Orleans held a secret so wretched that she'd been pulled from her bed at two-thirty in the morning to see it. With a disgruntled sigh, she pushed open the door and dropped down onto the pavement, her thick-soled, black leather boots making a satisfying thud.

She glared at reporters as she started toward the house, and they scurried out of her way. "Get those hover-cams behind the line, or I'm going to pretend I'm at the target range." The immediate hum of the hover-cams engaging and pulling back over the police line almost made her smile.

The steady grind of a power saw caught her attention the moment she entered the house. A small empty foyer with hardwood floors gave way to a large, carpeted living area. All of the walls save one were a ghastly color of pink that reminded her of cotton candy. Her gaze centered on Dr. Desdemona Marcos, who had a large saw in her hand. Desi's blond curls bounced in time with the vibration of the instrument, and Kyra watched in surprise. She would've bet a great deal of credits that Desi Marcos wouldn't have had enough strength to wield a tool like the saw. Desi was five foot two in shoes and probably weighed a hundred pounds fully clothed and soaking wet.

"Dr. Marcos, what are you doing?"

Desdemona Marcos disengaged the saw's motor and turned to Kyra as she handed the instrument off to one of her techs. "It's new. I always play with the new stuff."

Kyra raised an eyebrow and looked toward Dr. Jeffrey Parker who sat on top of his field kit eating a sandwich. His normally neat brown hair was mussed, and he wore faded jeans instead of the normal pleated, pressed slacks. "Okay, Parker, what am I doing here?"

Jeffrey motioned toward Desi and took another healthy bite of his sandwich. "It's her scene. I'm just here for decoration."

Desi took in a deep breath and started talking. "We have three bodies in a secret room in a house that used to belong to the NOPD. It sold at auction eight months ago to a woman named Sara Kingsley. She arrived in New Orleans to take possession of her new home four days ago. Earlier this evening, her spouse knocked a hole in that wall and found the three bodies."

Kyra was silent for a moment, her gaze focused on the young crime scene tech who was steadily removing the wall. "How old?"

"No idea. We'll know more once we can get in there and start looking around."

"Older than six months?"

"Oh, yes, certainly." Desi nodded and then she took in another breath. "They were definitely put in the room while the NOPD owned the house."

"Okay. Why is the press here?"

"They must've picked up the traffic off the police band." Desi pressed her lips together briefly. "Sara Kingsley is the granddaughter of Baxter Kingsley, the man who designed the first practical city domes."

"Did either of them talk to the press?"

Desi shook her head. "Of course not, Inspector. I had both women transported to the station shortly before I contacted you." She turned and looked toward the technician who had cut down the rest of the wall. "Would you like to see?"

Nodding, Kyra took the flashlight that Parker offered. "How can you eat? It smells wretched in here."

"The room was nearly airtight." Desi edged up beside Kyra as they both stopped to stand in front of the jagged hole.

"I've never smelled anything like this."

"It's old death," Jeffrey Parker murmured as he paused behind them.

Kyra's stomach clenched briefly, and she cleared her throat. The three bodies lay side-by-side in the small space. "They look like they're covered in wax."

"It's adipocere; the body creates it from fat and soft tissues during the first couple of months of decomposition. There wasn't enough oxygen in the room when it was sealed. The

result is what is commonly referred to as a soap mummy.” Desi cleared her throat. “This is bad, Inspector.”

“Any idea how long this would have taken?” Kyra asked softly.

“It takes about two years for this kind of mummification.” Jeffrey Parker slipped between them and into the room with a large flashlight in hand. He pulled a scanner from his pocket and activated it. “There are no dormant nanobots. Looks like one African-American and two Caucasian victims. The smaller of the victims might be female. I’ll know more once I get them back to the office.”

“I want them removed and processed as quickly as possible.” Kyra glanced toward the bodies one more time and then focused on Desi. “I’ll call in some more uniforms and push the press back as far as I can.” She checked her comm-u for the time and then pulled out her pocket-pc. “Send me anything and everything you get as soon as you get it. The mayor is going to have a conniption when he catches wind of this.”

Kyra shifted through her in-box on her p-pc as she walked toward the front door of the house. “I’m going to go down to the station and talk with the owner of the house.”

She glanced back toward Desi and Parker; they were working the bodies as if it were any other case, but it wasn’t. Three dead bodies in an old police safe house wasn’t the way she wanted to start a new week. Out on the small porch of the house, she took a moment to glare at the reporters and the hover-cams that were as close to the police line as possible. She knew she wouldn’t be getting to her vehicle without making some kind of statement.

With some regret, she moved down the steps onto the sidewalk. The hover-cams centered in on her movement, and their big red lenses followed her all the way to the gate. She raised her hand for silence and waited a minute while everyone vied for a spot in the front.

“It’s the middle of the night, people. I’ll make a brief statement. I will *not* take questions.”

“Come on, Inspector!”

“Don’t bother.” She tossed a practiced glare toward the reporter who edged toward the holographic police barricade. “Kevin, you move one more centimeter, and I’m going to give you the opportunity to get an inside perspective of police custody.

“As you’re all aware, the owner of this house found several bodies in a small, walled-in room. At this point, we have no idea who the victims are or if they died of something other than natural causes. We’re going to push the police line about another fifty yards to make room for the transport team. Under no circumstances are you to harass the cops I have working this scene. Failure to adhere to my rules on this matter will result in the revoking of your press pass in my district for the next year.”

“What about freedom of the press? The people of this city have the right to know what’s going on here.”

“The people’s right to know ends where the dignity of the dead begins. I don’t know what happened in this house, but I promise you I will find out. If I see one second of footage on the vid-panel or my compu-station that even resembles a body or a body bag, I will take great personal pleasure in the destruction of your career.”

“Inspector, we know this used to be a police safe house. How do you feel about finding three dead people in a house that offered refuge? Obviously something horrible happened here and members of the police department covered it up.”

Kyra focused on the woman and did a mental search for her name. “Ms. Dawson, why don’t you walk with me to my vehicle?”

“Of course, Inspector.” Joanna Dawson straightened her jacket and pulled out the control to her hover-cam.

“Turn that thing off,” Kyra bit out through clenched teeth as she made a path through the reporters. She heard the reporter groan a little and then the click of the hover-cam’s monitor function disengaging.

She turned around as soon as they were both behind her vehicle and out of visual range of the other reporters. “Are you stupid?”

Joanna stiffened and tightened her fingers around the remote control for her hover-cam. “Of course not. I hold several degrees.”

“Did one of those degrees teach you impulse control and discretion?”

“I only said what everyone else was thinking.”

Kyra ran a hand through her hair and glared. “No, Ms. Dawson, you just accused every cop in the city of being dirty.”

“I didn’t mean ...”

“It doesn’t fucking matter what you meant.” Kyra took a calming breath. “Your question is going to hit every major news station in this state; if you’re lucky, you might even get on the national news.”

“I don’t understand why this is a bad thing.”

“Then how about this -- *if* cops did this, they’re likely still part of the NOPD. They are going to see you on the vid-panel looking your blonde-coifed best questioning the integrity of the cops in this city. Are you really so stupid that you don’t realize you just put a big holo-target on your ass?” Kyra watched as the color drained from the woman’s face. “You should get your blush enhancement redone; it doesn’t hold up well under pressure. You look like you just saw the boogeyman.”

Joanna lifted one hand to her face and then closed her eyes briefly. “It’s a temporary enhancement. I’m still trying to decide how I want it. Beauty enhancements are difficult to reverse.”

“You should see Dr. Leroy Ellison. He has a practice downtown. He did my work and that was nearly sixteen years ago.”

“Yeah, maybe I will.” Joanna pressed her lips together and fiddled with her hover-cam remote. The camera shot over to her, and she plucked it out of the air. Shoving it into the bag she had slung over one shoulder, she looked toward Kyra once more. “Inspector ...”

“Look, you haven’t been on this job long enough for most of the city to take you seriously. Keep a low profile in the next press conference.”

She nodded abruptly. “Understood.” Joanna glanced around and then focused on Kyra’s face. “My boss told me to extend our apologies again on that footage showing Constable Mills murder. He wants you to know that Jeff Marks has been relieved of his duties with the station and will not be returning. We hope that you’ll reconsider any actions you’ve thought about concerning Channel 4.”

“If I wanted to punish the entire vid-station for the actions of Jeff Marks, I would have had my grandmother buy Channel 4 and fire everyone.” Kyra pulled open the door to her transport. “Since that hasn’t happened, you can assume that it isn’t going to happen.”

“Do you think that I have something to worry about?”

“I have three dead bodies in an old police safe house, lady. What the hell do you think?” She looked around and then glanced up at the moon and frowned.

“What?” Joanna looked up and raised an eyebrow. “What’s up with the moon?”

“There’s blood on the moon. It’s a bad omen.”

“You don’t believe in that stuff, do you?” Joanna looked at Kyra’s face intently.

Kyra shook her head and laughed a little. “No, I don’t believe it. Go play nice with the other reporters and remember what I said.” She pulled the door shut when Joanna nodded and then hurried away. She pushed the comm-u on her stirring wheel as she engaged the motor. “Mr. Joshua.” The internal communication unit in her vehicle engaged and dialed the code for Abel Joshua’s p-pc.

Abel’s pretty face appeared in the dash vid-panel several seconds later. With one hand, he pushed waist-length, white-blond hair out his face and raised one eyebrow. “Inspector.”

“Good morning, Mr. Joshua.” She flashed him a smile as he rubbed his eyes. “You don’t look happy to see me.”

“Not true, Inspector. I’m always pleased to see that beautiful face.” He yawned and sat back in the chair.

Kyra raised an eyebrow as she got a good shot of his bed and the two women sprawled out in it. “I see you’ve been busy.”

He yawned again and glanced over his shoulder. “Something like that. What’s up?”

“I need you. Kick out your lady friends and call Ana. I want you both at the station within the next half-hour.”

Abel frowned. “She’s your partner; you should have to wake her up.”

“Not on your life,” Kyra said with a grin and then disengaged the comm-u with a press of her thumb. Her partner of nearly one month, Ana Salanti, could be positively evil when she didn’t get enough sleep. Since she’d parted ways with the good constable no more than four hours before, she had a very good idea of the kind of reception Abel was going to get.

Her thumb hesitated briefly on the comm-u button before she punched it. “Commander Baker.” She tapped her fingers gently while she waited for him to answer. The signal came in from a personal p-pc, sparing her a visual of the commander straight from the bed. “Sir, there’s a problem.”

“I expect nothing less when you call me at three a.m.”

“I’ve three mummified corpses in one of the old safe houses the city sold last summer.”

“Mummified?”

“Yes.”

“Any chance this happened after the house sold?”

“I doubt it.” Kyra sighed. “The press was already there when I arrived.”

“Fuck me twice.”

She bit down on her lip. “Sorry, sir, did you say something?”

“Nothing you should ever repeat, Inspector. I’ll meet you at the station.”

“I’ll be in interview with the owner of the house.” She disengaged the comm-u, and it buzzed back at her. Kyra accepted the transmission and found herself looking at her partner. Ana’s normally tidy, dark-brown hair was a tangled mess, and her brown eyes flashed with irritation. “Constable Salanti, you look like hell.”

Ana glared at her. “It’s three a.m., Inspector.”

“It’s actually three o’ two a.m., Constable. I need you up and moving. Take an energy booster if necessary.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra sipped her coffee as she watched the two women in the interview room. They made an attractive couple. She glanced toward the door. She raised one eyebrow at her commander’s casual appearance. “Sorry to wake you, sir.”

Ethan Baker grimaced and shoved his hands into the jeans he’d pulled on. “Have you asked them any questions yet?”

“No. The owner of the house is very upset. I decided that it would be best if she and her spouse spent some time alone.”

He nodded. “She’s famous or something?”

“Her grandfather was the designer of city domes. Apparently, he’s very famous and very wealthy. I’m still waiting for information on Sara.”

"Do you think they're involved?"

"No." Kyra shook her head and set her coffee down. "They just wanted a closet."

"This situation is already all over the vid-panel. Every damn local station is reporting on the 'grisly' discovery of bodies in a police safe house." He paused. "Good quote, by the way."

"What quote?"

"The people's right to know ends where the dignity of the dead begins." Ethan nodded. "My wife found you impressive."

"Is Mrs. Baker with you?"

"No, she's at home cheerfully cursing you for waking her up." He motioned toward the interview room. "I'll watch."

Kyra took it for the hint it was and picked up her p-pc. "Of course."

She entered Interview Room 1, trying to ignore the pale yellow walls. Every cop in the station hated using this room. Some environmental engineer twit had told the city that yellow was a calming color. Kyra had personally rarely found calm people in interview rooms, no matter what the color. She pulled the door shut behind her and looked briefly over the two women.

They both looked tired. The one, with curling strawberry blonde hair, had an air of innocence about her. The other woman, with short brown hair, looked hard, but not in a way that was masculine. "Good morning, I'm Senior Inspector Kyra Moray."

The dark haired woman stood up and offered her hand. "I'm Magda Giroux. This is my wife, Sara Kingsley."

Sara pushed hair over her shoulder and took Kyra's hand next. "I've seen you on the vid-panel a lot. You always look great and mean."

Kyra smiled. "Thanks, I work hard on the mean thing." She sat down and motioned them both to sit. "This isn't a formal interview, of course, but I'd like to record it."

They both nodded as they retook their seats.

"We want to help." Sara put her hands on the table in front of her and met Kyra's gaze. "I've never seen anything like that in my life. Don't suppose things like that shock you anymore?"

"I have seen my share of death." Kyra cleared her throat and engaged her p-pc. "This is an informal interview with Sara Kingsley and Magda Giroux. It is October 31, 2162; the time is three-forty a.m." She set the small handheld computer down on the table and focused on Sara. "When was the first time you entered the house you purchased at 203 Rose Street?"

"We arrived on Saturday afternoon. Since we'd been traveling a long time when we reached New Orleans, we checked into a hotel room. On Sunday morning, we woke, took a meal, and then went over to the house." Sara paused, reached out for Magda's hand, and



smiled when the other woman met the silent request for support. "I was excited. This is my very first house. I've always lived in apartments. My parents were appalled when I bought a house so far south and outside a dome."

"Why did you?"

"I like the sun on my face." Sara shrugged. "So anyway, Mags and I worked up our floor plan before we arrived, so when we entered the house we were surprised to find that wall there. I designated that small room for a storage closet."

"The wall isn't in the floor plans you received from the city when you purchased the home?"

"No." Sara leaned down and rummaged through a bag sitting beside her. She pulled out her p-pc, started to fiddle with it, and then handed it to Magda. "Can you find the plans?"

Kyra watched the exchange silently. Of the two, Magda seemed far calmer. "Did the discovery bother you, Ms. Giroux?"

Magda glanced up and then shook her head. "Bother? Yes. Shock? No. I spent six years in the Union Army and then another four working Anti-Crime for the NYPD."

"North Korea?"

"Cuba." Magda looked down at the p-pc and then met her gaze. "If you'll give me your code I'll forward the floor plans and building specs for the house."

"182-KM-NOPD-MC."

She nodded. "You're the senior inspector of Major Crimes for this district?"

"Yes." Kyra sat back in her chair. "Are you planning on approaching the NOPD for employment?"

Magda lifted her gaze from the p-pc and met Kyra's. "My first priority is my wife. Once this situation is concluded and I've determined whether or not I can trust your city with her, I'll make a decision about my future employment options."

"Good."

"How much trouble is this going to be for Sara?"

Kyra was silent for a moment as she sized Magda up and then she nodded. "I think you know exactly how much trouble this situation could turn into." She focused on Sara. "Have you received any communications from the NOPD concerning the house or its sale?"

Sara shook her head. "No. All the paperwork and payment details went through the mayor's office. The deputy mayor of New Orleans called me personally to finalize the details."

"Did he ask you what you intended to do with the property?"

Sara frowned and then shook her head. "But he did make note that someone in New Orleans had an interest in the house if I decided not to move here. When I made it clear that I intended on living in the house and had already had a new security system installed, he

grew tense and angry with me. Since I know a fair amount about his politics, I assumed he found my lifestyle choice irritating.”

“What gave you that impression?”

She shrugged and glanced briefly at Magda. “At the end of the conversation he implied that I might not like New Orleans because it isn’t as liberal and morally degraded as New York.”

“New Orleans is just as filthy as New York; we just have more style.” Kyra reached out and turned off her p-pc. “Ladies, I know this has been difficult for you. Is there anything that I can do for you?”

“No.” Sara shook her head.

“Yes.” Magda put her hand on top of Sara’s and squeezed gently. “You can solve these murders quickly and understand that you won’t have any further access to Sara until this matter is resolved.”

Kyra nodded. “Where do you plan to go?”

“I don’t know. However, I won’t have my wife anywhere near an investigation concerning cops murdering people. It wouldn’t be healthy.”

“I don’t need to be coddled and pampered.” Sara pulled her hand free. “I intend to stay in my house.”

“That’s impossible.” Kyra returned before Magda could get her temper up. “Your house is a crime scene. I’m afraid I can’t let you back in until my teams have finished their investigation.”

“But it’s my home.”

“It’s a crime scene.” Kyra stood up and then shook her head. “Look, Sara, things are going to get very thick around here soon. Why don’t the two of you book a pleasure cruise to the moon?”

Sara turned to Magda. “Are you sure we can’t stay here in the city?”

“It would be best for you both if you didn’t,” Kyra murmured. “The fact is, I don’t know what happened in your house. There are two ways into the house now: through you and through me. If the men or women who hid these bodies want into the house to tamper with evidence or to retrieve things that we haven’t found yet, they might try for you. I doubt seriously that you want your spouse sitting in a jail cell for killing someone.”

Sara paled. “Just because she was in the military doesn’t mean she would be barbaric.”

Kyra raised an eyebrow and glanced Magda’s way. “She thinks you won’t be barbaric.”

“I’ll redefine medieval for the first person who comes her way.”

Sara’s gaze jerked between them for a moment, and then she sighed. “When can you get us on a shuttle, Inspector?”

“I’ll have my admin start work on it as soon as he gets here.” She glanced at her wrist comm-u and nodded. “He should be here now. Why don’t you ladies come upstairs with me to my office, and we’ll get started on the arrangements? If need be, Abel can collect any personal items you might’ve left in your house.”

## Chapter Two

Constable Anastasia Salanti sighed into the steaming cup of chocolate espresso sitting on her desk in front of her and didn't even look up when the office door opened. "I had two hours of sleep."

"I had none."

"How am I supposed to study for the sergeant's test if you keep me from sleeping?"

"You don't need sleep to study." Kyra waved her off. "We've got three dead bodies in an old police safe house."

Ana turned and looked at her. "Are you kidding me?"

"No." Kyra paused and looked at her. "You didn't listen to the news on the way in."

"No, I sat in blessed silence and plotted my revenge on you." She turned around and stuck her hand behind her computer screen. "I was going to hide this until you asked for it." Ana held out another chocolate espresso.

Kyra took it and laughed. "Thanks." She walked over to her desk and sat down. "Abel is arranging a few things for the current owners of the house, and I have to meet with the commander in a few minutes."

"Have you been to the scene?"

"Yeah." Kyra glanced up and raised an eyebrow. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"I'm your partner; why wasn't I called to the scene with you?" Ana took a deep swallow of her drink and then waved her hand. "It isn't like you're bothered by having to wake me up from much needed sleep."

"Dr. Marcos called me personally. If the call had come through dispatch, you would've been called."

“Oh.” Ana frowned. “Why didn’t Desi call me?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. When I got to the scene, the place was crawling with press. She’s new to the job so I guess we need to cut her some slack.”

“There must be a lot of pressure on her.” Ana frowned. She felt like an ass for complaining. “Being head of forensics for the entire Major Crimes squad can’t be a walk in the park.”

“I think she can handle it.”

“Yeah.” She slouched back in her chair. “You didn’t want me to go with you to the commander’s office?”

“No, I need you and Abel to go down to Police Plaza and pull the records on that house. I want every log from the house.”

“Every log?” Ana picked up her p-pc and opened a memo screen for the information. “How long was it used by the NOPD?”

“The city purchased it in 2146 and sold it last summer. Parker said that it takes a couple of years for bodies to do what they did in that room.”

Ana made a face and scrunched up her nose. “Bad?”

“Dr. Marcos called them soap mummies.”

“Bad.” Ana stood. “I’ll contact Abel and have him pick me up.”

“Yeah.” Kyra stretched her arms over her head and then sighed. “Watch your ass.”

“I love my ass.” She grinned and patted it. “It gets excellent care.”

“Send me the official blueprints of the house; I want to see if they match the ones given to the new owners.”

“I’ll transmit them first.”

Ana checked her comm-u for the time as she stopped by Abel’s desk. Punching in his code, she waited a few seconds while it connected. “Are you en route to the station?”

“No, I’m waiting for the transport to depart.”

“We need to go downtown to Police Plaza to retrieve the records for the safe house.” She leaned against his desk and then turned briefly to look it over. “Your desk is full.”

“Yeah, the inspector keeps me busy. I’ll be in front of the station in about thirty minutes.”

“I’ll meet you down front.” She ended the transmission and looked back into the office she shared with Inspector Moray.

If she were going to be truthful with herself, she’d admit that partnering with the senior inspector for Major Crimes was a huge source of stress. No one received the kind of attention Kyra Moray did, and her cases made the news-vids more often than not. Of course, having Kyra choose her as a partner had been a serious career boost. One she certainly couldn’t have turned her back on.

Kyra was sitting at her desk, focused on a report she was reading. Silky black hair fell over her shoulders and never seemed to be messy. At first, Ana had been a little concerned about being around a woman who always looked so put together. She had startling green eyes and the kind of permanent enhancements that only good money could buy. High cheekbones and full lips that Ana wasn't completely convinced were natural made up a classically beautiful face.

Kyra came from a wealthy family, yet she'd given up a lucrative career as a model and turned to law enforcement. Ana had found a couple of news stories on the Internet and had been surprised to learn that Kyra was not only Miss New Orleans but everyone in the pageant industry had pegged her as the next Miss North American Union. At nineteen, she'd had offers from several major league beauty enhancement companies, and she'd dropped all of it like it didn't matter. One day, Ana thought, she'd be comfortable enough with her partner to ask her why.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra picked up her p-pc and glanced at her comm-u. She knew that she'd probably find the chief of police with her commander. Delaying the meeting was pointless so she grabbed her jacket and shrugged it on over her holster. The large bullpen that housed the Major Crimes detectives was bursting with activity and cops. It seemed that the city of New Orleans no longer slept. She moved through the den without breaking stride to avoid the trauma of a conversation with an unhappy citizen.

In the past few months, she'd gotten a lot of vid-panel time, and the citizens of New Orleans had started to treat her as if they knew her. It had resulted in a number of situations that Kyra never wanted repeated. The key, she thought, was just not to make eye contact with them. It had been nice when people thought she was a bitch cop and avoided her. She wanted that back. Desperately. Maybe she could find a reporter to kick the shit out of later.

She paused at the commander's closed door, knocked, and waited for permission to enter. Commander Ethan Baker waved to her through the glass, and she opened the door. "I'm running a little behind."

She gave the chief of police, Joseph Dennis, a quick smile and sat down next to him in a chair in front of Baker's desk. The two men were drastically different in appearance: Dennis had a rough face and a nearly bald head, and Baker had neatly styled black hair. They were only about ten years apart in age. Kyra always appreciated the chief's refusal to bow to vanity. Most men his age would have been in an enhancement specialist's chair the same day they noticed they were starting to bald. It made him sexy, not a thought she was comfortable with. She turned her gaze to Commander Baker.

"Tell me what we have." Ethan leaned forward and rested his forearms on the desk in front of him.

“Three dead people in a house the city owned until about six months ago. Parker’s initial finding has indicated the bodies have been in the space at least two years. They’re mummified.”

“Christ.”

“Let’s not use the word ‘mummy,’” Joseph Dennis muttered. “It’s creepy.”

“Is there any sign of when the wall was built?” Ethan glanced briefly at the chief before focusing on Kyra’s face.

“No, but it isn’t on the plans the city sent the owners.” Kyra glanced down at her p-pc. “I have Ana and my admin working on the records at Police Plaza; they’ll send me the results when they have them. In the meantime, I thought I’d check in with Parker and Marcos. Parker already has the bodies back at the ME’s office.”

“Keep me informed, Inspector.” He held up his hand when Kyra started to stand. “Hold on. I’ve a few things on my desk to discuss.”

She retook her seat. “Okay.”

“One, you haven’t gone into the medical center to get your new nanobots.”

“I think a hundred and fifty bots is enough.”

“I don’t agree, and I worked hard to get the city to give me the funding to double our nanobots budget.” Chief Dennis raised an eyebrow at her frown. “Your commander and I both agree that having you do it will encourage others in your division to get theirs without having to threaten them with reprimand.”

Kyra slouched down in the chair, lips pressed together to keep from pouting. “Okay, fine. I’ll get it done soon.”

“Two, you haven’t had a vacation in twenty-three months.”

“I don’t have time for a vacation. I have ten cases on my desk right now.”

“Distribute all but the safe house case to detectives in your division and once you’ve dealt with that one, you’ll take at least seven days of vacation.”

“Fine.”

“And ... your hover-system for that monstrosity you call a transport vehicle is here.”

Kyra sat up abruptly. “Are you teasing me?”

“No, I’m not. Maintenance is installing it right now.”

“Oh, wow.” Kyra stood. “When will I get it back?”

“This afternoon. Get with someone in transport about an alternate vehicle.”

“I’ll transmit all reports to your p-pc as I get them.”

Ethan watched her hurry out of the door and looked at his superior. “I think she might have been giddy.”

Joseph laughed. “I guess everyone has a weak spot.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra leaned against the rocket-cycle she'd wrangled from a new guy in transport and glanced over the clean white bricks of Still Waters. The bar was fast becoming a cop hangout; she wondered if that bothered Alex. The door opened, and he strolled out just as she pulled off her helmet and shook her hair back.

"Good afternoon, Inspector." Alexander Waters, her current lover, stood six-foot-five, weighed around two hundred twenty pounds, and fulfilled every fantasy she had just by breathing.

The first time she'd seen him, the look of the man had turned her inside out and soaked her panties completely. Just four weeks had passed since that first night, him a near stranger, touching her and pushing into her body and life like a force of nature. He was one big sexy reason she was seriously considering that vacation her boss had told her she was going to have to take. She let her gaze drift over his dark brown skin and wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. The man always looked good enough to eat.

"Mr. Waters." She held out her hand and pulled him toward her when he took it. "I don't have much time. I promised Desi some food." She ran her hands down his chest and rested them at the waistband of the leather pants he wore slung low on his hips. "We match today."

Alex touched her cheek gently and tilted her head back so he could have her mouth. She moaned as he pulled her up off the cycle and into his arms. When he lifted his head, he pulled her closer and inhaled deeply. "I've missed you."

She tilted her head back and raised an eyebrow. "You were the one that took your ass to Florida to see your parents. Did Marcus come back with you?"

He nodded. "Yeah, and we brought our parents back with us."

Kyra stiffened. "Your parents are in New Orleans?"

"Yep. They are looking forward to meeting you." Alex laughed when the color drained from her face. "Relax. My mother is nothing like Aunt Clara." He paused. "Well, she doesn't practice Voodoo."

Kyra pulled free of him. "How could you do this?"

"My parents are eighty years old; they go where they damn please." Alex caught her as she turned and pulled her back against him. "Don't be mad. I'm looking forward to introducing you."

She stiffened and nearly melted into his body when he placed a soft kiss on her neck. "That's not fair, Alex."

"I don't play fair, baby. I never have." He lifted his head and eyed the rocket-cycle. "Where is your vehicle?"



“Oh!” She turned abruptly to face him and smiled. “I’m getting a hover-system installed. It had to be built to specs because I didn’t get the standard cop ride.” She paused. “What’s wrong? If you weren’t black, you’d be pale.”

He laughed softly and shook his head. “I’m not sure I am excited about you getting a hover-system.”

“I’m required to have one. I’m a cop.” She grinned as she said it. “You’re just jealous because the government hasn’t given approval for civilian use.”

“I think if a city cab driver can cruise around in one I should be able to, too.” Alex grinned and pulled her in for another kiss. She opened to the kiss immediately, wrapping her arms around him with a sigh. He lifted his head. “The food should be ready.”

Kyra threaded her fingers through his and let him pull her toward the entrance of the bar. “How’s business?”

Alex motioned toward the packed tables. “The lunch crowd is decidedly blue.”

She glanced over several uniformed cops and laughed. “If it bothers you, I’ll discourage it.”

“I haven’t decided yet.” He let go of her hand. “I’ll get the food.”

Kyra spent a few seconds watching his ass and then scooted up on a barstool. Marcus Waters, the famous retired jazz artist/pain in Kyra’s ass, stood behind the bar. “Hey, was it your idea for your parents to come to New Orleans?”

Marcus laughed and pushed several braids off his shoulder. “Inspector, are you interrogating me?” He leaned against the bar and smiled. “You know most women like me.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s your money.” Kyra grinned when his mouth dropped open briefly.

“You’re one mean cop.”

Shaking her head, she turned toward the kitchen and slid off the stool when she saw Alex approaching with a bag. “Thanks.”

Alex placed the bag on the bar and looked over her face. “She hasn’t contacted you, has she?”

Kyra’s gaze dropped briefly to the floor, and she took in a deep breath. “No, Glory hasn’t called me.”

“She will.”

She took the bag of food from the bar and shook her head. “Not for a while, yet. I should have paid more attention to her. I didn’t realize how upset she was ... and I’m a fool for it. I don’t know how I could have expected her to be okay once she left the hospital. My best friend was raped and nearly killed by a serial killer ... and I wasn’t what she needed me to be.”

"It's barely been two weeks since you put Aaron Belton in jail." Alex glanced briefly toward his brother as he guided Kyra toward the front door of the bar. "You've had a lot to deal with the past few days, especially after the incident with Donald Rose."

"Aaron butchered that man's child." Kyra opened one side of the saddlebag container on the back of the rocket-cycle and shoved the food in. Willa Rose had been Aaron Belton's last victim. Donald Rose had tried to take him down in broad daylight during a prison transfer. She'd barely managed to keep the man from getting killed by the uniforms on duty. Putting restraints on that grieving father had probably been one of her worst moments as a cop. "I don't blame him for trying to kill him."

"I know."

"I did what I could. The DA was thinking to make an example of him. To tell the city that vigilante justice wouldn't be tolerated."

"Is that why he had that pricey lawyer from New York Dome?"

"My grandmother has her ways." Kyra shrugged. Using her grandmother's power or wealth even for such a good reason made her uneasy. "The community service will be good for him. I heard that his wife and remaining children decided to serve it with him. Maybe as a family they can learn to find constructive ways to deal with their grief." Kyra swallowed. "Not all of Aaron's victims even have that."

"Glory doesn't blame you for what Aaron Belton did to her. She needed some time to herself to heal, and she chose to do it somewhere other than New Orleans."

Kyra blinked rapidly and cursed herself for the tears that had sprung up in her eyes. "She didn't tell me where she was going. I don't even know how she was when she left."

"Marcus took her to the airport."

She turned and glared. "What?"

"She asked him to and he agreed. He doesn't know where she went."

"How could you keep this from me?" Kyra started toward the bar again but Alex grabbed her.

"That's why. He did the woman a favor and doesn't deserve your wrath. I know you're angry with Glory for not being up-front with you and leaving without telling you, but hammering on my brother isn't going to help the situation."

Kyra didn't agree but she relaxed in his hold. "I have work to do."

Alex pulled her closer and forced her to meet his gaze. "Don't put this between you and me."

"I can't help her if I don't know where she is."

"This is her way of telling you that she doesn't want your help."

"If I had caught up with that bastard before he took her ..." Kyra's voice broke, and she looked away from him. "His advocate has already filed to have him declared incompetent to stand trial. He's crazy, but he knew exactly what he was doing."

"You regret not killing him."

"I do." Kyra met his gaze. "But not just for Glory."

"I know." Alex sighed and guided her toward the rocket-cycle. "I believe you have a few people who work for you to harass."

Kyra yanked the helmet off the handlebar and turned to him. "If she doesn't come back by Christmas I'm going to find her and drag her ass home."

"I think she knows that, too." He watched her put on the helmet. "You know, you look pretty hot on this thing."

"Save it for later." She slid astride the cycle and looked him over. "I'll come over after I go off duty. You'd better rest up."

"That sounds suspiciously like you're going to use me for mindless sex."

"No doubt." Kyra grinned when he laughed and pulled the helmet's face shield down. She engaged the motor and shot out into traffic.

Kyra stopped in the entrance of the house on Rose Street and took in the details around her. The forensics unit had concentrated their work in the small closet. Dr. Desdemona Marcos was standing with her hands on her hips, glaring at a crime scene tech easily twice her size.

"I tell you what ... get on your p-pc and buy yourself a copy of the *Dumbass's Guide to Forensic Science*."

"Dr. Marcos, it was a simple mistake."

"There are no simple mistakes in gathering evidence of a crime. The mere fact that you think so makes it clear you aren't suited for the field!" Desi took in a deep breath. "Get the hell off my scene. You'll receive your termination file by the morning."

"You can't do that. I worked hard for this job."

"You should have worked harder on your procedures, Mr. Pulman." Desi returned. "As far as I can tell the only thing you've ever done with any amount of skill is kiss ass."

Kyra watched the exchange in silence and didn't miss the glare the dismissed technician passed Desi's way. He focused on her and started to open his mouth. She pulled off her sunshields and raised an eyebrow. "Only authorized personnel are allowed on this scene."

He turned on his heel, gathered his equipment, and left.

"Thanks." Desi glanced toward the bag. "I hope that's for me."

"Half." Kyra glanced around. "Is there a table in the kitchen?"

“Yeah.”

She followed the younger woman into the kitchen and tossed the bag on the table. “I have no idea what he sent.”

“I never worry about not liking the food.” Desi sat down and tore into the bag. “The man is a god.”

Kyra laughed and sat down across from her. “He’s something else.” She tapped her fingers on the table and then accepted the carton of food Desi offered. “Marcus took Glory to the airport.”

Desi paused, a chicken finger dangling from her hand. “Can we talk about the case? I have lots of stuff to go over with you.”

She raised an eyebrow and opened her own box of food. “Dr. Marcos, are you keeping a secret from me?”

Shoving the whole chicken finger in her mouth, Desi shook her head, chewed rapidly, and then blushed. She swallowed and lowered her head to the table. “Don’t make me tell you.”

“I’m not going to make you do anything.”

“I told her I didn’t want to know.” Desi threw up her hands and then crossed her arms over her breasts. “She said someone needed to know in case something horrible happened.”

“Glory has always been one to plan for disaster.” Kyra paused briefly as she thought about her best friend. They’d met by chance in a junior beauty pageant that neither one of them were particularly interested in winning, as neither could imagine dealing with being crowned Little Miss Crawfish. “I guess it comes from losing her parents when she was so young. When she came to live with my grandmother and me, we hoped that she would heal more quickly. Grandmother had to pull strings from here to Washington to get custody of her. She had money-hungry relatives coming out of the woodwork. People she’d never even met were fighting over her money.”

“Her life would’ve been very different if your grandmother hadn’t interfered.”

“Yes.” Kyra nodded and then laughed softly. “Did you know that she was crowned Little Miss Crawfish when she was eight? She vowed right then and there that she’d never suffer such an affront to her dignity again. Ever.”

“She said you were crowned Little Miss Crawfish.”

Kyra pursed her lips briefly. “She would. I’d go kick her ass if I knew where she was.”

“She’s in Tuscany.” Desi blurted out and then grabbed another chicken finger. “At a counseling retreat. The guests aren’t allowed electronics while they are there, but the management will forward a message if it’s an emergency.”

Kyra watched her for a moment and then sighed. “A counseling retreat?”

“Yeah, she has a lot of issues to deal with, and she is frustrated about the fear that she can’t get past.”

“Okay.” Kyra glanced over the food she was no longer hungry for and waved her hand. “Tell me what you’ve found.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“I’m not mad at anyone.” Kyra corrected. “The case, please.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana shoved another box onto the dusty storage shelf and reached for the next one. “I think she gave us this crap job so she wouldn’t have to get dirty.”

She brought the box back to the table and dusted her hands off. Abel Joshua, womanizer extraordinaire, was a walking wet dream. He was exactly the kind of man she normally picked out for physical relationships. The fact that she wasn’t remotely interested in him confused her. He had a great body, skin that glowed like honey, and all that white-blond hair that he rarely ever bothered to tame falling down his shoulders.

Abel looked up from the log that he was scanning into his p-pc. “Yeah, I figured something like that myself.”

“I think they keep these old paper records to show us how hard cops used to have it. Anything interesting so far?”

He shook his head. “We’ll need to spend some time compiling all of this data and trying to find a time period before the wall went up.” He paused and then looked toward her. “You realize that this is going to involve cops.”

“I know. The inspector told me to watch my ass.”

Abel grinned. “It’s worth watching.”

She sat down in front of him and opened a new box. “I’m seriously glad we stopped using paper records ten years ago. At least the most current logs will be easy to pull.”

“Yeah.”

“And don’t go watching my ass. I’m not interested in being in your stable.” She pulled out a log and started flipping through it until she got to the sign-in sheet.

“That’s a crude thing to say.”

“It’s honest.”

“I would never refer to my female friends as a stable.”

“Only because you know they’d be insulted.” She glanced up at him and found him smiling. “You can’t even deny it.”

“Don’t hold it against me, Ana. I’m just looking for a few good women.”

“Desi and I are considering putting a warning label on your forehead.” Ana focused on the screen of her p-pc. “It would save a lot of women some time.”

“Do you have a man right now?”

“I’ve a friend. He serves his purpose quite well.” Ana glanced up. “Why? You aren’t seriously interested in me.”

“You’re hot, of course, but no. I wasn’t asking for me.” Abel returned to his p-pc and dug a log out of the box she’d just brought to the table.

“Who were you asking for?”

He shook his head. “I promised I wouldn’t say who. Look, if you decide that you’d like to meet up with someone new on a personal level let me know, and I’ll let the other person know.”

“I hate when people do this.” Ana frowned and started punching at the touch screen of her p-pc. “If someone thinks I’m attractive and would like to date me, they should just say so.”

“Not everyone can be as direct as you are.” He glanced up as the door opened. “Good afternoon, Inspector.”

Kyra glanced between them and then focused on Ana who was staring at her p-pc. “Constable, I came to collect you.” She waved a helmet and grinned when Ana paled. “I thought you might want to come along for the ride when I pick up my vehicle from maintenance.”

Ana lifted her gaze to Kyra’s and grinned. “It came?”

“Yes, it did.”

She jumped up and shoved her unfinished log toward Abel. “Can you handle this?”

“Yeah, go. I heard from one of the techs that the inspector’s hover-system is the most powerful in the city.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana slid off the back of the rocket-cycle and pulled off her helmet. “You’re insane.”

Kyra snorted and pulled off her own helmet. She watched Ana run her fingers through her wavy brown hair. “Don’t forget, Constable, I’ve been in that ‘sex on wheels’ you call a car.”

Ana smiled fondly as if she was picturing her cherry red Corvette convertible. “Yeah, I love that car.”

Kyra walked over to her parked vehicle and looked it over. “Check it for scratches.”

Ana obligingly walked around to the other side of the two-ton all-terrain vehicle, checking its shiny black paint for nicks or scratches. “None that I can see.”

“Inspector Moray.”

Kyra turned and looked toward a maintenance technician who was coming her way. He was a lanky young man with ebony skin and long braids that were every color imaginable. "Is it ready?"

"As promised. But we need to go over a few things." He paused and then offered his hand. "Reginald Snow."

"Call me Kyra, but only because you made one of my dreams come true."

"It's a sweet-ass ride." He sucked in a breath. "I took it for a spin this morning. I had to test it, you know."

She laughed. "You're lucky that I've already decided I like you."

He grinned. "Okay, a few rules. One -- your hard-deck for this thing is nine hundred feet. In most systems, it's twelve hundred, but your load is too heavy for that. That will still get you over other vehicles and the traffic control system in case of an emergency. Two -- you're only to use the hover-system on police business. I trust that you will, but I have to say it. Three -- the commander told me to tell you to keep it under a hundred miles per hour within the city limits."

"I'll be sure to let the commander know that you informed me of the proper use of the hover-system." She handed him the helmet she still carried.

Kyra opened the door and looked at Ana across the front seat. She was standing on the passenger side with the door open. "Are you going to get in?"

"I was thinking that you could test it without me."

"Pansy. Besides, we don't have time to play at the moment."

Ana frowned and then glanced around in the vehicle. "Does this have that cushy accident foam?"

"All vehicles made after 2160 are required to have that stuff. They wouldn't let me take it out."

"Okay, fine." Ana climbed up in and started arranging her harness. "Can we go outside the city limits and tear around for a while?"

"No, we are due at the ME's."

\* \* \* \* \*

Abel shoved the last box of mini-discs into its slot and picked up his p-pc. The complete report was nearly finished transmitting to his backup system and the inspector's unit. His comm-u went off, and he thumbed the manual switch.

"Hey, big sis."

"Are you done?"

"Yep, I'm about to leave."

"I'm at the ME's; meet me over here, and I'll help you with the data."

“Yeah, be there in a few.”

He ended the call and turned to pick up his things. Abel paused and then shoved his p-  
pc into his pocket. The outer door to the archives room had opened and closed. Realizing  
that he wasn't alone, he turned to face whoever was coming.



## Chapter Three

Desi looked up as Kyra and Ana entered the large exam room they were using for the three mummies. “Have you guys seen Abel?”

Ana shook her head. “No.”

“He should have been here an hour ago.” Desi frowned and looked down at her comm-u. “It isn’t like him to be late without calling to make some lame-ass excuse.”

“Yes, I’ve found him to be very poor at ass-kissing, lying, and showing up on time.” Kyra checked her own comm-u for the time. “However, he’s pretty and very good at everything else.”

“I think I’ll go over to the Plaza to check on him.” Desi moved to gather her bag.

“He transmitted the log file to me about an hour ago.” Kyra glanced around the room, taking in the worried faces of the people around her. “I’ll go.”

“I’m going.” Desi’s chin jerked up when Kyra’s gaze narrowed.

“Fine. Get your little ass moving.” Kyra motioned toward the door and then looked at Ana. “Try calling his home and check with dispatch for traffic accidents that might fit his vehicle.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It took Kyra five minutes to get through the crowd in the hall outside archives, and that was after Desi suggested she pull out her gun and start shooting people who got in her way. What they found in archives wasn’t what either of them expected.

Kyra walked fully into the room and around the med-tech who was working on a head wound. “Mr. Joshua, did you fall down?”

"Yeah, but I had help." Abel cast a glance at the med-tech. "Look, just give me an activation shot for my bots and back off."

"You don't have enough nanobots for that to be an effective treatment."

Kyra glanced between them. "Activate his bots and go away."

"Fine." The med-tech pulled a reactivation unit and shoved it up against Abel's arm.

"Dr. Marcos, clear this room."

She was silent until Desi closed the door behind the med-tech. "How long were you out?"

"Thirty-five minutes, maybe more. I heard the door open, but I was in an area behind the shelves." He motioned with his hand. "I walked toward the door and two men rushed me. At least, I assume they were men. I got in a few hits, but one of them took me down with a stunner-baton." Abel moved in the chair and rubbed his ribs a little.

"How many nanobots do you have working in your system?"

"I have the standard allotment for the work I did in the Air Force."

"That isn't an answer, Mr. Joshua." Her gaze narrowed as she accessed him.

"I was in Special Operations, Inspector. I have eight hundred bots; just enough to almost think you can feel them."

"I have a hundred fifty, and I think I can feel them," Kyra said dryly.

"You'd have to have several thousand to feel them." Desi pulled a health scanner out of her bag and brought it over to Abel. "And even then, it's so minimal that most of the nerves in the body learn to ignore them." She activated the device and started to scan her brother. "Two of your ribs have hair-line fractures, and it looks like you might have a concussion." She took a deep breath. "When are we going to talk about this bullshit? For the love of God, someone came in here under the noses of a couple hundred cops and attacked him, then walked out with evidence."

"I'm fine."

"You're bleeding," Desi snapped.

He grabbed her hand. "I'm fine, Des. Just take a few minutes to relax and think about this."

"He's right." Kyra pulled a chair over to them. "Okay, what did they take?"

"My p-pc." He looked around the room and motioned toward the filing units. "I imagine they took whatever relevant records with them."

"Is this a problem?"

"No, I'd already transmitted the information to you." Abel flexed his hand and then rolled his shoulders. "I shouldn't have turned my nanobots off. That stunner wouldn't have even fazed me."

"I understand why you didn't have them on." Kyra stood up and turned her back on the two of them. "I didn't think it would get this intense so soon. We haven't even identified the bodies."

"It's only going to get worse once those three people have names. They were killed for a reason, and hiding their bodies in a police safe house was savvy but risky. These people aren't average, everyday criminals." Desi pulled a pressure bandage out of her kit and slapped it on Abel's forehead over the large cut he had there.

"Hey, one hit was enough." He offered his sister a glare, and she glared right back.

"You're lucky you have so many bots or that would likely scar."

"What about the time period on the murders?"

Desi nodded. "Parts of the remains are just bone and the parts that went through saponification are very fragile. I've already set up a scan to date the bones and clothing fibers we found. The results should be in by now. I imagine Dr. Parker has them ready for your review."

"Good. The two of you go join Ana at the ME's office, and I'll meet you over there."

Kyra watched them leave silently. Since she'd started working with the two of them, she'd wondered a lot what it would be like to have a sibling. They were closer than most people she knew; Desi and Abel's relationship was strong. It was obvious they had grown up in a home full of love. She certainly couldn't complain; her grandmother had done the best she could after her mother had taken her own life, but siblings had a different relationship.

She walked to the exit of the archives room and wasn't surprised to see the hallway empty. It wasn't hard to imagine what all the cops in the building were thinking. Her temper was well known, and that was a source of embarrassment. Kyra ran her hands through her hair and walked toward the elevator. The trip up to the top floor of the building was a quick one. The elevator doors opened to a large bullpen area much like her own. The room was silent; detectives turned to stare as she left the elevator and headed straight for the senior inspector's office.

Kyra pulled open the door without knocking and stalked in. She found Inspector Todd Conrad sitting at his desk waiting for her. He probably had twenty years on her, and had been a cop for nearly thirty years. She'd spent six months in his department before transferring to District 4 more than ten years ago. "I want the security footage for the archives floor for the last two hours."

"The vid-recording system for that level of the building is undergoing repairs." He leaned back in his chair. "I heard what happened to your admin. I plan to conduct an investigation into the matter."

"Abel is fine, and since he'd already forwarded the report he'd generated to me and the rest of my investigative team, nothing important was lost." She sat down in a chair in front of his desk. "I don't keep visitor chairs in my office; it discourages socialization."

"I'll have to remember that." He looked pointedly at her. "Surely you don't think cops are responsible for the attack on your admin."

"Unless you're going to sit there and tell me the security in this building is so lax that any jackass could walk in off the street and enter a restricted area of Police Plaza, it's the only reasonable answer."

"I'll conduct an investigation, as I said. You aren't authorized to interrogate anyone in this building."

Kyra smiled. "Here's what you don't understand, Todd, I don't need your permission to do a damn thing. One of my people was assaulted on your turf and case material was taken from him and the archives area. There are obviously people in the NOPD that would prefer the three bodies in that safe house never receive justice for what was done to them." She stood up and planted both hands on his desk. "I'm not a cop to make friends, Todd. I'm a cop to serve and protect the people of New Orleans. I will find out who attacked my admin, and I will find out who is responsible for the deaths of those three people in that house on Rose Street."

"Be careful that you don't get in over your head."

"Be careful that you don't get in my way."

\* \* \* \* \*

She found Ana, Desi, and Abel eating in a small break room next door to the large exam room. "Okay, tell me what's up."

Abel motioned to his sister with his fork. "Desi is working through the security footage from archives."

"Inspector Conrad told me the vid-recording system for that level is under repair." Kyra frowned as she turned to look at Desi.

"It is but while it's under repair, they reactivated the older system for some level of security." Desi motioned to her. "Come here, I'm almost finished with the hack."

"You're hacking into Police Plaza?" Kyra frowned at her.

"Relax, Inspector, I've been hacking into Police Plaza since I was ten. I have no problems avoiding Computer Sentinel's security measures. The old system isn't nearly as advanced as what we have today. Just video instead of the standard eye, body, and face scan. Still, it might show us something."

"Good." Kyra watched the compu-station screen for a while and then looked toward Abel. "Better?"

"Yeah, I'll be a hundred percent in the morning."

"I expect you'll let me know if you're otherwise." She shook her head when he grinned and returned her attention to Desi. "Well?"

"It's compiling now."

Kyra frowned as the vid file started to play. "That's a crappy picture."

"Yeah, well, this system was just one step up from standard digital recording, and it hasn't seen a maintenance tech in years. I guess we're lucky it's working at all."

They watched in silence as Desi sped the recording up to the time of the attack. Two men dressed in nondescript clothes and facemasks moved down the hall and into the records room. A few minutes later, they left with four boxes of materials.

Desi sighed. "That was a waste of my time."

"Are there any other cameras?"

"No." She shook her head. "The old surveillance system is only functioning in lock-up and three hallways on the underground level."

"Archives and what?"

"An exit-only hallway for prisoner transport and the gym." Desi shrugged.

"Nothing important?"

"Nothing at all. The halls were empty during the entire time period."

"Not really." Kyra moved away from her, lips pursed in thought. "How many people would have known the surveillance in archives was down?"

"Almost everyone in Police Plaza would've known." Ana sat back in her chair and frowned. "Would they have known about the backup system?"

"It's old and hasn't been used in forty years. I doubt seriously anyone was notified that it was engaged." Desi stood up and stretched. "The only reason I know is that I know a few of the techs in the building, and they'd mentioned the old system sometime back. They play with it a lot."

"So if everyone knew the surveillance was disabled and the secondary system is basically off the radar ... why did those two men show up with masks over their faces?" Kyra focused on her partner. "Theories, Salanti?"

"The two individuals responsible don't work in police plaza, but do have a working knowledge of the building." Ana stood up and went over to the compu-station where Desi still sat. "They are both slight of build, and you can't tell if they're both male."

"Right." Kyra agreed.

"Unless they actually planned on killing me they would have still had to wear masks to avoid being identified." Abel closed the pizza box in front of him and stood up from the table.

"Let's say they didn't know you were there." Kyra responded. "I came to pick up Ana, and they might have believed she was working on her own."

Ana stood up and stretched. "So, they think that I probably haven't figured out which time period we're going to need ... and they come along after I leave to snag the records."

“Yeah. Except now that they have Abel’s p-pc, they are going to know that you guys already had the information they were trying to hide,” Desi murmured. “And they’ll know the information had already been transmitted.”

Kyra nodded and then glanced at her comm-u for the time “You guys finish up here, and you’re dismissed for the day. I’ll expect you all in the morning at the station. I’m going to check in with Parker, and then I’ll be off duty.” She paused and closed her eyes briefly as she considered what she wanted to say next. “If any of you would like to back off this case before things get really nasty, I won’t hold it against you.”

“No way.” Desi shook her head.

“We can handle anything you can.” Ana raised her chin slightly. “Don’t even think about trying to send me on vacation or something.”

Kyra nodded and shifted her gaze to Abel. He looked up from the portable computer station he was working on. “Well?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good.” She turned and left the room in search of Dr. Jeffrey Parker. She found him in his office eating a bag of greasy chips and concentrating on a report he was reading.

Jeffrey Parker had been the chief medical examiner for Districts 3 and 4 since she’d come to District 4. They didn’t always agree, and there had been times when they had fought vehemently over the work they did together. Still, she found him to be excellent at his job and a man she could trust. She couldn’t put her finger on the day they’d gone from combatants to friends, but she considered herself fortunate.

“Well?”

“They were all three shot in the back of the head, execution style. The female has several broken bones; she might have taken a beating before she died. She was also pregnant at the time of her death. The remains of her fetus were preserved through the saponification process. I’d estimate five or six months.”

“Anything else?”

“Based on the appearance of their bones and clothes, I’d say that the deaths occurred between ten and fifteen years ago.” Parker paused and walked over to the computer station that was compiling the dating data. “The computer concurs. The receipt we recovered from one of the men’s clothes is a good indication of the time of death.”

“You think the receipt was from the day they were killed?”

“Could be. It’s prime evidence either way. We can say for sure that the one male wasn’t placed in that room before May 21, 2147.” Jeffrey stood. “Come have a look.”

Kyra followed him out of the room and into the exam room where one table had been set aside for the clothes evidence. “Anything else from the clothes?”

“No, just standard for the time period. Lots of synthetic fibers and a few designer labels, but nothing the average person couldn’t afford. They were all in very good health when they

died but had no nanobots. Of course during that time period only military personnel were given health nanobots.” He walked over to a tray where he had the receipt placed in a stasis field. “The paper is very delicate.”

Kyra leaned over it and stared. It was a standard receipt from a convenience store. A few drinks, a bag of soy-chips, and news-vid mini-disc. She straightened and sighed.

“I know you would have preferred a different answer.” Jeffrey grimaced. “But it gets worse.”

“You retrieved the bullets?”

“Yep, they are standard police issue for the time. I’ve input the data for the bullets in the ballistic-fingerprinting database. Desi will get the results as soon as they come through.”

“But you don’t expect a match.”

“If a cop did this, he would have been smart enough not to use a gun that was registered in his name in the database.”

“You watch your ass, Parker. The attack on Abel isn’t going to be an isolated event.”

“I can take care of my own.” He glanced up and raised an eyebrow. “You’re hovering.”

Kyra sighed, walked to the counter opposite the table, and hopped up on it to sit. “I sent the others home.”

Jeffrey leaned against the table and crossed his arms over his chest. “Okay, give.”

She pursed her lips and then sighed. “Alex’s parents are in town. He didn’t even tell me he was bringing them back with him.”

“It’s a big step to meet the parents.”

“Yes, it is. He doesn’t think it’s a big deal.”

“To him it probably isn’t.” He shrugged when Kyra glared at him. “Look, the man is obviously very interested in a future with you, and he wants you to meet his parents. It’s important to him, and it demonstrates a level of seriousness on his part. All you have to do is put on a smile and meet them.”

“Put on a smile and meet them,” Kyra muttered as she checked her reflection in the rearview mirror of her vehicle. “Easy for him to say.”

She glanced up the building to the location of Alex’s apartment and found the lights on. It was nearly one o’clock in the morning, but she’d expected him to be awake. Exiting her vehicle, Kyra went inside and into the elevator. The few days he’d been gone had seemed like weeks, and the knowledge that she’d missed him was very unsettling. The few moments they’d shared earlier in the day simply hadn’t been enough.

She pressed her palm against the ident-panel next to his door, entered, and grinned at the sound of running water. The only thing better than Alex Waters naked was Alex Waters wet and naked. She shrugged out of her jacket and tossed it over the couch as she headed

toward his bedroom. Soft jazz was playing in the bedroom, the lights were dim, and the bathing room door was open. She could see him through the glass wall of his shower and for a moment, she just stared.

Muscles moved under his dark, brown skin, water slid down the length of him like a lover, and all she could think was that he was hers. Her hand drifted to her stomach and caught at the buttons of her pants. Just looking at the man made her wet and needy. No man had ever turned her on like he did. Kyra shrugged out of holster and tossed it into a chair then pulled a fitted shirt and pants off. P-pc, comm-u, and the comm-u's earpiece quickly followed suit. She figured he knew she was there, but found it amusing that he hadn't turned to look at her.

Naked, she walked into the bathroom and around the corner to enter the shower area.

"I've waited all day for you." He turned and pulled her into his arms. "I hope you're prepared."

"Oh, yes." She nodded and pulled his head down to hers.

The kiss was a hard and relentless invasion. Alex slipped his tongue into her mouth as he lifted her and coaxed her legs around his waist. Pressing her against the wall, he lifted his head and watched her eyes widen as he pushed nine and a half inches of thick cock into her. Her pussy clenched around him immediately and she arched against him.

"Are you always wet like this?" He buried his face in the side of her neck and took a deep breath.

"For you." She tightened her hands on his shoulders as he began to move. "I missed you."

"Me or my cock?"

Kyra laughed softly and a shudder slid down the length of her back as he pushed in and out of her with the kind of strength and skill that amazed her. "Both. I missed both."

"Good." He cupped her ass firmly with both hands as he moved away from the wall and toward the built-in bench in the shower.

Sitting down he lifted her off him so she could arrange her legs but stopped her when she tried to lift to take his cock back into her.

"I'm not done with that, yet." Kyra wrapped her arms around him and pressed her hard-tipped breasts against his chest.

He laughed, pushed his fingers into her hair, and pulled her forward for a kiss. Hard need moved between them as the kiss deepened. As he ended the kiss, he lifted her upward and let her take him. "I missed you, too."

Kyra took in a deep breath as he ran the tips of his fingers along her jaw. "Good. I would hate to think I was miserable by myself."

Alex moved his hands over her body, taking in her athletic but curvy form as she began to move. "The way you do that should be against the law."



She let her head fall back as she gripped his shoulders and increased her pace. Pulling up and then sliding down on his cock with measured strokes, she pushed them both closer to orgasm. Alex moved forward on the bench and spread his legs, his hands moving down her back to her ass.

Kyra stilled briefly and tightened her hold on him. "I need more."

"I know."

Holding on to her he slid off the bench and lowered her to the wet tile floor of the shower. Kyra planted her feet on the floor and lifted her hips. "More."

Alex hissed in a breath as her nails dug into the flesh of his back. The pain of it stole his breath, and the pleasure that slid along behind it wrenched a groan from him. "I'll never get enough of you."

"Fuck me." Kyra arched up against him and cried out when he met her demand. Water from the still activated showerheads pooled around them and streamed over him as he slammed into her with as much force as she could take.

Her vision darkened briefly and she stiffened beneath him as she came. She felt her muscles tighten around his invading cock and held him tightly as he slowed his pace. Kyra sighed against his lips and opened her mouth to his kiss. He lifted his mouth from hers and met her gaze as he rocked deeply inside her.

Kyra lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist; her eyes focused on his. The intimacy of the moment was shocking to her. There was a part of her that would have shied away from the connection they were building if she thought he would allow it. In that stark moment, with the rest of the world pushed away she realized that for the first time in her life she was in love. Anything she'd experienced in the past was pale and small in comparison. The urge to tell him was overwhelming; she bit down on her bottom lip to keep from saying it.

This wasn't the moment to deal with something as complicated as love. When she thought she had the impulse in check she released her lip and rubbed her thumb across his lips as she cupped his jaw. "Come for me." She watched him close his eyes briefly. "Give in to me."

He lowered his head and tucked his face into the side of her neck as he started to move. She held on and sucked in a breath when he jerked against her and groaned against her neck. He nipped the skin there with his teeth gently and then rolled off her to lie on his back beside her.

"You're the kind of woman that could kill a man with sex."

Kyra laughed and stood up from the floor. "Come wash my back."

"Yeah, give me a minute. I think I died a little bit there." He stood and then sat down on the bench they'd abandoned earlier.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex watched her at the mirror as Kyra ran her fingers through her hair. She wasn't a vain woman, and it was surprising, considering how beautiful she was. Even bare-assed, she still managed to look like a cop, though. There had been women in his life who had turned him on, made him mad, and often frustrated him. But none of them compared to her. A part of him wanted to run like hell from it, but he knew without a doubt that she was *it* for him. He did wonder if she would back off once she realized how he felt about her.

Kyra turned from the mirror and eyed him with an expression that could only be called predatory. Alex couldn't help but smile as she walked toward him. "What's on your mind, Inspector?"

She crawled up onto the bed beside him and leaned into him. Pressed her lips to his shoulder before baring teeth to nip at him. "More."

"You're insatiable."

"Not true." She gasped a little when he turned and tossed her on her back with one swift movement. "I just like to be satisfied repeatedly."

She spread her legs for him as he moved over her. Her trust and desire for him was often startling. Kyra Moray wasn't a weak or demure woman by any means, but he probably made two of her. He knew she'd never back down, and he found that insanely sexy. Alex lowered his head and took one hard nipple into his mouth. She arched her back and moved under him restlessly.

Lifting his head, he moved down her body and spread her legs wider. "You're always in such a hurry."

She laughed softly and then jumped when he placed a soft kiss on the inside of one thigh. "You're a tease."

"I'm not teasing." He moved lower and pressed his tongue briefly against her entrance before sliding it up between her labia to the hard nub of her clit.

Her body tensed under him and her breathing deepened. Alex clamped onto her hips to hold her still and continued to play with her with his tongue. Her sharp, sweet taste never ceased to turn him inside out. The first time he slipped his tongue into her slit, he nearly came. No woman had ever tasted so good, so right.

"Alex." She ran her hands down the back of his head and rubbed her legs against his body.

He knew what she wanted, and he was happy to oblige. Moving to kneel between her prone legs, he watched as she moved on the bed and spread her legs wider for him. "Christ, you're sexy."

"I want you. Now."

"Anyway I want?"

"Yes." She nodded.

"Get on your knees."

Alex watched as she moved into position and presented. He ran his hands down her back, allowing his nails to scrape gently on her skin. Putting one hand on the small of her back, he moved her gently so her hips tilted and gave him an unobstructed view of her pussy. Just the thought of pushing his cock into her soft pink flesh made his hands shake a little. She pressed back against him, and he moved into position to take her.

Unable to help himself, he looked down and watched as he pushed his thick brown cock into her. The difference was insanely sexy. She accepted his invasion with a soft moan and a little hitch in her breath. Gripping her hips, he started to thrust into her with deep, measured strokes the way she liked. The muscles of her cunt clenched around him like a fist with each thrust, forcing his own orgasm closer and closer.

He stilled and closed his eyes. "No, don't move."

"Alex." She pushed back against him.

She sucked in a deep breath when he pulled from her and smacked her ass. "On your back."

Kyra turned to him and assessed him with a narrow gaze as she moved to do as he instructed. "You smacked my ass."

"You deserved it."

She laughed as she stretched out in front of him and spread her legs. "Come here."

Alex settled between her thighs and slid into her slowly. "I love the way you take me."

"I love the way you fill me." She wrapped her legs around his waist and held on as he began to thrust.

He slipped one hand between them to rub her clit as he increased their pace. She stiffened and rushed wet with orgasm against him. Their mouths met in a furious crush as he started to come. Tongues brushed and mated with each other as he stiffened and spilled into her.

## Chapter Four

Kyra shrugged on her holster and left Alex's bedroom. She found him in the kitchen. "You were right. It's easier to just keep clothes here."

He glanced up from the eggs cooking in a skillet. "Good. Have you gotten your new nanobots, yet?"

She rolled her eyes as she slid up onto a stool beside him at the bar and pulled her p-pc from its holder on her belt. "Actually, I have an appointment today to get them injected."

"Your commander put pressure on you to get them?"

"Yeah." She glared at his little smile. "The chief took time to lecture me as well. I don't need the damn things."

"You *do* need the damn things." He shoved a plate of eggs, bacon, and toast in front of her. "You need any edge you can get."

"You don't like them any more than I do."

"No, but I have them."

She inclined her head and then looked him over. "How many?"

"Why do you ask?"

"My admin was attacked last night. He told me that he had eight hundred nanobots. How many do you have?"

"How is he?"

"He appeared fine." She frowned when he nodded silently. "Are you evading my question?"

He went back to the counter and retrieved his own plate. "Let's go to the table."

Kyra followed him to the table with her plate and p-pc. "Alex."

“What?”

“You haven’t answered my question.” She sat down in front of him and took the fork he offered. “Tell me.”

“I have eight thousand nanobots, and yes, I was evading the question.” He leaned back in his chair. “My battle nanotech is cutting edge. It was necessary for the work I did. I also have two thousand dormant bots for organ regeneration.”

Kyra nodded and looked down at her food. She knew that Alex had spent ten years in the Special Forces branch of the North American Union’s military. Union Special Forces troops saw the most action of any of the military agencies that NAU created for defense. She’d never asked him any questions about what he did; a part of her hadn’t wanted to know the kind of life he’d lived during those ten years.

“I pulled your military records shortly after I met you.”

He nodded. “I figured that you did.”

“You aren’t upset?”

“No, you’re a cop. It’s your nature to check things out and look at people’s past. I don’t hold it against you.”

“Is this something that you’re comfortable talking about?” She picked up a piece of bacon and broke it apart.

“Not particularly, but I don’t want you to think that I’m keeping secrets from you.”

“You were dropped in a great many situations that could have gotten you killed.”

“Yes.” Alex nodded. “I led a highly trained group of men whose job it was to get into places that couldn’t be penetrated. To kill people who were believed to be untouchable.”

“An assassin.”

“I’ve been called that, yes. I can’t say that every person that I killed deserved it, but I can tell you that I followed orders and served my country. Does it keep me up at night? Sure, and I figure that makes me at least half normal.”

“How can your body handle eight thousand nanobots?” Kyra asked softly; she knew just enough about nanotech to know that the body couldn’t support that many bots without help.

“They altered my body chemistry and DNA so that my body could support the nanobots. Most people don’t have enough electrical charge for anything over four thousand bots. My body produces four times more than normal.”

She nodded. “Were there any side effects?”

His silence was telling. He pretended to focus on his food for a moment and then abandoned it. “Yeah, but only one that really matters. I should have already told you.”

“I’m a grown up, Alex. I can handle it.” She watched as he shifted in his chair. “Just tell me.”

"The genetic alterations made me infertile."

"Did they tell you that would happen before they messed with your DNA?"

"No. They had no way of knowing; I was the first. My body temperature elevated to such an extreme during the process that it killed my ability to make viable sperm. However, my results helped them create a process that wouldn't damage future recipients of the program."

She was silent for a moment. "The first night we were together you told me you took contraception shots."

"I lied. It's a lot easier to say that than to explain the real reason why I'll never get you pregnant. Before you ask, it's the only lie I've told you." He looked at her then, meeting her gaze with his own. "It isn't something I disclose often."

"I understand. This story certainly would have ruined the mood." She pushed her plate away. "I never thought about whether or not I'd have children."

"Yeah."

She met his gaze. "This doesn't change anything."

"Kyra, you know it damn well does. For a lot of women this is a deal breaker."

"I'm not a lot of women."

"I would agree with that."

"I just need to think about this a little." She stood, went to him, and slid into his lap. "You're important to me. Far more important than I ever wanted, and it's something I have to deal with. I have a job that could get me killed, and that's something you have to live with."

"I should have told you sooner." His hands moved over her back and pulled her closer.

"Yeah, and I should have called you when I got shot a few weeks ago." She leaned forward and rested her forehead against his. "I just need to think about it."

"Okay."

"Now, I have to go because I have a few asses to kick today."

"I told my parents we'd have dinner with them this evening."

"Man." Kyra frowned and then glared at him. "Do I have to put on a dress and fix my hair and stuff?"

"That's up to you. They've seen you on the vid-panel so it isn't like they haven't seen you dead on your feet and looking misused."

"I resent that."

"Doesn't make it any less true." He ran his fingers through her hair and shook his head. "I never expected to meet a woman like you."

"You never expected to survive North Korea." She met his gaze and saw that she'd guessed right. "Where are we meeting your parents for dinner?"

“Carlo’s, downtown, at eight.”

She nodded and reached for her p-pc to input a reminder. “If something foul happens, I’ll let you know.”

“They’re looking forward to meeting you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and watched Ana exit her apartment building. She waited until Ana had fastened herself in before speaking.

“I’m meeting his parents tonight.”

Ana raised an eyebrow. “That’s a big step.”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve only been seeing him a few weeks.”

“Yeah.” Kyra nodded and shrugged. “It feels like years. I can’t explain it.” She paused, aware that she’d always preferred to keep her partners at a professional distance. “Sometimes I look at him and wonder why he’s with me.”

“It’s your ass.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Glory told me that it’s turned many a man’s head to mush.” She winced when Kyra stiffened. “Look, I’m sure she’ll be back soon. You can’t blame her for wanting to escape a little.”

“I don’t blame her.” Kyra shoved the vehicle into drive and put on her sunshields. “Book a time for a vehicle charging. I’m down to the backup battery.”

“How’s Abel this morning?”

“I’m sure he’s fine.” She glanced Ana’s way and noticed that she was working with the dash workstation. “I’ll have to charge the batteries for the hover-system, too.”

Ana turned and glared. “Did you use it without me?”

“No, the energy exchange system is programmed to hit the hover-system for power before the backup battery.” She glanced toward her partner. “Promise.”

“You didn’t call and check on him?”

“No, I didn’t realize I needed to baby him.”

Ana flushed and then shrugged. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“If he was less than perfect this morning, he would have already called me to bitch about it. The man isn’t the type to grin and bear it.” Kyra slipped her earpiece in and engaged her comm-u. “Nana.”

The comm-u earpiece buzzed in her ear briefly and then connected. “Good morning, darling. How are things?”

“Good.” She paused. “I’m meeting Alex’s parents tonight.”

Sharon Moray laughed. “You aren’t worried, are you?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“Don’t be. You’re a Moray, and anyone who doesn’t like you isn’t worth knowing.”

Kyra laughed softly and fought the urge to curse the motorist in front of her. “So, what plot for world domination do you plan to work on today?”

“Hmmm, I have a meeting with the city planning committee about the park I want to fund and build in the downtown area. They are spouting some nonsense about historical buildings. The buildings down there are falling apart, and no legitimate historical association would go near them.”

“I’m sure they’ll see it your way.”

“Then I’m going to shoot over to Still Waters to see if I can arrange a meet with Alex’s parents.”

“Grandmother!”

Sharon laughed. “Just checking to see if you were actually listening.”

“I always listen to you. Otherwise, I’d have no idea how to protect the city from you.”

“Speaking of protection ... I purchased a dog.”

“A dog?”

“Yes, his name is Rufus.”

“Rufus,” Kyra repeated. “What sort of dog did you purchase?”

“He’s a Scottish Terrier.”

Kyra pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. “You bought a Scottish Terrier for protection?”

“I don’t want a man eater -- just an animal that will bark at an intruder.”

“If you engaged your security system like you’re supposed to, it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“The damn thing talks to me. I hate that.” Sharon huffed. “So, Rufus is at the veterinarian getting his shots, and then I’m picking up him up.”

“How old is he?”

“About two months; he has charming manners. You’re just going to love him. I have to run, dear. We’ll have lunch later in the week.”

“Of course.” Kyra ended the call and glanced briefly at Ana. “She bought a Scottish Terrier named Rufus.”

Ana laughed. “So I gathered.” She shrugged. “Maybe she gets lonely. It’s a big house.”



"I've thought about that. Last year I suggested she get a companion to live with her." Kyra shook her head. "She said she'd rather live in an extended-age facility than hire someone to keep her company."

"Well, she has a lot of friends and does attend events with the mayor. Maybe she'd just prefer to have her house to herself at the end of the day."

"Yeah."

Ana pulled down the in-dash compu-station and shoved her p-pc into it to update her data. "My uplink failed last night. I hate that ... it sucks when I have to give my p-pc over to tech support for maintenance."

"Well, maybe Desi could look at it for you."

"Yeah." Ana smiled. "She wouldn't take it and keep it for weeks."

"You know I've carried a p-pc for about four years; when I first got it I couldn't for the life of me figure out what I'd use it for. Now it's like my arm or something."

Ana laughed. "Yeah, I get that. So, who do you think attacked Abel?"

"Someone who was afraid that those records held something important. Whoever they were, they didn't play with the big dogs. Otherwise they would have known the records were already taken care of." Kyra glanced briefly at Ana as she changed lanes and gave another driver an evil look. "I hate these people sometimes."

"People can be a pain in the ass." Ana looked out the passenger window. "Have you ever hooked up with a woman?"

"Why do you ask? Meet some girl that strikes your fancy?" Kyra glanced over at her and noticed that Ana looked tense. "Oh. You did."

Ana sighed and looked toward her. "I think so."

"Well, okay. No, I've never been involved with a woman on a sexual level. It's something I considered and would've certainly indulged in if I'd come across a woman I found attractive."

"That easy, huh?"

"You and I both know that sex doesn't have to be complicated. So, you're interested in a woman ... it could be worse."

"How?"

"You could *not* be interested in anyone." Kyra chuckled when Ana sighed again. "Seriously. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"No. I suppose not."

"So, worry about chasing this fortunate young woman later. What's on the work agenda?"

"I thought I'd start searching through people who were in the house in May of 2147. I know that Abel will be generating a list of cops who were in the house, but I thought I

would concentrate on any material witnesses that we placed there during that time period. If something was off or wrong during that time, one of them might remember something.”

“Good.”

“I’ll grab the list and go over to the ME’s to work on it. Sort of keep off the radar.”

Kyra glanced briefly her way as she pulled into a parking spot. “Yeah, okay.”

“You don’t think it’s a good idea?”

She turned off the vehicle and was silent as she unbuckled her harness. “If you’re concerned about your safety ... I’d like to know.”

“I put on a badge and gun every morning.” She shrugged. “Becoming a cop wasn’t a fashion statement for me. I figured if I was with Parker it would be easier for you to do what you have to do. Desi and Abel will be glued at the hip until this is solved so traveling in pairs seems like a good idea.”

“Easier for me?”

“Last night, you gave me an out not because you thought I was afraid but because you didn’t want to be responsible for me.”

Kyra felt heat stain her cheeks. “That makes me sound selfish.”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. I just haven’t proven to you, yet, that I can handle myself.” Ana shrugged. “We’ve only been partners a few weeks.”

“So, you’re saying you’ll be patient with me.”

“Yeah.” She pulled her p-pc out of the dash station as she undid the harness. “I figure it’s the least I can do.”

Kyra laughed. “Just for that you get to walk to the ME’s office.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“What’ve you found out so far?” Commander Ethan Baker sat down at his desk and focused serious blue eyes on Kyra.

“We believe the bodies were placed in the room around the end of May. One of the men had a receipt in his pocket dated May 21, 2147.”

“How is Mr. Joshua?”

“He’s fine.”

“Inspector Conrad’s commander called me this morning.”

“I hope you told her where to stick it.” Kyra glanced toward her commander and grinned at his weary expression. “Come on. Janelle Copeland is a career pain in the ass. The only reason she made commander is because she was too damn old to leave on the street, and they couldn’t force her to retire.”

“You were in her house threatening her people.”

“Whoever attacked Abel could have killed him. They are just fortunate that he can take care of himself.”

“What did they take?”

“His p-pc and the physical records for May, June, and July of 2147.” She sat down in a chair in front of his desk.

“The reorganization of the city’s police force began in March of 2142. The task force formally disbanded in January of 2147, but there were solitary undercover operations in the city for nearly a year afterward. There were a lot of dirty cops that the net simply didn’t catch.”

“Bad cops happen. It isn’t something I like to think about, but I’m sure there are plenty in this station and every other station in the city. True, the corruption isn’t rampant like it was before the reorganization, and the police force has to answer for its actions.” Kyra glanced around his office. “Don’t you miss the street?”

“Sometimes. I have to admit that sitting in this office all day dealing with a bunch of crap that can’t really be called cop work gets to me sometimes. Then I go home to my wife, and I remember what it was like when I had no life because of my job. It’s a fair trade.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Any thoughts on what happened in that house?”

“No, at least not yet. We do know that all three victims were shot in the back of the head with a gun loaded with police issue ammunition.” Kyra shrugged. “The wall isn’t on the original plans of the house. Ana is going to work on witnesses that might have been held in the house during that time.”

“If we’d lost three witnesses, it would have been noticed. No one could have hidden something like that.”

“They had to have a reason to be in that house. Two kinds of people enter police safe houses: witnesses and cops. We can’t even begin to speculate as to why these people were murdered until we know who they are.”

“Keep me informed.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The bullpen was silent when Kyra entered it. She looked around at the six on-duty detectives in her area. The Major Crimes unit spanned two floors of the station house, and the senior detectives worked on the floor with her. She walked to Abel’s desk and found him working.

“Mr. Joshua, issue a warning to every cop in my unit that they have a week to get their new nanobots injected.”

"I sent out a reminder this morning." Abel looked up from his terminal and met her gaze. "I'm good."

"Yeah. Has Dr. Marcos finished working the scene?"

"She mentioned pulling up the floor."

"After you've gathered the material you need to work, join her at the scene."

"It was my intention." He glanced around. "Where's Ana?"

"She's working in the computer archive and then she's going to go the ME's office to work with Parker."

He nodded and handed her a compu-pad. "I've assigned all of your cases but the safe house murders to detectives in the unit, and you have an appointment in an hour to get your nanobots. The med-tech made me promise you wouldn't hurt him."

Kyra glared briefly. "Do you have me bugged or something?"

"The commander sent me a communication detailing a few things that required your immediate attention. Also, you've been requested downtown for lunch with the deputy mayor."

"Were Commander Baker and Chief Dennis invited?"

"No."

"See that they are informed of the lunch and make sure they'll both be there." She checked her comm-u for the time and looked around the bullpen. "Has anyone questioned you about what happened last night?"

"A few guys asked me if I was okay but nothing more specific than that. I took the liberty of checking the employment records of all the cops in District 4. There are twenty-two who were on the job during the time period those three people were killed. I transmitted that to your p-pc, and I'm compiling a complete list for the whole city."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, you had a communication come through on your office comm-u from a man named Sebastian Green."

"Did he leave a way for me to contact him?"

"He's coming here. He'll be on the afternoon transport flight from Los Angeles and would like to speak with you. The gentleman provided no other information."

"Delete that call from your log and add the appointment to my calendar, but don't list his name."

"May I ask who he is?"

Kyra met his gaze. "Sebastian Green led the reorganization committee for the entire New Orleans city government fifteen years ago. He personally saw to the arrest of two hundred corrupt cops and city employees." She checked her comm-u.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Desi, come see this.”

She looked up from her task and looked toward Parker. “Find something?”

“Oh, yes.”

Desi pulled off the nu-skin gloves she wore and tossed the disposable polymer in a trash can beside the table where she’d been working. “Oh, you have the DNA results.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “The African-American gentleman was the father of the woman’s child.”

“The other man?”

“Unrelated to the others, but interesting all the same.” He picked up the results and gave them to her.

“What the hell is that?” Desi sat down on a stool at the counter and spread out the DNA analysis. “Is this a genetic marker?”

“Yes.” Parker nodded and then watched as Desi read through the results.

“This is so illegal.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t always illegal. Texas was the last of the former United States to join the North American Union. They remained an independent city-state for over a hundred years. They joined the NAU in 2146, but I imagine there are still people living in Texas who have these sorts of markers.”

“Can we run the marker?” Desi turned to meet Parker’s gaze and saw the caution there. “You already did.”

“Yes. It was relatively easy to do. Another reason such markers are deemed a violation of privacy.”

“Well?”

“His name was Mitchell Libby. He was a Texas Ranger and was reported missing, presumed dead, in June of 2147. His records were flagged; I’m sure the inspector will be getting a phone call from the Rangers very soon.”

“He was a cop.” Desi’s gaze traveled across the room to the remains. “If we have one dead cop in that room ...”

“We might have three dead cops in that room,” Parker said quietly.

“Christ.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“What the hell do you mean, I can’t deactivate them?”

The med-tech jumped and backed away. "They aren't designed to be turned off, Inspector. They'll upgrade your current nanobots to their configuration."

"So I can't turn the old ones off any more either."

"No. They'll go dormant on their own and reactivate when they are notified of injury." He took several steps back when she stood up and grabbed her jacket. "It was included in the press materials you were sent."

The press materials she'd thrown away. Kyra shrugged into her jacket and with one meaningful glare toward the tech, she stalked from the room. If it weren't for her new hover-system, she would be violently protesting the release of military technology into general society.

She went out the front exit of the building and headed across the street to her vehicle. Maintenance had moved it to a charge station for her earlier in the morning, and she wasn't surprised at the astronomical charge when she disengaged the charging mechanism.

"The government is trying to take every credit I have." She keyed in her access code and engaged the unit.

A glance at her comm-u told her she probably had twenty minutes to reach the transport center for her conversation with Sebastian Green. She fought the urge to engage the hover-system; Ana would never forgive her if she missed the first hover ride.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sebastian Green checked his comm-u as he exited the transport shuttle that had brought him from the New York Dome. The flight had been on time and after a cursory glance of the large lobby area, he settled on Senior Inspector Kyra Moray. She moved like a cop. He'd studied her career over the past few years and often wondered why such an attractive woman would chose the pursuit of justice over a life of leisure. Black hair fell down her shoulders and around a good strong face. He'd read her file and paused as she focused on him.

She checked her gun and looked around the area before she motioned him with a nod to follow her.

Kyra settled at a small table in the back of a café in the transport center and watched Sebastian Green enter. He didn't look that much different from the image she had on file for him. He slid into the booth in front of her and put a slim envelope on the table.

"Good morning, Inspector. Thank you for meeting me on such short notice."

"Thank you for coming to New Orleans. I was going to contact your office, but I wanted to wait until I knew who the victims were." She put her p-pc on the table. "One of them has been identified by a genetic marker. I received the report en route."

He raised an eyebrow. "A genetic marker?"

“He was a Texas Ranger.”

“I see.” He rubbed his face briefly and then pushed the envelope across the table to her. “That’s the list of cops and city officials that I knew were dirty but couldn’t get enough evidence on them to toss them from the force or in a jail cell. I haven’t checked it to see how many of them are still with the city.”

“Were you ever questioned about a citizen from Texas being missing?”

“I don’t remember anything of that sort during my time in New Orleans. I doubt the Rangers would’ve been very quiet in their search for a missing man. Have you pinpointed a time of death for the three bodies?”

“May/June of 2147.” She picked up the envelope and shoved it into a pocket of her jacket. “I’ve a dead cop, Mr. Green. Do you have any idea who the other two bodies could be?”

“No. I left the reorganization task force in December of 2146. In fact, I went to Texas to help bring their state resources up to par with the rest of the NAU. They were in bad shape and had been mismanaged for years. The NAU never should have agreed to their petition to join the union without assessing their needs.” He waved his hand and sighed. “But that’s beside the point.

“Do you know if the Texas Rangers sent men to New Orleans for the reorganization committee?”

“No. They had quite a few problems of their own during that time. I doubt they would’ve spared even one man.” He looked down at the table and shook his head. “I came with the list because I wanted you to have any edge you can. I know I didn’t leave this city as clean as everyone likes to say. Regretting it won’t get me anywhere.”

“Did you tell anyone you were coming here?”

“No.”

“I can’t guarantee that the message you left me wasn’t read by people I can’t trust. I had my admin delete it, but it may be too late.” Kyra stood up and glanced around the café.

“Okay.”

“Get back on a transport shuttle, Mr. Green. It doesn’t matter where it takes you. Just get out of New Orleans.”

“It won’t be a problem, Inspector.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra took stock of the state of the table before she approached. Commander Baker and Chief Dennis looked like they’d both eaten something very disagreeable. The deputy mayor, Lloyd Deller, was on his comm-u. Deller hated her, and she supposed he had the right since she hated him right back. Her commander caught sight of her, and she sighed.

She pulled off her jacket as she approached and pulled out her own chair before the chief was out of his seat to help her. "I'm fine, sir."

"Inspector Moray."

"Deller." She picked up her menu briefly and signaled for the server. "I'm starving."

"I've called you here to inform you that your investigation into the bodies in the house on Rose Street is closed." Deller took a sip of his water and stared at her pointedly.

Kyra turned to the server. "Bring me a glass of water and a salad to start. Oil and vinegar dressing. I'd like a New York strip, medium rare, and the wild rice on the side." She handed him the menu, and she turned to Deller. "I don't take orders from you. This is my investigation and solving the murders of those three people is my number one priority. They deserve justice and will have it. If I have to step over your dead body to accomplish that, I could live with it."

"The mayor has made his wishes clear."

"The mayor of New Orleans isn't stupid, Deller. He knows better than to try to bury the murder of a cop."

"A cop?" Commander Baker demanded.

Kyra sat back in her chair and focused on her commander. "Parker sent you the report, sir. One of the men was a Texas Ranger. A man named Mitchell Libby. His records were flagged, so when Parker ran the genetic marker they found in his DNA, the state of Texas was notified. I expect a call from the captain of the Rangers any moment now." She looked at Deller. "And if you think for a moment that the positive identification of a murder victim who just happens to be a Texas Ranger can be smoothed over ... well, you're a bigger idiot than I've always assumed."

"Inspector, your attitude is obscene."

"No more obscene than your ambition." She offered the server a smile when he placed a salad and glass of water in front of her. Picking up a fork, she speared a tomato and looked at Deller. "I don't care how bad this looks for the city. Hell, I don't care if this causes another reorganization period by the NAU Law Enforcement Oversight Committee. I'm going to find out who killed those people, and there is nothing you or anyone else in this city can do about it."

"Your grandmother isn't going to live forever."

Kyra focused on him then. "Is that a threat?"

"It's a statement of fact. You get away with a lot because of who your grandmother is, but things change."

"Yes, they do." She tilted her head. "Do you think I'd be less dangerous to you without a badge?" Everyone at the table grew very still. "If my grandmother were to suffer in any way because of you and your agenda, you'd be made to regret it."



“Money does make the world go round.” He glared openly at her. “It certainly bought Sharon Moray everything she ever wanted, and you’re no different.”

“My grandmother may be extravagant with her money, but she’s never had any need to use her money to buy the goodwill or favor of others. Since you cannot say the same, I would suggest you refrain from speaking of her at all.”

His mouth dropped open, and then he clamped it shut tightly. “I expect you to close this matter quickly and quietly.”

“I will do my job.” She looked down at her salad, then offered her chief an easy smile. “Not eating, sir?”

“I told them to hold our food until you arrived.” He glanced down at her salad. “I’m not much on grass.”

Kyra shrugged and let her gaze move back to Deller. “Also, under no circumstances are you ever to arrange a meeting with me without my superiors present. It’s a violation of the city employee ethical code and disrespectful to the chain of command.” She paused and watched his face flush red. “To ask me to meet you in a public place like this for a discussion about an ongoing case that has the potential to be very volatile is begging for the media to accuse me of inappropriate behavior. I’m sure that was your intention, but let’s just let it be said that I would never fall for such a ploy.”

She pushed the salad away and picked up her water glass. “Would you like to tell me why you contacted Sara Kingsley personally regarding her purchase of the house on Rose Street after the city auctioned it off?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I can have the comm-u records for your personal and office units pulled, and we can review the communication you sent to her. The woman certainly has no reason to lie about it.”

“I’ll have to go over my records, of course, but I’m sure that it was a standard communication that I made to all of the auction winners.”

“I’m sure.”

“What are you implying?”

“Sara Kingsley remembered you being irritated with her purchase of the house. You told her that there was a resident in New Orleans who was interested in the house if she chose not to come to New Orleans. You don’t happen to remember who that resident was? Or even more importantly, why you bothered to involve yourself in the matter?”

“Inspector, I’m honestly at a loss as to what you’re implying.”

“I’m sure.” She turned to her commander. “Sebastian Green sent me a message this morning. I met with him at the transport center less than an hour ago.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “What did he say?”

“He gave me a list of cops and city officials he believed were dirty but who couldn’t be prosecuted.”

“I demand to see it.”

Kyra turned to Deller and raised an eyebrow. “Sharing the list with you, Mr. Deller, would be a violation of the chain-of-evidence rules that I’m duty-bound to uphold.”

“You’re honestly going to pay attention to a list? The man hasn’t been in this city in fifteen years!” Deller demanded roughly.

“He’s a cop. In fact, he is *the* cop. I studied his investigations and procedures in the academy. I trust him.”

“Your opinion of this man doesn’t matter. It isn’t up to you decide whether or not this list has merit.”

“I’m going to use the list in any way I see fit to solve the murders of those four people. Once I have everything I need, the list is going to be sent to IAB.”

“No.” Deller shook his head and started to stand up.

Kyra looked at him, taking in his anger and the underlying fear. “Are you afraid your name will be on the list? You’ve worked with the city for almost twenty years.”

“Don’t be insulting.” Deller snapped.

“You don’t have a say in this matter, Deller.” Chief Dennis leaned forward slightly. “She is, in fact, the only person sitting at this table who will decide what that list means to her case and if the information on it is valid. Considering the ramifications of Mitchell Libby’s murder, this case now has a Level 4 security seal on it.”

“Level 4?” Deller demanded. “That’s ridiculous. These three people were murdered years ago!”

“Four, Deller. Four people died in that room, and as far as I’m concerned, it happened today,” Kyra murmured and then looked toward the chief. “Level 4 is fine with me, sir. If I need additional personnel, I’ll let you know.”

“Good.”

“This is unacceptable. If the case is that important, it should be elevated to a higher level than this woman.”

“I am confident in Inspector Moray’s abilities.”

“Thank you, sir.” She glanced up as the server arrived with the food. “Thank God. I could eat a whole cow.”

The server offered her a smile and served her first. “It’s a pleasure to have you here, Inspector. I see you on the vid-panel all the time.”

“Oh, yeah?” She looked her steak over and picked up a knife. “Someone said I look exhausted and misused on the vid. Would you agree?”

“Sometimes, but even then you’re still beautiful.” He blushed and hurriedly set the others meals on the table. “Can I ask you a favor?”

Kyra raised an eyebrow. “Is it the nearly naked picture?”

“No, ma’am, though that was one is certainly a favorite.” He pulled the image out of his pocket and unfolded it.

Kyra took it and the pen he offered. It was a candid shot of her in the leather outfit she’d purchased from a conservationist several weeks before. “Most offer old pageant images.” She signed it and handed it back to him.

“Oh, well, me and my friends have some of those. We all agree you were the best-looking Miss New Orleans in twenty years. You would have won Miss North American Union if you hadn’t declined the title in favor of going to the police academy.” He sighed. “But you’re much better looking now that you’re older. I think it’s the gun.”

Kyra laughed out loud, glanced at his nametag, and shooed him away. “Thank you, Damon. I’ll keep that in mind.” She cut into her steak and then looked around the table. “That’s been happening for weeks. I don’t get it.”

“The people of New Orleans were very pleased with you when you apprehended Aaron Belton. Having a serial killer running around in the streets was difficult for us all.” Joseph Dennis sighed and looked at her plate. “I should have ordered a steak. My wife is on me to avoid red meat.”

“I’m not giving up my steak.” Kyra sighed when she happened to glance in Deller’s direction. “I suppose you think that signing that silly image was damaging to the city’s image?”

“You aren’t a celebrity.”

Ethan Baker laughed. “I suppose that the city of New Orleans doesn’t agree with you, Lloyd.”

## Chapter Five

Kyra sat behind the wheel of her transport across the street from the restaurant she'd just left, the mini-disc Green had given her in her hand. Traffic shot past her in a steady stream of activity that she found comforting most of the time. A part of her didn't want to know who was on the list. Disgusted with herself, she shoved it into the dash compu-station and took a deep breath.

"Display contents."

There was one file on the disk. "Display New Orleans-2146." The names were listed in an orderly fashion along with their employee number and position at the time Green had made the list. "Send file New Orleans-2146 to Constable Salanti, Dr. Marcos, Abel Joshua, Chief Dennis, and Commander Baker. Secure transmission, highest level."

She closed the file and ejected the mini-disc. The names meant nothing to her and for that, she was relieved. Regardless of whether or not the names listed were involved in the safe house murders, she knew that she'd make it a goal to get those cops off the street.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra paused in the entranceway of the large exam room and let her gaze move briefly to the bodies before looking at Jeffrey Parker. "Parker?"

"We are working on facial reconstruction." He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face with both hands. "Once we have the scans of the skulls complete ... we'll have to deflesh them and scan them again. The saponification process preserved much of the tissue on all three skulls, but the faces are bloated and distorted."

She nodded and looked around. "Where's Ana?"

"Office four."

Pulling the door shut, she walked down to the end of the hall and stopped in front of the door. Desi and Abel were in the small office with Ana, gathered around a pizza. She pulled open the door and all three looked up.

"Hello there."

"Hey, we were just compiling reports to send you."

She grabbed a chair and sat down with a sigh. "I'll brief you guys and then you can brief me." They nodded, and Desi motioned toward the box. "No, I ate the better part of a cow for lunch. First and foremost, the chief has marked this case a Level 4. That means from now on no communications or reports will pass between us without a high level of encryption." Kyra glanced around the table to see how they reacted to the news. "Sebastian Green, the cop that led the reorganization task force for the city from 2142 to 2146, came into the city to deliver a list of names. I made copies of the disc and sent the three of you the list. The list contains the names of twenty-two people he thought were corrupt but couldn't nail. Thirteen are cops, and the rest are city officials. I'm not sure how many of them are still on the city's payroll, so that's one avenue one of you can run tomorrow. I still haven't heard from the Texas Rangers; I expect to have one in the city by tomorrow afternoon. They'll be interested in recovering their man and finding out what happened to him." She turned to Ana. "Okay."

"Ten witnesses were listed as having been in the safe house on Rose Street during the month of May in 2147. The house was closed by the mayor's office in June of 2147 and reopened for use as a safe house six months later." Ana cleared her throat. "I spoke with eight of the ten people, and they all distinctly remember a closet being there, because the cops on duty used it to stash their food and gear."

"How many cops?"

"Four." Ana pulled her p-pc free from her belt and called up the list. "Julia Delaney, Kyle Neal, Victor Merck, and Seth Barnes. Delaney and Neal are still on the job and work in District 2. Victor Merck retired ten years ago and died last year of natural causes. His record was clean. Seth Barnes is the senior inspector for Anti-Crime in District 3; his record is also clean."

"Delaney and Neal?"

"Neal has a few reprimands for being rough with suspects, and Julia Delaney is something of a discipline problem. She is one reprimand short of permanent suspension."

"What about the log itself?" Kyra turned to Abel when Ana waved her hand in his direction.

"We culled the list of witnesses and cops from the first three weeks of May. The fourth week is missing from the log files. I know Ana and I didn't miss any in the room, so they weren't there. Or, they never made it into the archives." He picked up his p-pc. "I'm still compiling a list of city personnel, and I expect the search to be finished sometime in the morning."

Kyra nodded and motioned to Desi. "Shoot."

"We finished the work on the house; there is nothing else to speak of left in the small area where the bodies were hidden. I took everything I could from the scene that might help, including the building materials for the wall. Right now, I have samples of them in the lab with my team. If we hit upon something rare, we might be able to trace its purchase." She paused and grabbed another piece of pizza. "I have to say that it is an unlikely avenue of discovery and will probably lead nowhere. However, it's good practice for my team and may provide something."

"Anything else?"

"No." Ana shook her head. "That's all we've come up with today. We spent several hours helping Dr. Parker with the scans of the skulls. He doesn't want to involve any of his other ME's in the case."

Kyra couldn't blame him. She had dirty cops in the mix, and the thought of it made her ill. "First thing in morning, make arrangements for interviews of all of the cops currently on the city's payroll who were in that house during the right time period."

She stood. "Also, I'd really like to know who worked in the mayor's office at the time and what the official reason was for the house being closed."

"So I guess you're going to home to get ready for your dinner with Alex's parents?"

Kyra glared at Ana and then shrugged. "I thought I'd go back to my office and harass a few people."

"You don't need to be nervous." Desi grinned when she received her own glare. "They'll think you're awesome."

"I don't care what anyone thinks."

Ana laughed and watched her leave with a little wave over her shoulder. Once the door shut, she shook her head. "Ten credits says she finds a way to bail on the dinner."

"I wager ten she goes to the dinner but finds a way to leave early." Desi dug into her pants pocket for a credit chip.

"I say she'll stay through the whole meal and plot revenge against Alex." Abel dropped a twenty credit on the table and raised an eyebrow. "I have it on good authority that after this case closes, she's going to have take at least seven days of vacation."

"There's no way she'll go on vacation and a trip with a new man." Desi shook her head. "You're dreaming."

"Hey, put up or shut up."

"Fine." Desi pulled out another chip. "She leaves early from the dinner and doesn't go on vacation with the new man."

"I'm apt to agree. They've only been seeing each other for a few weeks." Ana added more money to pile. "She doesn't strike me as the impetuous type."

Abel laughed. "I'm going to feel really bad when I take your credits, ladies."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Like I'd be nervous," Kyra muttered and leaned back in her chair. Her compu-station was dormant, and she'd pulled out her earpiece. She had four hours to kill before she had to be downtown meeting the parents. Her desk comm-u buzzed.

"Comm-u engage."

A sleek panel of ultra-thin glass rose from the console, and the system engaged; the name of the caller flashed briefly before his face appeared. "Good afternoon, Ranger Jonas Hatch."

"Inspector Moray."

"I was wondering when I would get a call."

"We like to take our time and get things right in Texas." He grinned, showing even white teeth. He brushed his fingers through casually styled blond hair. "I want to come to New Orleans, Inspector. Now we can involve our respective superiors, or you can play nice."

"I can play nice. The problem is, Ranger Hatch, what guarantees do I have that you'll be nice once you get here?"

"It's your case, your city." He leaned forward a little, his blue eyes serious. "Mitchell Libby was the grandson of Senator Harlan Libby, and the senator's very interested in bringing him home."

"Is he willing to wait for justice?"

"Yes."

"I caution you against sharing the details of the case file with the Senator." She cleared her throat. "The remains were mummified through a process called saponification. The ME has referred to them as soap mummies. I will say that, after ten years working homicides, I find the remains disturbing."

Jonas leaned forward and sighed. "Christ. I'll be there in the morning."

"I'll send my partner to meet you."

"Thank you."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Who chose this place?"

Alex took her hand and helped her from the passenger seat of his vehicle. "This is my parents' favorite restaurant."

"Oh." She took the time to smooth the dark green silk dress she wore.

"You don't like it?"

Kyra sighed. "My grandmother owns it and the hotel attached. I swear to God if I see an escort in this place, I might lose my mind."

"Just close your eyes and don't think about it."

"Easy for you to say -- your grandmother doesn't own brothels all over town." Kyra opened her purse and checked her gun. She hated the smaller gun because it didn't have nearly the power of her standard weapon. "I should have strapped my gun to my thigh."

"As sexy as that would have been, I'm sure you'll get along just fine without it." He prodded her toward the door and laughed when she stopped again. "Kyra, this isn't going to be an inquisition."

"I get a lot of bad press, you know."

"Well, you get a lot of press. I'm not sure I would call any of it bad."

The doorman opened the door, and he hurried her inside before she could say anything else. A hostess appeared before them immediately. "Inspector Moray, I didn't realize you would be with us this evening. It's no problem, of course; I have the perfect table."

"No, actually we are joining another party -- Mr. and Mrs. Devon Waters. They should already be here."

"Yes, they arrived several minutes ago for the private dining room they reserved. Come with me."

Kyra threaded her fingers through Alex's as they moved through the maze of tables to the sliding doors of one of the private dining rooms. The elder Waterses stood as the doors opened, and she took in a deep breath. They were both in their eighties, but anti-aging vaccines and nanotechnology could hold the signs of age off for a long time. Morgan Waters had her sister's eyes. Seeing Clara's clear and serious eyes on another woman's face was a little unnerving. The resemblance ended there; she looked nothing like her sister. Her smooth skin was cinnamon in color, and her hair was curly and attractively arranged. Devon Waters offered her a smile that reminded her of Marcus, but the smooth planes of his face and his serious eyes reminded her of Alex.

Both of them appeared to be pleased to see her. It was going to be a long night.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, thanks for seeing me home." Ana leaned against her doorway and glared at Abel. "Are you going to tell me who asked you to ask me if I was seeing someone?"

"No. I promised I wouldn't." He raised his hands and laughed when she crossed her arms over her breasts. "Don't look at me that way. Look, you just let me know if you become available, and I'll pass the information along."

"I'm not exactly seeing anyone, you know."



"But you aren't exactly single either," Abel reminded. "Trust me, dick-on-the-side counts with a lot of people."

"Well, maybe the dick-on-the-side would disappear if I knew who was interested in me."

"Maybe the person who's interested in you would prefer that you make the decision to get rid of the dick-on-the-side before they approach you."

"Maybe you're an asshole."

"Yeah. I probably am." He laughed. "Lock your door, Constable."

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, Kyra, how is your current case coming? We've seen you on the vid-panel a few times in the last couple of days."

She lowered her water glass to the table and nodded. "The media loves to find new ways to harass me. The case in question has a lot of potential to be damaging to the city's image, and everyone is all in a bunch about it." She glanced briefly at Alex and raised an eyebrow. "Lloyd Deller told me to bury the case today."

"Did you tell him where to go and how to get there?" Alex asked.

"I was amazed by my own restraint."

Morgan, Alex's mother, sighed and shook her head. "Lloyd Deller has always been a pain."

"How do you know the deputy mayor?"

Morgan laughed. "He chased me around during college."

"Lloyd Deller tried to date you." Kyra swallowed hard, shocked.

"Oh, yes, that was before he jumped on that moral majority crap and decided that mixing races was the work of the devil. During his younger years, the only thing he was against was being poor. He chased every woman in town who had money." Morgan wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Not like I would have gone out with the little weasel anyway." She put her hand on her husband's. "I'd already met Devon, after all, and Lloyd paled in comparison."

Kyra bit down on her lip and dropped her gaze to the table to keep from laughing. "Yes, I can see that."

"I met your mother a few times. She did a lot of charity work in the city during the time that I was here. I always found Alicia to be a bright and gentle young woman."

"My mother lit up any room she was in." Kyra picked up her glass of water, pleased that it wasn't shaking and took a deep swallow. Talking about her mother always knocked her off center. "You must have met her through Clara."

"Yes." Morgan nodded her head and glanced briefly at her husband. "I believe Alicia was trying to convince Clara not to put a hex on some poor man that had wandered on to her

property to hunt. Back then it was illegal, of course, but Clara has always preferred her own kind of justice.”

“Yes, she does.” Kyra shared a brief look with Alex and sat down her glass. “The truth is your sister makes it her lot in life to make my life hell.”

“I have no doubts.” Morgan grinned. “She’s a handful, but I wouldn’t trade her for anything.”

“At least there is no mystery as to where you stand with a woman like my sister-in-law.” Devon Waters brought his wife’s hand to his mouth and kissed it gently. “When Morgan brought me home to meet that woman, I figured I’d either be approved or dead ... either way, I would’ve been put out of my misery. What made you choose to become a cop?”

“I like order, and I wanted a job that helped bring order and peace to people. My job, unfortunately, often shatters the peace of others, but I think at the end of the day I make the world a better place. Of course, it’s a dangerous job, but I knew that from the beginning.”

“It’s been something to get used to,” Alex murmured. He watched her fidget for a moment and then turned to his father. “She was shot a couple of weeks ago.”

“I had a few grazes.” She motioned to her bare upper arm. “No holes.”

“Have you been shot before?” Morgan leaned forward, fascinated.

“Twice. Both were relatively minor. I only manage to get shot at about once a year.”

“Do you think cops killed the people in that house?”

Kyra stiffened visibly. “I haven’t gathered enough evidence to make an assumption like that yet.”

“It must be difficult to even think it.”

“I’d like to trust the men and women who serve the city of New Orleans.” She sighed. “However, I realize that might be impossible.”

“What have you found so far?”

“I can’t discuss specifics, of course, but we have narrowed down a month and year for the killings.”

“How?” Morgan’s eyes grew wide

“The forensics teams dated the bones and fibers. But we were able to pull a receipt from May 2147 from the pocket of one of the men.”

“May 2147?” Morgan sat back in her chair abruptly.

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No ...” Morgan shook her head. “It’s not you, dear. It’s just that that’s the same month and year that my nephew Dane disappeared.”

Kyra put her fork down abruptly and almost stood up from her chair. “Excuse me?”

Alex put a hand on her arm, and she focused on him. “My cousin Dane disappeared the last week of May of that year. You didn’t realize?”

"No. I mean, every cop in the city knows that he disappeared in 2147. It's hard not to know, considering the speculation that has always been around about him. I didn't know it was in May."

Alex picked up her water, pressed it into her hand, and glanced briefly at his parents, who were both silent. "Just take a deep drink."

She took the water; her mind raced with the new information. "I'm okay. That was just unexpected." Kyra took a deep breath. "One of the men was identified today. He was a Texas Ranger, and he was murdered in that house with a weapon loaded with police-issue ammunition." She paused, realizing that she'd revealed far more than she should have. "That hasn't been released to the public yet."

"You can trust us, dear." Morgan offered her a shaky smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"They're nice people." Kyra pulled off her shoes and tossed them close to her couch as she walked toward her bedroom. "I'm sorry the case talk ruined the evening."

"It didn't." Alex walked to stand behind her and carefully unzipped her dress. "But it wasn't the ordeal you expected."

"I don't know what I expected. I've never let a man take me to meet his parents." She turned in his arms and met his gaze. "We do know that the other man is African American, and the woman we found was carrying his child."

Alex sighed and pulled her closer. "Tell me what you think happened."

"That's just it." Kyra moved away from him and shrugged off the dress. "I have no fucking clue what happened in that house. We're starting to get some information together, and I'm going to spend a lot of time interviewing cops who were in the house in May of that year. The last week's logs are missing, of course."

"How is Abel?"

"He's good. I've been keeping him, Ana, and Desi away from the station house. I don't like not knowing who I can trust."

"You can trust me." He placed a soft kiss on her shoulder, and her breath caught.

"You don't think it could be your cousin?"

"Baby, Dane has been missing for fifteen years. To be truthful, I always believed that his body ended up in the bayou. I don't expect that his body will ever be recovered."

"What do you remember about his disappearance?"

"I was fifteen. Marcus and I followed him around like he was a god whenever he would let us." He smiled briefly and then touched her jaw gently as he turned her to face him. "He had a lot of passion and wanted to change the world. I joined the Union Special Forces

because of him. I wanted to be a part of bringing change and freedom to the rest of the world. It wasn't the path he would've taken, but it served me."

"If I could find him and bring him justice, I want to think that I would try." She glanced away from him briefly. "To be entirely truthful, there isn't a cop in New Orleans who wants to be the one. I just want you to know that I won't shy away from it."

"Is it because Clara has always said cops killed him?"

"Yes. It's a difficult thing to believe, but I've never doubted her word on it. She said a cop killed her son, and I never doubted that." Kyra turned away from him as she pulled off her earrings and walked toward her dresser. "But I've never heard anything on his death. Like every other cop in the city, I've reviewed his case file. It's less than substantial."

"Clara alienated every cop that came near his case because she believed that they would never give her only child justice." He walked to her and pulled her close to him. "Let's put this aside for the moment."

She leaned against him and sighed when he slid one hand down her stomach and straight into her panties. "That's what I like about you ... you're so goal oriented."

He laughed. "Cut the job off. I want your full attention."

Her knees weakened briefly when he slid one finger between the lips of her sex and pushed it up inside her. "You've got it."

Alex stroked her gently, and he gripped the back of her panties. With a firm hand, he yanked and the material broke away. He tossed them over his shoulder and turned her to face him.

"You're going to buy me some more panties."

"I would love to." He maneuvered her toward the bed. "Sit."

Kyra sat as he instructed and sucked in a shaky breath when he knelt in front of her and rolled her thigh-highs down one at a time. He tossed the flimsy silk aside and pulled her closer to the edge of the bed. She gasped a little when he eased both of her legs onto his shoulders.

"If this is my reward for staying the whole meal, tell your parents that we can have dinner tomorrow as well."

Alex turned his head and sank his teeth briefly into her thigh before continuing his quest to the moist flesh of her pussy. "This is my reward. You'll have to think up your own."

She shuddered and leaned back on her hands as he slipped his tongue inside her. He probed her entrance gently and then moved his tongue up to claim her clit. The hard flesh throbbed against his tongue, echoing the beat of her heart. She rocked her hips against his mouth, letting her legs relax on his shoulders. His tongue dipped into her again, and she whimpered at its silky invasion.

He pushed his hands up under her ass and lifted her off the bed slightly as he moved back up to her clit. His hot, wet tongue whipped over her repeatedly. Orgasm rushed over

her in one shattering blunt force. She went rigid with the pleasure of it and then collapsed against the bed as his tongue drifted downward again. Alex pushed his tongue into her again and again, until her hips rocked to the rhythm he'd created.

When she could bear it no more, she pulled free of his hands and lay back on the bed. "I need your cock."

"Oh, really?" Alex stood and pulled off his shirt.

"Yeah. Now." She ran her hands down her legs to her knees and lifted them to plant her feet flat on the bed.

"You realize you make it impossible for me to be gentle with you." He pulled off his boots, tossed them aside, and then unbuckled his belt.

Kyra smiled and let one hand drift down her thigh to her pussy. "If you don't hurry up and put your cock in me, I'm going to start without you."

Alex knelt on the bed between her legs and watched her lift her hand away. "Some other time I wouldn't mind watching that."

"Okay, but only if you return the favor."

He pushed the head of his cock into her pussy and paused. "You'd like to watch me masturbate?"

"I think it would be very sexy." She arched against him as he filled her with his cock. "God, size matters so much."

He laughed and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. "You know when you told me you dated men based on the size of their cock I was shocked."

"I remember." She moved against him as he started to rock gently. "If you'd had a little dick you would have never seen me again after that first night. I just can't be bothered ..." Her eyes fluttered briefly. "That's so good."

"Don't ever use the words 'little dick' in a sentence where I'm the subject." Buried to the hilt, he stilled inside her and watched her as she opened her eyes and met his gaze. "I always want you, but I'm beginning to need you more."

She pulled him down to her and wrapped herself around him as he started to move. Kyra tightened her legs on his waist and lifted upward to meet the unhurried thrust of his body. The pleasure of taking him in never dimmed; it was as if every time he slid into her was a new, more amazing experience. It was more than the glide of his flesh against and in hers.

He stopped and ran his hand up one of her legs. "I want you on top."

"Hmmm, with pleasure." Kyra took in a breath as he pulled his cock free from her. For a moment, the emptiness was almost unbearable.

She quickly took the hand he offered and slid astride his thighs. He lifted her up and then onto his cock. Kyra's back arched as she settled on the length of him. The stinging

penetration robbed her of air, a tangled sound of pleasure and pain slipped past her lips. When the feeling eased she began to move.

Alex's hands slid over her body gently, urging and teasing with skill. His fingertips caught at her nipples and pulled at the hardened points with just enough pressure to make them ache more. Then he drifted his attention downward and pushed two fingers against her clit. Every movement, every jerk caused her swollen clit to rub against his fingers.

"Fuck, that's too much." She caught his wrist but didn't have the strength to remove his hands. "Alex."

"Come for me."

"Close." Kyra bit down on her bottom lip and let her head fall back as she continued to move on him.

He rolled them over abruptly and pulled her legs upward onto his shoulders. Alex pressed his thumb against her clit as he started to thrust deeply into her again and again, until she cried out and tears streamed down her face. Releasing her legs, he slowed his stroke. Her body still moved against him. She opened her eyes and met his gaze.

Alex pushed deeply into her one more time and stilled as he came. Kyra reached out for him and pulled him down into her arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dane Tibideaux. He'd been the first thing she thought about when she'd rolled out of the bed nearly an hour before. When she'd called Jeffrey Parker and asked him to meet her at his office, he'd been surprised. She supposed he had reason to be; she'd never called him at home.

He was standing at the front entrance waiting, and he opened the doors for her. Kyra watched him lock the doors, and then they walked toward the exam room.

"What couldn't you say over the comm-u?"

"Did you know that Dane Tibideaux disappeared in the last week of May in 2147?"

Parker stopped and turned to stare at her. "No. I mean, I remember the scandal and that it was in 2147."

Kyra looked toward the exam room door and then to Parker. "Have you finished the facial reconstructions?"

"I left the computer compiling last night." He pushed into the room and walked over to the compu-station. "The bones in the front of part of the African-American man's face were shattered from the impact of the bullet." Jeffrey input his pass code and the machine activated. "Give me a few minutes to work with this."

"Was there enough of the skull left for the compu to make an educated guess on the face?"

"It's rating the reconstruction as a six. I doubt we'll get a match from the database. I rarely do on composites rated below a seven." He glanced toward her and shrugged. "His missing person file should have a copy of his Citizen Identification Record. We could compare the DNA."

"The CIR was removed from his file when the case went cold. You know how zealously the NSA guards identity records." She looked at the reconstruction of the skull, searching for features that she would recognize. She didn't see anything in the computer rendering that reminded her of Alex or Marcus, but that didn't mean much. Dane could have very well taken after his father.

The computer rendering, balanced and aesthetically pleasing, looked generic.

"Can we find a picture of Dane Tibideaux without his CIR file?"

Parker nodded and brought up an Internet browser. "Shouldn't be a problem. The case received a lot of attention at the time from the press and the public. There are even a couple of websites dedicated to him and his disappearance."

"Conspiracy theorists?"

"Some. You'd be surprised at how much these people know."

She nodded and leaned in a little as he picked out a website. "The Murder of Dane Tibideaux: An exposé on the cover-up of murder and corruption in New Orleans." The picture of Dane Tibideaux appeared to be a candid shot. "I wonder where they got that image."

"Perhaps a yearbook or from the university." Parker shrugged. He copied the picture and went back to the face reconstruction program to compare. "No, the reconstruction isn't detailed enough for a positive match."

Kyra frowned and pulled a small computerized device out of her jacket pocket.

"Isn't that an STD scanner?"

Kyra blushed. "The last male blood sample in this belongs to Dane Tibideaux's first cousin. Can you compare it with the DNA results of the African-American body?"

"This borders on illegal." Parker raised an eyebrow when she shrugged.

She sighed when he took the device. "I need to know. If they appear related, I'll contact Madame Tibideaux for a DNA sample."

"The two men's mothers were sisters?"

"Yes."

"Okay, give me twenty minutes."

Kyra walked away, guilt nipping at her a little. It would have been easy to tell Alex she was going to have the body checked against his DNA, but then he would have worried and fixated on it until the results came. She crossed the room to stand at the end of one of the exam tables. The body of Mitchell Libby was bathed in the faint blue light of a stasis field.

The head hadn't been returned to its place as of yet. Part of the body was just dried bones, and there were other parts where saponification had caused the flesh to turn into a waxy substance. She sincerely hoped that his family chose not to review his remains.

The woman was lying on a table between the two men. The mummified remains of her fetus lay on a smaller table at her feet. Kyra swallowed hard, and wondered how she could ever have justice for him. His life ended before he'd even drawn a breath.

"Inspector?"

She turned to look at Parker. "Well?"

He turned and stared at her. "This young man you're seeing, how much do you know about him?"

Kyra smiled. "I know he's been genetically altered."

Parker relaxed. "Okay." He turned back to the computer. "A pretty fantastic job, I might say; he's nearly perfect."

"Not so great of a job," Kyra murmured thinking of the look in Alex's eyes when he'd told her he'd never father children. "What about the comparison?"

"It's close enough for me to request a copy of Dane Tibideaux's CIR. With Mr. Waters altered DNA I can't say with a hundred percent certainty."

"Do it, but let's keep this very quiet."

"Of course."

Kyra rubbed her face. "Of all the fucking cops in this city, why did it have to be me?"

"Madame Tibideaux trusts you. If it has to be done, it probably should be you." Parker winced when she glared at him. "You and I both know if his body had been found in another district it probably would have been tossed to you. Most of the people in this town have a healthy fear of the woman."

"How long will it take you to get the CIR file on him?"

"Probably an hour."

"Don't file any reports. Call me on my comm-u the moment you know." Kyra paused. "And Alex's DNA."

Parker lifted his head. "Won't leave this room. I'll handle it personally and delete it as soon as I get the CIR file on Dane Tibideaux."

"Thanks." She left the exam room. She only had one place to go, and it was the last place she ever wanted to be.

The drive to Clara's wasn't long enough. In the past, she'd always complained about having to haul her ass out to the middle of the bayou to talk to a Voodoo queen. Parker was right, of course, people did have a healthy fear of Clara Tibideaux, and her reputation wasn't exactly unearned. The sun was bright on her face as she turned onto Clara's driveway and tried to think of what she would say.



The older woman was sitting on the end of the dock that shot out into the bayou just left of her driveway. Kyra exited her vehicle and pulled off her sunshields. Her boots clunked on the solid wood boards of the dock as she walked. She sat down in the empty chair next to Clara and cleared her throat.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"No." Clara shook her head and looked out into the bayou.

Kyra looked toward Clara. The woman was nearly one hundred years old, but with the few anti-aging nanobots and vaccinations she allowed herself, she managed to look around sixty. Her near ebony skin was shiny with health and bore only the most superficial of wrinkles. "So, what are you doing out here?"

"Saying good morning to the bayou." Clara looked at her. "When you live this close to it, you have to respect its ways. The bayou is like no other place on earth."

"I've heard that before."

"Yes." Clara nodded. "You have to respect it and realize that the bayou wasn't really made for man."

Kyra checked her comm-u for the time and then leaned back in the chair. "I met Alex's parents last night."

"Yes, Morgan told me that she thinks you're charming."

Kyra laughed. "I suppose you informed her otherwise."

"Bah, she doesn't listen to me. Never did; suppose it has a lot to do with us having different fathers." Clara nodded as if she was agreeing with herself. "Mama was a different person when she had Morgan."

"You've a great family, Clara. For the life of me I can't figure out why you live out on this swamp when you could be chasing old men around a retirement village in the Bahamas or Florida."

"I ain't ever had to chase a man." Clara snorted. "Suppose you might know something about that. You've got my nephew's head turned every which way."

Kyra straightened in her chair and focused on the water in front of her. "It's only fair, just looking at him makes me stupid."

Clara grew very still. "Don't move."

Frowning, Kyra watched Clara reach under her chair and pull out a storage bag. "What are you up to?"

"Just be still." Clara tapped her foot gently on the dock and an alligator slid to the top of the water.

Kyra's hand wrapped around the handgrip of her gun. "Woman, you're insane."

Clara shook her head and turned the storage bag so that its contents splashed into the water. The alligator pursued the meat offering, gliding away as quietly as he'd come. "He's

old, far older than most of his kind. When I realized he could no longer hunt for himself, I started bringing food to him. I inject the meat with food supplements and vitamins.”

Kyra’s comm-u buzzed, and she stood as it engaged. Walking down the dock quickly, she went to her vehicle and stopped. “Go ahead, Parker.”

“It’s a positive ID.”

“She’ll want to see him. Do the best you can to make him presentable.” Kyra disengaged the call and looked back to Clara who still sat in her chair.

She walked back down the dock and sat back down in the chair. Kyra had told many parents over the years that their children would never return home. It had never occurred to her that one day she would tell Clara Tibideaux. Was there some part of the woman that still hoped and prayed that her son was alive? Kyra glanced over her shoulder to the solitary scarecrow and realized that couldn’t be true.

Kyra frowned and stood. She walked to the scarecrow without thinking and stopped when she stood in front of it. He had new clothes. In all the years that she’d known about the scarecrow, his clothes had never changed. Tattered, torn, and threadbare in some places, they were always the same. Clara came to stand beside her.

“Those are new clothes.”

Clara nodded. “Yes, I thought it was about time he had some new ones. Changed them the other night during the blood moon.”

The night they’d found the three bodies. Kyra cleared her throat. “His body has been recovered, Clara.”

“I’d thought you’d send Alex out to tell me.”

Kyra looked at her briefly. “I never realized you believed me to be a coward.”

“No, not a coward. Just unwilling to face some situations.” Clara reached up and straightened the hat. “I’ll get my bag.”

“I’ll wait in the car.”

Kyra watched Clara walk toward her house, her steps jerky. She turned and started toward her vehicle; she was certainly coward enough not to watch the woman struggle for control. Manually engaging her comm-u, she put in Alex’s code and closed her eyes.

“Hey beautiful.”

She closed her eyes. “Alex. I need you to meet me at the ME’s office.”

“Something wrong?”

“I’m taking Clara there so she can view the remains of her son.”

“One of them was Dane.”

“Yes.” Kyra winced at his jagged intake of breath. “I wanted to be wrong.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going to check?”

“And if I’d been wrong? If it had just been a coincidence?” She waited, listening to his breathing. “I didn’t want it to be true.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

## Chapter Six

When they entered the exam room, she noticed that Parker had covered the other remains with crisp white sheets. Where had he gotten white sheets? Kyra's gaze went briefly to the small table where she knew the child was and winced. She still hadn't told Clara about the baby. She wasn't sure how to do it. Clara stood beside her, her hands curled around the straps of her bag so tightly that her knuckles strained against her skin. Kyra glanced in Alex's direction. He looked tense and angry.

"Madame Tibideaux." Parker came forward and offered his hands. "I am Dr. Jeffrey Parker."

Clara nodded. "Dr. Parker."

"I realize this must be a difficult moment for you. You've waited a long time to bring your son home."

"Yes."

Parker glanced briefly at Kyra and Alex then tucked Clara's hand in the crook of his arm. "I'd like to help you with this."

Clara glanced up at Parker's face. "Okay."

Kyra watched with fury pumping through her veins as Parker guided Clara over to the table. The older woman's steps had never been so halted or uneven. Watching the strongest woman she knew slowly break apart had her heart slamming against her chest. She was silent when Alex walked over to join his aunt. When she could take no more of Clara's silent grief, she walked over to the end of the table.

"Clara, we need to talk about a few things."

"That can wait, Inspector," Alex snapped.

Kyra jerked at his sharp tone; she took in a deep breath and opened her mouth to speak, only to have Clara speak first.

“Alex, she has a job to do here.” She took her nephew’s hand, though her eyes still focused on her son. “I need justice, and Inspector Moray understands that.”

Relaxing as much as she could, Kyra walked around to the opposite side of the table and didn’t speak until Clara looked up and met her gaze. “Was Dane seeing anyone at the time of his disappearance?”

“No, there had been a young woman earlier in the spring, but they’d broken up some time during the first part of May. She’d gotten a job up North and just left. He was very angry with her for leaving and tried to find her for a few weeks.”

“Do you remember her name?”

“Gina.” Clara glanced at the other covered tables. “She was small, with a good face, white, of course. Dane always preferred white women to black. He’d introduced her to me in March, but only because I’d heard through a friend that he was seeing her. He knew I would disapprove.”

Kyra raised an eyebrow. “Because she was white?”

“No, of course not. I could care less about the color of people. She was a cop. He knew how I felt about you people, so he kept it from me.”

The knot in Kyra’s stomach doubled in size as she glanced toward Parker. He was looking at the table where the woman lay, covered. “Do you remember her last name?”

Clara frowned. “No. I’m sorry.” Clara glanced around and then focused on the table that Parker had been looking at. “Can I see the others?”

“Madame Tibideaux.” Parker cleared his throat and started to shake his head.

“Dr. Parker, I would like to see the people that my son died with.”

Parker flushed and went to the second table. He pulled the sheet off the body. “We’ve been unable to determine who she was.” He walked to the last table and revealed the third body. “This young man was a Texas Ranger named Mitchell Libby.” He stopped and held his hands behind his back. “We don’t know how the three of them ended up together.”

Clara walked to the small table and touched the sheet.

Kyra reached out and grabbed her wrist. “No.” She pulled Clara’s hand from the sheet and shook her head. “You don’t need to see ...”

“You think I don’t know?” Clara asked softly.

“Madame Tibideaux, perhaps you’d like to sit down for a while in my office?” Parker hesitated and looked at Kyra for help.

Alex walked to where Kyra and his aunt stood. “What’s under the sheet, Kyra?”

Clara sighed. “The remains of my only grandchild.”

Kyra released her wrist and cleared her throat. “Let me.”

“Yes.” She pulled her hand back and watched silently as Kyra picked up the sheet with shaking hands.

Kyra pulled the sheet from the table, and her gaze dropped briefly to the floor at Alex’s intake of breath. The mummified fetus was the last thing she personally ever wanted to see again. It simply hadn’t occurred to her that Clara would be able to glean the information about the child from just being in the room. It should have; she certainly had enough experience with Clara to know what her empathic abilities were. Guilt stirred in her gut.

Tightening her hands into fists against her thighs, she watched as Clara and Alex stood staring at the baby. It was the first time in a long time that she regretted being a cop. No one should be the bearer of such horrific news.

“He doesn’t have a name.” Clara frowned. She picked up the small electronic ident-tag that was in the container with the baby and looked up to Parker. “He should have a name, Dr. Parker.”

“Of course.”

Parker crossed to them and took the tag she held out to him. “Would you ...”

“Let’s call him Isaiah.” Clara looked down to the baby. “Isaiah Tibideaux.”

“It’s a good choice,” Kyra whispered, her voice hoarse.

Clara nodded. “Yes. You’ll figure out what Gina’s last name was?”

“Yes.”

“I remember her saying that she had no family to speak of.” She looked at Kyra then, her dark eyes focused and intent. “If that’s the case, I’d like to bury all three of them together.”

Kyra nodded and watched in silence as Alex carefully but firmly guided his aunt from the room. She knew he was angry and wasn’t surprised when he left without a word to her. There had been a hundred ways that she could’ve handled the viewing of Dane’s remains, but she’d taken the only path that made sense. Clara Tibideaux wasn’t the kind of woman who expected or appreciated coddling. She just hoped that Alex would come to understand that.

\* \* \* \* \*

“There was a hit on the ballistics.”

Kyra looked up from the report she was reading on her p-pc to meet Desi’s gaze. “Now, that’s a surprise.” She put her p-pc down on her desk and sat back in her chair. “Go on.”

“After the police database yielded nothing, I checked the records of weapons that had been confiscated during arrests. The Civilian Ballistic Fingerprint database also lists guns turned in to the city after the ban on civilian use of penetration weapons. A woman named Phyllis Foster exchanged the gun for a low-grade stunner in 2155. She’d inherited the

weapon from her father.” Desi paused and glanced around Kyra’s office. “Her father, Royce Foster, served the NOPD for thirty years and retired in 2148.”

“Royce Foster.” Kyra frowned. “He wasn’t in the safe house or on Green’s list.”

“No.” Desi shook her head.

“Where is the daughter now?”

“She’s halfway to Mars.”

“Mars,” Kyra repeated.

“Yeah. She’s a biologist, and she’s going to Mars on behalf of the company she works for to do experiments. I can schedule a conversation.”

“Yes, do that, though I’m not sure if she would know why her father had possession of the murder weapon.” Kyra pursed her lips briefly as she considered what it meant. It was stupid to keep a murder weapon that long. “See if you can find out how Royce Foster came to have that weapon.”

“Of course.” Desi paused and then looked pointedly at Ana’s desk. “Where is she?”

“I spoke with Ana briefly before I went to the morgue. She should be halfway finished with her sergeant’s test.”

“Oh.” She bit down on her bottom lip. “Well, I sort of skipped all of that. Is it difficult?”

“It’s ass-numbing.” Kyra grinned when Desi laughed. “She’ll be ready to eat and ready to shoot someone by the time she comes out of it. They’ve started making sergeants run through the holo-training simulation that detectives have to annually qualify on to keep their badge. She’d probably think you were the next best thing to artificial gravity if you swung by Police Plaza with some food in about an hour.”

“Cool.”

She nodded and then glanced up as her office door opened. Alex strode in and she stood. “You’re dismissed, Dr. Marcos.”

Desi glanced between them and her hand went briefly to her holstered weapon as she passed Alex. “Thank you.”

Kyra waited until the door shut before she met his gaze. “I realize you’re angry with me. I’m sure you think you have every right to be. However, coming here to vent on me is unacceptable. If you’d like to yell at me or tell me to fuck off, you’ll simply have to wait until I’m off duty.”

“You hurt her on purpose.” He clenched his teeth together as if he had more to say but was trying to control his temper.

She jerked, as if he’d hit her, and swallowed. “I see. I had no idea you thought I was a cold-hearted bitch.”

“You don’t like her any more than she likes you.”

"It's true that Clara and I will never be close, but I wouldn't hurt that woman for anything. What happens between your aunt and me is private and none of your business." Kyra turned her back on him and looked out the window behind her desk. "Get out of my office."

"There are plenty of people in this building that you can order around, Kyra; I don't happen to be one of them."

"You think I won't toss you in a cell?"

"I think you'd try."

She stood up from her chair and turned to face him. "I did my job, Alexander. It is *not*, nor will it *ever* be, your place to dictate how I do it."

"When it comes to my family, Kyra, I expect to be informed of matters that could potentially hurt them."

Taking in a deep breath, she stared at him for a few seconds and then shook her head. "We don't live in an easy or fair world. Since you spent the better part of your adulthood killing people, I believe that to be something you understand. I won't coddle your aunt because you assume that's what she wants."

"How do you know she doesn't want to be *coddled*?"

"Do you honestly think her so weak that she needs to be protected from the truth?"

"The fetus."

"I should have asked Parker to move Dane into a smaller room so that Clara would see him alone." Kyra paused briefly. "With her empathic abilities, I can't really say what she did and didn't know."

"But you didn't."

"There are strings dropping down all around me, and I don't know which one to pull. I can't figure out how to pull the one that will cause the least amount of pain."

"What the hell happened to my cousin?"

"He was shot in the head with a gun loaded with police ammunition. An unregistered weapon that was eventually turned in to the city by a dead cop's daughter. They laid out all three bodies in a small closet space and walled them in. The room was nearly airtight. The bodies underwent a decomposition process that resulted in half-mummified remains." Kyra turned and sat down on the window seat. "Last night at dinner when you told me about the time period that Dane disappeared in, my whole body seemed to clench up. I couldn't figure out how it could have been a coincidence. The moment I stepped into that house, I knew that cops had done it. Clara has always maintained that the NOPD was responsible for his death. It seemed unreal, and it hurt."

She paused and used both hands to push her hair back from her face. "The night that the bodies were discovered ..."



“What?”

“Halloween night. There was a blood moon that night.”

“What are you saying?”

“You know what I’m saying.” She crossed her arms over her breasts, her gaze never straying from his. “She changed the scarecrow’s clothes that night. Clara knew the exact moment those bodies were uncovered. She knew who he was before I had his DNA compared.”

Alex was silent for a moment and then cleared his throat. “I’ve never seen her like that before.”

“Perhaps I could have made things easier for her. I don’t know how, but I should have thought it all out before I went out there.” Kyra shook her head and glanced at him. “She was waiting for me, just sitting out there on her dock.” She waved her hand around and then glared at him. “Do you know she feeds an old alligator?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you think that you should discourage that?”

“I’ve tried. Clara does exactly what she wants, when she wants. I’ve told the Park Service about the old thing, but they can’t catch him. They’re also afraid of her and refuse to go on her property.”

“With good reason.” She pushed her hands through her hair and closed her eyes. “If I had comforted her, she would have fallen to pieces. And while I might dislike her ways, I wouldn’t want to embarrass her that way. Clara is the strongest, most powerful woman I know, and I’m not talking about the Voodoo.”

“You treated her like you would want to be treated.”

“Yes.”

“I would have preferred to have been there when you told her.”

Kyra sat down at her desk and relaxed when he walked around to her and rested against the window seal. “I’ve been a cop for ten years. I’ve notified more people than I ever want to count that someone they love is never coming home. I did my job today, and you don’t have to like the way I did it. I honestly didn’t expect that you would.”

Alex was silent for a moment. “I suppose that tiny doctor of yours is outside the door waiting to storm in to save you from me.”

She laughed and glanced toward the door. Desi was indeed standing outside of it, her back to them. “She almost pulled her weapon when she walked past you. I guess that means her instincts are getting sharper. Dr. Marcos is an interesting person. Brilliant, moody, and often times distracted by the many toys she wrangles out of the purchasing department.”

“I can appreciate loyalty.” Alex stood away from the window and then squatted down beside her chair.

Kyra raised an eyebrow as he maneuvered her around and pulled her chair closer to him. "What are you up to?"

"You and I came together quickly. We have amazing sex and that in itself has normally been enough for me. I can say that you're like no other woman I've ever been involved with."

"Is that a complaint?"

"No. I just need you to understand that you aren't the only person in this relationship who is out of their element. I'm not a man who enjoys not having control of the environment around me. Having you move around in the lives of people I care about in ways that I can't control is uncomfortable."

"So, I can't talk to your family without your permission?"

He stood up abruptly and turned his back on her. "You don't get it."

"I get it, Master Chief." She leaned back in her chair when he turned to glare at her. Her use of his military rank had only added fuel to the fire. "As I've said before, I do realize that you have the dick in this relationship. You knew what you were getting into when we met. I'm a cop."

"Yeah. I knew what I was getting into." He rubbed his face and looked toward her. "She cried the whole way home."

Kyra's hands clenched in her lap briefly and then she stood. "I did what I could to preserve her dignity. You might have wished to be there when I told her, but I can tell you she didn't want anyone there; if she had, she would have called someone."

"You're right."

"It happens sometimes."

"Tell me about the case."

"I think that it would be best if we had that discussion later in the day when I can give you a better picture of what happened. We're still trying to find her full name."

"Fine. I'll come over after I'm done with the bar for the night."

Kyra sat back in her chair as he left and watched Desi slide back into the room. "Hey, I thought you were going to take Ana some lunch."

"I placed an order. I'm going to pick it up on the way down there." Desi looked around the office and then focused on her. "I guess he wasn't as mad as I thought."

"Oh, he's furious." Kyra glanced at her desk comm-u when it buzzed and sighed. "What about my call to the stupid space ship?"

Desi's mouth dropped open briefly. "Inspector, the New Frontier is one of the most sophisticated vessels humanity has ever created. Its Artificial Intelligence Unit alone is ..."

Kyra threw up her hand and sent the incoming call to voice mail. "Did someone go pick up the Ranger?"

“He didn’t come in on the morning flight. Abel called his office; apparently he was delayed because Senator Libby demanded to speak with him personally before he left Texas.” Desi paused. “As for your request to speak with Phyllis Foster. They said no.”

“Who said no?”

“SpaceTeko. The crew aboard their ship is to have no contact with anyone outside of the company. They are afraid of industrial espionage. The New Frontier doesn’t allow direct communication with anyone who doesn’t have a security code.”

“Fine.” Kyra frowned for a moment and then focused on Desi. “How do you like your new job?”

“It’s more work than I had before, and I have to put up with a lot of crap I didn’t think about when I accepted it. But it’s working out okay.”

“How are things with the crime scene tech you fired the other night?”

“He’s filed a complaint against me.” Desi pursed her lips briefly. “I was going to tell you about it, and then I decided not to because ... well, I thought I should handle it myself.”

“Why hasn’t the complaint hit my desk?”

“He went over your head.”

“Over my head?” Kyra asked softly. She almost smiled. Finally, after days of refraining, she actually had an excuse to kick the shit out of someone.

“Inspector, I think maybe we should just let the commander handle this.” Desi paused. “He accused me of sexual harassment.”

Kyra raised an eyebrow. “Funny, I didn’t think he’d be your type.”

“No, even when I’m in the mood for a man, he simply wouldn’t do. I shouldn’t have accepted his transfer.” Desi glanced around the room and then finally met Kyra’s gaze. “How did you know?”

“I know as much as possible about you, Dr. Marcos. I’ve never mentioned it because it became apparent to me that your sexual preference was something you’d prefer to keep to yourself.”

“I’m not ashamed of being bisexual. I just think it’s personal and no one’s business.”

“I would agree.” Kyra watched her relax. “Now, are you sure I can’t find that little weasel and beat on him for a while?”

“I’m sure.”

“Let me know if you change your mind.” Kyra engaged her desk compu-station. “If your brother is at his desk, send him in.”

“Of course.” Desi went to the door and pulled it open. “Thank you.”

Kyra lifted her gaze to her. “For what?”

“For having faith in me. I really appreciate it.” Desi hurried out without another word.

Abel Joshua came into the room seconds later and closed the door. "You've certainly had a busy day."

"Yes." She tapped her fingers on the desk. "Find a real live person to talk to at SpaceTeko and tell them I'd like to send Foster a list of questions to answer. Questions that they can look at, but remind them that this is an active homicide investigation and disclosure of any information pertaining to my case would make me very angry."

"Would you like me to draft the questions?"

"Yes, send me a copy as soon as you're ready, and be prepared to file a request for a warrant to compel SpaceTeko to do what we ask."

"Of course."

She stood up from her desk and pulled on her jacket. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. All of the detectives in the unit have received their new nanobots, and the majority of the patrol officers have done it or made appointments to do it. At the end of the week, I'll provide you a list of personnel who haven't been accommodating."

"Fine."

"I pulled Royce Foster's personnel file and sent it to your p-pc. He has a son who still lives in New Orleans, but his wife died shortly before he did."

"What about his son?"

"He's a firefighter in District 2. I haven't pulled his file yet."

"Pull it, and send it to me."

Kyra shouldered her bag; its comfortable weight against her hip was reassuring. After the morning she'd had, that small amount of normalcy made her feel better, more centered.

"I know I've only worked for you for a few weeks and that you're still trying to figure how I fit in." Abel paused when she looked up and met his gaze. "What happened in the archives area ... well, it won't happen again."

Kyra put her workbag down on her desk and leaned on the edge. "I trusted the cops in Police Plaza with your life, and they violated that trust. I'm angry about it, but I'm not angry with you."

"Okay."

"And I fully expect you to kick the shit out of the next person who comes at you."

"I won't disappoint."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana tugged her uniform hat on as she exited Police Plaza and stopped briefly when she saw Desi leaning against her car. "Dr. Marcos, you're awfully friendly with my car."

Desi grinned and patted the passenger side door. "She likes me. I caught a ride with some techs from the station." She held out a bag of food. "I brought eats."

Ana wet her lips. "Careful, food is the way to my undying love."

"Then I should've brought more."

Ana laughed and walked to the passenger side door. She reached past Desi and pressed her thumb against the ident-pad to unlock the door. Her hand brushed briefly against Desi's arm, and she took a deep breath. A sweep of heat moved through her and pooled in her belly. Desi always smelled so good. "New perfume?"

"Yes. It's called S-E-X." Desi moved away a little and winked when Ana reached out and opened the door. "Thanks."

"S-E-X, huh?"

"You gotta admire simple marketing." Desi slid into the car and put the bag of food on the seat beside her. "We can eat at the park down the way."

"Sounds good." Ana walked around the car wondering when exactly Desi Marcos had started turning her on. She had no answer for it. "After lunch I'm going over to the ME's to work with the personnel records."

"So when do you get your results?"

"The written exam results are probably already in the inspector's inbox. The psychological testing and halo-training simulations ... well, that usually takes about a week since a human being is involved in the assessment." Ana sighed. "I just hope I did well."

"I'm sure you did."

"Easy for you to say, girl genius." Ana chuckled when Desi made a face. "I just don't want to disappoint the inspector."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra checked her comm-u and resisted the urge to peek in the side window of her grandmother's obscenely plenteous plantation house and tapped her foot gently as she heard the snap of high-heeled shoes approach the door.

Sharon Moray threw it open with her usual flair. "Darling." She frowned as she pulled her into the house. "You look tired. When did you last get a facial?"

"Months. I haven't had time to scrub half my skin off my face." Kyra looked around. "The dog?"

"Oh." Sharon tugged her toward the formal dining room. "He's in class."

"Class? Doesn't he already know how to be a yippy lap dog?" Kyra asked.

"Shh, lower your voice. You'll disturb his concentration."

Kyra came to a stop and stared at the puppy who was sitting perfectly still in front of an uptight man that looked like a human version of a yippy lap dog. The dog was probably wearing ten thousand credits in diamonds.

"Nana, really? A diamond collar?"

Sharon snorted. "As if I'd put real diamonds on a dog. They're synthetic."

Rufus turned and looked at them, and his pink little tongue darted out. "He's cute."

"Shhhh!"

"Oh, darling, this is Franco DeChamp. He's giving Rufus his lessons."

"You're making too much noise." Franco glared at them both. "Quit this room immediately." Then he snapped his fingers twice at them.

"Snap your fingers at me again, *Franco*, and I'll rip them off." Kyra raised an eyebrow when he jumped to his feet. "I'm sure my grandmother could find another little overwrought Frenchmen to teach her dog to sit."

"Kyra, don't threaten Franco." Sharon took her arm and guided her toward the door. "He's sensitive."

"He's about to be black and blue." Kyra glared at him over her shoulder as Sharon shut the door and all but pushed her toward the sitting room. "I don't know how you always manage to find the most irritating people to work for you."

"It prevents me from getting too attached to them. If I liked him I might be tempted to keep him around and seriously, who needs a full-time dog trainer?" Sharon sat down and crossed her legs at the knee. "I saw you on the vid-panel looking righteous and tired."

"That's how you always see me."

Sharon picked up her teacup and nodded. "Yes. Just once, I'd like to see you coming out of some pretty party with a dress that barely covers what God gave you. You used to know how to dress. Just look at you!"

Kyra glanced over her tan leather pants and then up to the white fitted shirt she had on. "Alex doesn't seem to mind."

"Yes, I noticed." Sharon nodded. "Very nice catch on your part, dear. Big, brawny man that he is, I bet he rocks your world three ways from Sunday."

"I am not discussing my sex life with you." Kyra reached forward and poured herself some tea. "And don't refer to him as a catch. He isn't a fish." She smiled into her teacup. He was certainly big and splendid though. "His parents are nice. Though after this morning they could all be a little put out with me."

"What happened this morning?"

"We identified one of the bodies from the safe house. Dane Tibideaux."

The color drained from Sharon's face, and she put her cup down when it started to rattle in the saucer. "You know Clara always said the cops were involved in his

disappearance. I guess I believed her. I mean I had no problems keeping your mother's suicide a secret."

"I really don't want to hear about how you bought cops." Kyra glared at her briefly and then dropped her gaze to her tea.

"I'm sure." Sharon folded her hands in her lap. "I did it for your mother. She did so much good in this city, it wouldn't have served her memory at all for people to know she killed herself." She straightened in her chair and then swallowed hard. "I'll go out and see Clara this afternoon then."

"She was very upset this morning."

"I understand her pain better than most, Kyra." She paused. "You'll understand one day what it's like to carry a life and love that little person with all that you are."

"Actually, that subject has come up recently." Kyra sighed. A part of her wanted to shut up right then and leave. "Due to the enhancements that the government put him through, Alex is unable to father children."

"What a shame." Sharon sighed. "The two of you would have had pretty babies. Well, you could adopt or perhaps get a donor if you wanted to have children later."

"Yes." Kyra nodded and stood. "I have to go."

Sharon stood with her and followed her to the front door. "You should bring Alex over for dinner."

"I'll tell him." Kyra reached out for the door and then abruptly turned to face her grandmother. "Lloyd Deller?"

"What about him?"

"He apparently chased Morgan Waters around town like a lost puppy because she had money."

"So?"

"Did he try to date my mother?"

Sharon pressed her lips firmly together. "Men like him don't look for love; they look for an easy way to live."

"That isn't what I asked."

"Why do you care?"

"Because the man hates me. He's hated me since we met, and I'd like to know why. He apparently harbors a great deal of ill-will toward you as well."

"His mother worked for me." Sharon moved away from the door and sat down on a narrow bench. "She died when he was around nineteen. Alicia was far too young for him to be interested in her. She couldn't have been more than fourteen at the time. He did, however, harbor illusions that I would support him because his mother had passed away

while in my employ. I loved his mother dearly, but Lloyd was a difficult young man, and I had Alicia to consider. I didn't feel he'd be a good influence on her."

"You threw him out."

"Of course not." Sharon twisted a ring around her finger a few times. "I found him a very nice apartment downtown next to the university, paid his rent for a year, and set up an account to handle his education. It was the best I could do by him, and I knew his mother wanted him to go to college."

"But he wanted more?"

"Yes." She looked upward and met Kyra's gaze. "I won't let him hurt you. He hates you because of me."

"I'm not afraid of him."

"You needn't be. He's a small man with more ambition than heart."

Kyra nodded and opened the door. "Don't worry about Deller. I won't let him hurt you either."

"Kyra." Sharon stood up quickly and went to the door. "I love you. Everything I ever did was because of it." She took a deep breath. "I didn't hide your mother's suicide because I was ashamed of it or her. I failed her. I should've realized how hurt she was. It seemed that everyone around me knew. I don't know how I could've missed it."

"I understand. I certainly failed Glory."

"No." Sharon shook her head. "You didn't. Glory needed something none of us could provide. Her time in Tuscany will be good for her."

"*You* knew?" Kyra demanded softly.

"Of course, darling." Sharon pulled her in for a hug and kissed her cheek. "She used my new sonic-jet. I told her she could break it in. As if I'd let our sweet Glory travel on one of those crowded transatlantic transports."

She laughed, anger draining away. "How could I have thought otherwise?" Kyra hugged her grandmother tightly. "Remind me, which one of us won Little Miss Crawfish?"

"She did. That was just a year before her parents died." She stopped to push a lock of Kyra's hair back from her face. "You were Little Miss French Quarter that year."

"Oh, yeah." Kyra wrinkled her nose. "How on earth could I have forgotten?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra found Ana in an office in the ME's, her hands buried deeply in her hair. "From your appearance am I to assume that you haven't found anything?"

Ana looked up and sighed. "Not a damn thing. There were five women named Gina who worked for the NOPD during the year of the murder, but they are all accounted for."

"Have you checked your findings against the payroll system?"



Ana shook her head. "No."

"Do. It would be easy for someone to take her information out of the employee information database, but erasing the payroll records would be a lot of work and probably would have been caught in an audit."

"Shit." She lowered her head to the desk in front of her. "I'm beginning to wonder how I got this badge. I'll have to file for a warrant to review payroll records."

"It's easy to narrow your focus so much that you lose the big picture." She checked her comm-u for the time and then motioned around the room. "Maybe you need to take a break or a nap. Find a place to lie down; just avoid places where someone might think you're a dead body."

Ana laughed and nodded. She watched her partner of only a few weeks close the door, leaving her alone again. Working with Senior Inspector Kyra Moray was a big boost to her career, but she was beginning to realize that it was also going to make her a much better cop.

She glanced toward the door again, just in time to see Desi wave and open it. "Hey."

"The inspector told me to get you. We're going to get food." Desi leaned against the doorframe. "You look tired."

"She said I could sleep."

Desi nodded. "Maybe you should. How long has it been since you had a full night's sleep?"

"Who knows? We just had lunch."

"We had lunch six hours ago."

"Oh, well, okay." Ana stood up and stretched. "Where?"

"Still Waters."

"I'll meet you in the transport."

She laughed. "Figured you'd say that."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra frowned as she stared at the face reconstruction of the woman. "Have you gotten a hit on her DNA profile?"

"No." Parker shook his head. "And I searched the employment records going back twenty-five years just in case she was a great deal older than Dane. No luck."

"Send the reconstruction to my p-pc. I'll go out to Clara's and see if she can confirm that she's the woman she met."

"Your man tangled up about this morning?"

"Tangled up doesn't even begin to describe the state of Alex Water's temper." Kyra stretched her arms over her head and then glanced toward the door. "We're going to eat, interested?"

"No, but thank you. I promised that I would be home on time for dinner."

"Let me know if anything pops before you go."

"As always, Inspector."

Kyra left the exam room and walked down the hall that would lead to the lobby of the building. The morgue was a sterile and odorless environment. She hated smelling nothing, it was weird. Outside she found both Desi and Ana had already gotten into the vehicle.

"Not sleepy?"

Ana pulled at her harness to test it just in case her partner was in a bad mood and shrugged. "I can sleep any time, but it isn't every day that I get to stare at men. You're all the time sticking me in rooms off by myself."

Kyra laughed. "Didn't I give you the Texas Ranger?"

"Yeah, but he's delayed. He'd better be worth the wait."

"He's all right for a man from Texas."

"Can we use the hover-system?" Desi asked from the back seat. "I can pretend to be dying if we need an emergency."

"No. Just hope that we have an emergency to go to sometime soon." It was getting on her damn nerves, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

"She had no business putting Clara through that."

Alex winced as his mother started to pace in front of his desk again. "She's doing her job, Mother. I may not like it, and I can guarantee you she doesn't like it much either right now. She deals with death on a fairly regular basis, and I trust her."

"What about the baby?" Morgan demanded and turned to look at her son.

"What about him? Mother, Clara went in to that room already knowing everything she needed to know. I know you have a problem discussing her gifts, but we can't ignore them."

"It was a heartless thing to do."

"Kyra may be a little tougher than most of the women I know, but she's not heartless. She puts every bit of her energy into the job, and she might come off as aloof, but don't mistake it for not caring." He watched her go over to the couch in his office and sit down. "I don't like what happened at the ME's office. I was angry with her, and I'm still angry at the situation."

"Clara is so upset."

“And would be no matter how Kyra dealt with her. She chose to deal with her on an equal footing. Had she not treated Clara like an equal, I imagine the situation would have been even more difficult.”

“I can’t imagine how.”

“She’s important to me.”

Morgan turned and looked at her son. “You’ve only known her a few weeks.”

“Don’t I know it.” Alex rubbed his face. “She’s what I want, and I need you to understand that and respect it.”

“So, I don’t get to be mean to her.” Morgan raised an eyebrow.

He laughed. “That’s between you and her, but I should warn you, she bites back.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra paused at the bar while Desi and Ana scouted out a table. She slid up onto a stool beside Marcus Waters and tapped the smooth surface in front of her with the tips of her fingers. “Are you mad at me, too?”

“No.” He turned and looked at her, flashing the smile of angel. His smooth, dark brown skin and the arrangement of braids that fell down his shoulders were attractive, but he didn’t pull at her the way his brother did. “You did your job. Alex and our mother would like to wrap her up and protect her from all of this. You and I both know Clara wouldn’t tolerate it.”

“Alex accused me of hurting that mean old witch on purpose.”

Marcus laughed at her tone and shook his head. “Yeah, yeah, I heard all about it. You might as well know our mother is spoiling for a fight.”

“That’s too bad.” Kyra slid off the stool. “She in his office?”

“Yeah, our father is running a few errands before he picks her up. They’re going to stay in town for the foreseeable future.”

Kyra nodded and after a brief glance to see where Ana and Desi had taken themselves, she walked back toward Alex’s office. She pushed open the door and looked the two of them over.

She focused on Alex. “Don’t you have a bar to run?”

“No bloodshed.” Alex stood up from his desk and glanced briefly at his mother before leaving the office and pulling the door shut behind him.

Kyra looked around the office, pulled off her jacket, and tossed it in a chair near the door. “I don’t have any siblings. I have this friend that I would definitely consider my sister. Her parents died when she was eight, and my grandmother became her guardian. I’d go to hell for her. She’s beautiful, impetuous, and has the worst taste in men on this planet. If there’s a jackass within a hundred mile radius she will find him and date him.”

"Must make things interesting."

She nodded. "Sometimes."

"Clara is very upset."

"I knew she would be, and I honestly could think of no way to tell her what I knew without hurting her. There is no way to tell a parent their child is never coming home without hurting them." Kyra looked at Morgan then. Saw the anger and the frustration slipping over the older woman's features. "I've been working homicides for a long time, and every day I run the risk of delivering the kind of news that Clara received this morning. The only difference is that she knew. She knew that I'd found his body. I would have preferred to spare her the viewing of the infant, but she insisted."

"My son cares about you a great deal."

"Yeah, he has the worst taste in women." Kyra leaned against Alex's desk and sighed.

"Clara always said that Dane's body would be recovered. I don't think I ever believed her."

"I can't give him back to her, but I'll do what I can to make it right." She checked her comm-u. "I'll be going out there in about an hour to speak with her. I trust you'll want to be there."

"Yes."

"Then we can agree that we might argue later."

"I think we can agree on that." Morgan stood. "I'll try to remember you're doing your job."

"That's all I can ask."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You know you could have stayed in the city."

Ana glanced over the hood of the transport as she shifted her gun. "I'm not afraid of her."

Kyra glanced her way. "No, I didn't imagine that you were. Don't get too close to the water. She feeds an old alligator." She grinned when Ana hurried around the transport, her hand gripping her weapon. "Have you gotten your additional nanobots?"

"Sure did." Ana tucked her uniform hat under her arm and hurried to catch up with Kyra. "Did you?"

"Yes." Kyra frowned. "I can't turn the fuckers off."

"I figured that would piss you off. Almost told the med-tech not to tell you." Ana grinned when her partner stopped and turned to look at her. "I didn't though."

Kyra paused at the stairs that led up to Clara's porch and sighed. It was the first time ever that she wasn't out on the porch to greet her.

She went up the stairs and pushed the visitor button. The door opened quickly and Devon Waters slipped through and pulled the door shut behind him. "Inspector."

Kyra gaze narrowed. "Did your wife send you out here to tell me to go away?"

"No." He laughed and leaned against the door. "I know what my son sees in you."

She flushed a little and tried to look professional. What was it about the Waters men that made her stupid? "I need to talk to Clara."

"I wanted to prepare you. She's not sleeping and our attempts at sedating her have failed."

"Consider me prepared."

He shrugged and opened the door. "It's your funeral."

Kyra shook her head and took a second to glance back at Ana's pale face. "Relax. She hasn't killed a visitor in years." The inside of Clara's house was just as it had been the last time she'd entered it. Neat, sparsely decorated, and cinnamon scented the air. "Where is she?"

"In her bedroom, it's down the hall to the right."

Kyra looked toward Ana. "Why don't you hang back and interrogate Mr. Waters? I'd like four or five really embarrassing stories from Alex's childhood."

Ana shot Devon a look and nodded. "Of course."

Kyra left Ana with him in the small foyer and walked down the hall to Clara's bedroom. The door was open, so when she stopped in front of it, she had an excellent view of both of them. Morgan Waters and her sister were standing on opposite sides of the bed, both looking rather winded and ill-tempered.

"Good afternoon, ladies."

Clara straightened and took a few seconds to smooth her hair. "Inspector, I'm pleased to see you. I'd like you to throw my sister and her husband out of my house."

"I work Major Crimes. We don't involve ourselves in domestic disputes unless someone ends up dead." Kyra leaned against the doorframe and watched the two women try to calm down. Clara was giving her sister looks that could have killed. "They've completed the facial reconstruction on the female victim."

"You're here to see if she's the same woman Dane was dating?"

"Yes." Kyra pulled her p-pc from its holder and walked over to Clara. Calling up the image took a few seconds, and then she offered the personal compu to the older woman. "The computer isn't much of an artist, but this is what we've come up with."

Clara nodded. "Yes, it's close. Her eyes were shaped a bit differently and her lips fuller. She was a beautiful woman." She frowned. "I shouldn't have been so damned stubborn about their relationship."

"You had nothing to do with what happened to your son and his girlfriend."

"You'll find out who did?" Clara asked as she handed the p-pc back to Kyra. "Even if it's a cop."

"We both know that it probably was a cop, and I won't stop looking until I find the man responsible."

"Is that a promise?"

"Yes." Kyra turned to look at Morgan and then held out her hand. Morgan walked forward and dropped the injection canister into her hand. "Now, your sister and her husband are worried about you. Not sleeping won't do anyone any good, and fighting over it is a waste of time and energy." She held the canister out. "Take the sedative, get some sleep, and then when you wake up, you can plot chaos and mayhem on anyone you'd like."

"I don't take orders from you." Clara crossed her arms over her breasts and glared.

Kyra met Clara's gaze and raised one eyebrow. "I'm faster than you. So take the damn sedative before I chase you around this house myself."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"The rest of this city might cower at your feet, Madame Tibideaux, but I don't, and I never will. You look ready to keel over, and frankly a woman your age should know better."

Clara glared and then grabbed the canister from Kyra. "Bitch cop."

"Mean old witch."

She pressed the dispenser end to her arm and pressed the release button. "Get out of my house, Inspector."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You handled her like a pro."

Kyra laughed softly and shook her head. "Mrs. Waters, there isn't a person alive who can handle Clara Tibideaux. I just took a hit at her pride." She glanced out to her vehicle where Ana was leaning. "You should be careful of the dock; your crazy-ass sister is feeding an old alligator." She looked back to Morgan and found her mouth hanging open. "Yeah, I'd take her and have her mental facilities investigated if I wasn't afraid she'd put a curse on me."

Morgan crossed her arms over her breasts and glanced back at the house. "Her work room gives me the chills."

"You don't practice?"

"Voodoo? Good Lord, no. Clara chose to walk in her father's footsteps. He was deeply involved in the faith when he died. Our mother always thought that Clara turned to Voodoo so that she could feel connected to her father."

"How strong was the sedative?"

"Just a mild one. She'll sleep a few hours."

\* \* \* \* \*

Desi sat back in her chair and stared at the results in front of her. The gun used in the murders had a serious past, and she knew Kyra wasn't going to like what she'd found. She glanced at her comm-u for the time and knew that the inspector would be in the building in a few moments.

If she were a coward, she'd just shoot the report off to the whole team and hide in a hole until she was sure that Kyra had read it. She glanced up as her office door swung open and raised an eyebrow.

"She's here?"

Abel nodded. "Yeah. Conference room 3."

## Chapter Seven

Kyra put her coffee down on the table in front of her as Desi and Abel took seats. “Clara confirmed that the woman is likely the same woman named Gina that Dane Tibideaux dated before he disappeared.”

“I’ve searched all city employee records for women named Gina. They are all accounted for.” Ana browsed through her p-pc and glanced up at Kyra. “I filed for a warrant to review the payroll records for the years 2145 through 2150. Since the warrant will be public record, I figured I should make the search as broad as possible.”

Desi cleared her throat. “I’ve done some more digging on the gun.” She waited until Kyra looked toward her before continuing. “It was confiscated in a drug bust on February 5, 2145. A couple of uniforms pulled a car over for erratic driving, and it turned into a blood bath. The suspect shot both officers but they survived. The gunman was apprehended and the gun confiscated by the responding detective, Benjamin Darcy. However, the records on the gun’s ballistics fingerprint are not in the file. I found it only because the idiots who did the compu work didn’t purge the arrest record, which included bullet evidence pulled from the uniformed cops on the scene. Two years later it was used to gun down Mitchell Libby, Dane Tibideaux, and the woman we believe to have the first name of Gina.”

Kyra sat back in her chair and glanced around the table. Ana was staring at the table in front of her. “Was Benjamin Darcy in the log files for the safe house?”

Abel picked up his p-pc and called up the appropriate file. “He was in the safe house on May 2, 2147, and then again in February of 2148.” He looked up from the screen. “Who is he?”

“He was my partner.” Kyra stood up and grabbed her coffee. “When I moved to District 4 he was already an inspector. He trained me. Ben retired two months after I made inspector.”



“Did they push him out?”

Kyra’s gaze met Abel’s. The question had caught her off guard. “He was near mandatory retirement. When I was promoted to senior inspector of Major Crimes last year, he was given the choice of taking a position at Police Plaza or retiring. He told me he was ready to relax. I left it at that.”

“Well, it’s certainly no secret that you were the star of the city after you stepped in front of the mayor and took a bullet.” Ana watched Kyra pace the length of the room. “Your rapid rise in rank caused some people to be very angry with you and the department in general.”

“Cops,” Abel murmured. “It pissed off cops.”

“Some.” Ana shrugged. “It’s certainly no secret. A year after she saved the mayor’s life, she’s promoted to inspector, and they put her in the office of a man who’d been on the job for nearly forty years.”

Kyra nodded. “Yeah. I caught some flack, but I never felt like Ben had a problem with it. Hell, he officiated at my rank ceremony. But none of this has anything to do with the case.”

“What were the procedures for removing evidence from the locker in 2147?” Abel asked, his gaze moving around the table.

“Doesn’t matter.” Desi flushed a little when they all turned to look at her. “The last record of the gun in the database is its removal from evidence for recycling. Four cops oversaw the removal operation of over two thousand guns in April of 2147. Two of the four cops involved in nearly all of the gun recycling runs for District 4 are on Sebastian Green’s list.”

“How many of them served in District 4 at the time of Dane Tibideaux’s disappearance?”

“Two. Roger Setterstrom and Beau Grant were patrolmen for District 4 Major Crimes, partners. They are both detectives in District 1 now. The other two, Remy St. James and Evan Horn, left the department eight years ago. They are both employed as bodyguards for an upscale firm for personal security.” Desi put her hands down on the table. “There’s more.”

“Okay.” Kyra nodded, aware that Desi had grown very still. It was odd to see her that way. “Dr. Marcos?”

“I requested processing records for the recycling plant for the time period of the gun’s alleged destruction. They don’t match ours. Someone went in and changed the records in our system. The recycling plant sent me the records for the first ten years they were in operation. Every shipment that went to them that involved District 4 from 2144 to 2147 was grossly unbalanced. For instance, the shipment of guns for April 2145 was several tons short by the time it reached the recycling plant.”

“Gun smuggling.”

“Yes.” Desi nodded and looked briefly at her p-pc. “So I requested all of the recycling records for the entire city. I should have them by the end of the day.”

“Your thinking?” Kyra prodded.

“They were taking a huge risk, much too large a risk to just be running the confiscated weapons from District 4.” Desi paused. “There’s another problem.”

“Concerning the records or the guns?”

“The records. The number of guns and the amount of reported recycled metal from the plant have been altered at least two times. He didn’t even bother to conceal his activity. Foster went in and altered the amount of recycled metal every time there was a shipment. The recycling plant would forward the data; several hours later Foster would go in and change the numbers so they matched.” Desi took a deep breath. “Then the day before he retired he went in and changed all the numbers again. I don’t know if he changed them back to what they should’ve been or just altered them enough for it to look bad.”

“Your estimate on the amount of guns?”

“At least twenty tons of weapons disappeared out of District 4. I’ll have an estimate for the whole city when I get the records from the recycling plant.”

Kyra sat back down in the chair at the head of the table and put her coffee down. “So, we have a gun that was supposed to have been destroyed, two cops that were suspected of being corrupt, at least twenty tons of missing weapons, and one of my former partners took the gun into evidence. What about Royce Foster?”

“Foster was a detective at the time of the murders and partnered with Benjamin Darcy.”

“It doesn’t mean he had anything to do with the killings.” Ana sat up straighter when Kyra looked toward her. “You don’t know where all the evidence you’ve ever logged is, do you?”

Kyra waved her hand. “No. I couldn’t possibly keep track of that kind of thing. However, the fact that it wasn’t destroyed when it was supposed to have been is bad, and we all know it. Our killer was or still is a cop, and that is unacceptable.” She stood. “I want to speak to the cops that were in the safe house and on Sebastian Green’s list. If any of them refuse, contact Internal Affairs.”

“What about Darcy?”

“I’m going to go talk with the commander. I’ll take care of Ben personally.”

Kyra paused at the entrance of Commander Ethan Baker’s office and waited until he finished his comm-u conversation before she came in. “Sir.”

“Inspector.” He motioned to a chair in front of his desk. “That was the chief. He’s getting pressure from the mayor’s office.”

“He’s getting pressure from Lloyd Deller.” Kyra corrected softly. “He and I apparently have more history than I thought. His mother worked for my family for years before her death.”

“I see.” He raised an eyebrow. “He blames your family for her death?”

“Her death was of natural causes. Deller hates my grandmother because she refused to support him after his mother’s death. I suppose he thought she owed him something because his mother had worked for the family for so many years.”

“Yeah.” Ethan nodded. “Tell me what you’ve got.”

“We’ve had no luck finding the woman’s full name but Ana is working on that angle. Clara Tibideaux did confirm that the facial reconstruction is a decent match for the woman she knew as Gina. The Texas Ranger, Jonas Hatch, will be here tomorrow.

“The gun was confiscated in a drug related case in 2145 by Ben Darcy, and the city pulled it from evidence for destruction April 4, 2147. In May of that same year, it was used to kill three people in the safe house. In 2155, a woman named Phyllis Foster turned the gun in for a stunner. She’d inherited it from her father, a man named Royce Foster, Ben’s partner at the time of the murders. Dr. Marcos has also discovered evidence that supports a large gun-smuggling operation in the city.”

“Gun smuggling?” Ethan shook his head. “The reorganization committee would have found out about a citywide operation like that.”

“The recycling records don’t match the records we have on file for the guns that were slotted for destruction. Nearly every run from 2144 through 2147 came up short at the plant. We’ll have a good accounting of how many guns were smuggled out of the city this afternoon when Dr. Marcos gets the rest of the records.”

“She’s going to compare the gun destruction records for the whole city then?”

“Yes. It’s the only way to be sure.”

Ethan nodded. “Your next move?”

“I need to have a conversation with Ben Darcy, and I’m going to start interviewing the cops on Sebastian Green’s list. Two of the four cops that were supposed to see to the destruction of that gun in 2147 are on his list.”

“Keep me informed.”

“Won’t be a problem.”

“Watch your ass.”

“I will.” Kyra paused at the door and then turned to look at him. “I don’t like this.”

“No cop wants to investigate their own,” Ethan murmured. “There’s a reason IAB pays so well. Do your job, Inspector, and we’ll deal with the consequences as they come.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Benjamin Darcy leaned against the doorframe of his modest home and looked out at Kyra's vehicle. "Think that thing is big enough for you?"

"You always told me to drive a vehicle big enough to carry a couple of bodies." She plucked off her sunshields and met his gaze. "I need to come in."

"Yeah, I figured that you would." He stepped back and followed her in. "Pardon the mess; the wife is out of town."

"I'm sure she'll be thrilled to come home to this." Kyra glanced around the room taking in two weeks worth of discarded clothing and food containers before looking at him. "Really, Ben."

He laughed and motioned to her. "Come along, I was out on the deck."

Kyra followed him through the house and out onto the deck. She sat down in a chair on the opposite side of the single table on the deck and looked over his face. She wanted to see innocence, but she didn't. Worry and frustration lined his face in a couple hundred different ways.

"You look like an animal caught in the crosshairs of a conservationist's weapon."

"When I was where you are now, I only visited retired cops officially when they'd done something wrong."

"A gun you confiscated from a drug bust in 2145 was used to kill three people after it was said to have been destroyed."

He raised an eyebrow. "The safe house murders?"

"Yes."

"You were in that safe house at least once during the month of the murders along with two other cops from District 4. After the murders, the house was closed for use for six months by the mayor's office and no reason was ever listed. Do you remember why the house was closed?"

"There were over a hundred safe houses in the city at that time. We were just getting out of the reorganization, you know."

"I'm very aware of that. Roger Setterstrom and Beau Grant were part of the four-man team that was supposed to dispose of the weapon along with a couple thousand others. They were also in the safe house during the month of the murder."

"How were you able to determine the month?"

"The killer was stupid enough not to search his victims. We found a receipt from a convenience store in one of the victim's pockets." She shifted in the chair and watched him move around the deck.

"I see." He cleared his throat. "I worked with a lot of good cops, Inspector. I also worked with cops taken out by the reorganization committee and cops that escaped it. It takes a lot more than just following a rule book to be a good cop."

“Rules can be bent, but they should never be broken. You told me that.” Kyra looked out toward the neatly manicured lawn that spread out beyond the deck. “Sebastian Green came here to personally deliver a list of city personnel that he believed to be dirty but was never able to gather enough evidence on to warrant their arrest.”

“You’re taking the list seriously?”

The question didn’t need an answer. “You weren’t on it.”

“I didn’t expect that I would be.” He shrugged. “The gun’s survival is a mystery.”

“Setterstrom and Grant didn’t destroy the weapon; I’m left to assume that it wasn’t the only one they kept back. The black market gun market was thriving back then; the gun ban for citizens had been in effect for a few years. It was getting harder for the average citizen to get any weapon legally.”

“Gun destruction runs were done by four cops. How do you suppose Setterstrom and Grant did it?”

“I’ll find out soon enough. I believe that they would’ve had to be in on it together.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a pretty good idea as to how the gun ended up back in circulation.”

“Yes, but what I don’t understand is how it got into Royce Foster’s possession.”

“What?” Ben stiffened and met her gaze for the first time since they’d walked out on the deck.

“The gun was turned in at a gun exchange program by Phyllis Foster who said that she had inherited the weapon from her father when he died.”

“You don’t honestly think that Royce had anything to do with these murders!”

“You tell me.”

“He was a good cop. I trusted him.”

“Royce Foster had the gun after the murders were committed. We’re looking at his financials for irregularities. Procedure demands that we review yours as well.”

“You think I’m dirty?” He stood up from his chair and turned his back on her. “I trained you.”

“Your partner had a weapon in his possession that was used to murder two cops and a civilian. You didn’t teach me to overlook anyone just because it might be uncomfortable.”

“Two cops?” He turned and his gaze moved along the synthetic wood planks of the deck. “Who?”

“A Texas Ranger named Mitchell Libby who had been sent to the city to see how well the reorganization had worked. A woman named Gina who was part of the NOPD.”

“Gina?” Ben shook his head. “No, not Gina. She took a position in New York Dome to be closer to her mother.”

“Her full name?”

"Gina Webb. Shouldn't be too hard to locate her; she was a detective in Major Crimes."

"The records for Gina Webb were erased from the employment database." Kyra pulled out her p-pc and sent Ana a message containing the name. "She was five months pregnant when she was murdered. We found her mummified fetus in what was left of her body."

"Jesus Christ."

"You haven't asked who the other body was. Do you know already?"

Ben shook his head. "No. I don't have a clue."

"Dane Tibideaux." She watched the color drain from Ben's face and wondered what had disturbed him more: the deaths or the identifications. "I'm positive."

"Well, you have yourself a fine mess here."

"Yeah." Kyra nodded. "And it's only going to get worse. Ben, could Royce have been involved with Setterstrom and Grant in some way, without you knowing?"

"Of course. We were partners, but we didn't spend every waking hour together. But I never once thought that he might be dirty."

"What about the other two?"

"I don't remember either of them all that well. They were both still in uniform then?"

"Yes."

"Royce did some administrative work for the lead inspector at the time. He had a great deal of contact with the uniformed unit."

"The senior inspector was?"

Ben raised an eyebrow, apparently shocked. "You don't know?"

"We haven't gone through all of the personnel assignments for the District. Our search so far has focused on the gun and the safe house."

"Ethan Baker was the senior inspector of Major Crimes for District 4 that year."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ethan Baker's head jerked up. She had never slammed his door; plenty of cops had over the years, but never Kyra.

"Inspector?"

"Why didn't you tell me you were senior inspector of this district for Major Crimes during the murders of those people?" Her voice was controlled, but her temper shone brightly in her eyes.

"I could say I assumed you knew."

"You assigned Setterstrom and Grant to that gun disposal run."

"Yes. The chief of police asked two districts to supply two uniformed cops for gun destruction. I believe you've done it yourself a few times."

“Did Sebastian Green ever tell you that Setterstrom and Grant were corrupt?”

“No. Green cut a path through this city without regard to rank or chain of command. It was his job. He didn’t bother talking to anyone.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I honestly don’t know. That summer was a difficult one for me. I’d just taken the position as the head of Major Crimes, and Madame Tibideaux’s accusations were being touted by every news agency in the state. We’d just started to recover from the reorganization and then that happens. Up and coming college kid just disappears, and the mother is saying that cops did it.”

“Gina Webb.”

“She was a detective in Major Crimes. Her mother grew ill and Gina moved to the New York Dome to take care of her.”

“Gina Webb was murdered in that safe house with her lover, Dane Tibideaux, and a Texas Ranger.”

“I handled her paperwork myself.” Ethan snapped. “She sat in my office and detailed her plans, and I helped her get a position with the NYPD. You have the wrong cop, Inspector. New York would have contacted me if she hadn’t shown up.”

“She never left New Orleans.”

“Then I suggest you find out why, Inspector.”

“Who was her partner?” Kyra asked softly. Anger still burned in her gut. She didn’t like anyone keeping secrets from her.

Ethan frowned and turned to his compu-station. After a few tense minutes, he turned to her. “Todd Conrad.”

*Todd Conrad*, the cop she’d threatened over the attack on Abel. “The other two cops that helped with the gun disposal are detectives in his division.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana called up the picture she’d found of Detective Gina Webb and then brought up the facial reconstruction. Clara was right; the compu had done a decent job of recreating the woman’s face. The lips weren’t full enough, she thought. Her warrant for Webb’s CIR would provide the DNA link needed for legal identification. The request for employment records in New York had yielded very little information. The record for Gina indicated that she’d accepted a position with their Internal Affairs Bureau, but she never reported for duty. Had she been IAB in New Orleans as well?

She turned in her chair as Kyra entered the office. “I’m waiting on her DNA profile. But it’s a good ID.”

Kyra glanced toward the wall vid-panel and nodded. "Yes. What about New York Dome?"

"She was offered and accepted a position in IAB for the NYPD, but she never reported for duty. Her employment was terminated officially on June 1, 2147." Ana looked to the vid-panel again.

"Baker was the senior inspector at the time. He said that she came to him with her plans, and he helped secure her a position in New York."

"Why didn't we already know that?"

Kyra's looked at her and for a moment, she said nothing. Then she cleared her throat. "That's yet another question we can add to our plate."

"He didn't offer an explanation as to why he didn't tell us?"

"We should have already researched it. Ben Darcy blindsided me in the interview with that bit of information. As for Baker, he said that the summer was stressful for him and didn't offer a satisfactory explanation as to why he didn't tell me what his position was in District 4."

"You're right. We should've already known who the top players were in the district at the time of the murders."

"I want to know who the commander for the station was and who the senior inspector of Anti-Crime was at the time." She turned to look at the vid-panel that displayed an image of Gina Webb. "Did New York send you her file?"

"No, just a summary of events. Was she going to New York to escape something?" Ana asked softly and stood. "I need some coffee. Want some?"

"I just refilled actually." Kyra sat down at her desk and focused on the smiling face of Gina Webb.

What had happened in that house? Had she been running from New Orleans? The questions kept adding up, but she had very few answers. She turned to her desk comm-u and looked up Senior Inspector Todd Conrad's comm-u number. Instructing the comm-u to dial, she glanced up briefly when Ana left.

The comm-u activated, and the viewer slipped up in front of her. "Inspector Conrad."

"Inspector Moray, I haven't been able to find out anything about the attack on your admin. I assure you that I will let you know when I do."

"I'm not calling about that." She sipped her coffee and watched the man adjust in his chair. "Detective Gina Webb."

"What about her?"

"What do you know about her?" Todd shrugged and tried to look relaxed but Kyra could see tension slip over his features. He should never gamble, she thought. "Inspector?"



He cleared his throat. "I was her partner for about two years. She resigned her post in New Orleans and moved to the New York Dome."

"She died in a house at 203 Rose Street in 2147 along with two other people."

"You are very much mistaken."

"I am not." She watched him move around a little, his face pale. "I'd like to have a conversation with you, Inspector Todd. You can come in on your own, or I can send a few uniforms over to pick you up."

His face flushed red with anger. "You're out of your damn mind. You can't charge me with anything, and you can't force me into an interview room."

"Are you telling me no? Because I've a room full of reporters downstairs waiting for me to talk about these murders. I'd be happy to tell them you're obstructing my investigation."

"I'll be there in an hour."

"Be sure that you aren't late." Kyra ended the call and looked at Ana who had reentered the room near the end of her conversation with Todd Conrad. "I enjoyed that."

"I know you did." Ana glanced at the vid-panel again and sighed. "She was pretty."

"Yes." Kyra stood. "Is the press room ready?"

"Yes, and they're all being very polite and quiet today. It's probably a sign that the world is ending."

Kyra nodded and pulled her p-pc from its docking station. "After her CIR file comes in, you can go off duty."

"I planned to." Ana offered a smile. "I've got a date."

Kyra exited her office and strode through the bustling bullpen. It was nearly time for a shift change and most of her detectives were overloaded with murders and robberies. The pressroom was indeed quiet when she entered. She took note of the hover cams with some disgust. The mayor had given the media permission to use them in city buildings last week, and the press hadn't wasted any time getting smaller versions for indoor use.

"Good evening, I want to thank you all for your patience. I realize that I should have been here nearly thirty minutes ago."

"You're good ratings. We'd wait all night."

Kyra glanced up at the reporter who had spoken. "I don't consider that a compliment, Mr. Daily." She paused and waited while the hover cams engaged and the reporters prepared. "We've identified the bodies discovered in the house on Rose Street, the families of the victims have been notified, and you're free to use their names during your reports now. As most of you probably already know, there were two men and one woman in the small room. Mitchell Libby, a Texas Ranger, was the first victim we identified. At this time, we have no information as to why he was in New Orleans. The second male has been identified as Dane Tibideaux." She paused and listened to the rush of noise move through the room. "The

woman has been identified as Gina Webb. She was a Detective for the NOPD and served in District 4 before she disappeared.”

Silence settled over the room as Kyra’s gaze drifted over them. The news had changed the dynamics of the case for every person in the city, and the men and women in the room knew it. Alone, each of the victims was news; together, they were something far greater.

“Questions.” She looked around the room and her gaze locked with Jim Daily’s. “Go ahead, Jim.”

“Inspector, is the man you’ve identified as Dane Tibideaux, Madame Tibideaux’s son?”

“Yes.” Kyra looked toward Joanna Dawson and nodded. “Channel 4.”

“How were they killed?”

“Three of the victims in the room died of a single gunshot wound to the back of the head. The fourth was Gina Webb’s unborn child; she was between five and six months pregnant at the time of her death. I will be pursuing four counts of murder in the first degree in this case.” Her hands clenched on the podium in front of her. “We’re actively investigating this case and have several promising leads to pursue. I would remind you that Madame Tibideaux deserves peace and respect. As you can imagine, the discovery of her son’s body has upset her greatly.”

“It’s news, Inspector.” Joanna insisted.

Kyra raised an eyebrow. “At this point, I’d like to remind you that nowhere in the penal code of the city of New Orleans does it state that murdering someone with the use of a Voodoo spell is a crime punishable by law.”

## Chapter Eight

Inspector Todd Conrad was sitting at the interview table, alone. She'd expected him to come in with an advocate. The door to the observation deck opened and Ana entered.

"Thought you had a date?"

"It fell through." Ana leaned against the one-way window and looked at Conrad. "He's got this amazing new story to write."

"You're dating a reporter?"

Ana glanced her partner's way and laughed. "No, I occasionally screw this one reporter half dead and then leave him to shake in his bed all by himself. It works out great for me."

"Half dead?" Kyra shook her head and grinned. "Poor guy."

"Yeah, he complains about it a lot." She motioned toward Conrad. "I want to be in there."

"Sure about that?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go. If he knows something about this case I'll get it out of him, eventually."

"You think he would have let his partner's murder go unpunished?"

"I guess we're about to find out." Kyra pulled off her jacket and dropped it in one of the chairs.

"I would hope that you'd wreak bloody vengeance on my behalf," Ana muttered. "I'd certainly do it for you."

"Of course I would, Salanti." Kyra flashed a grin. "I'd turn this city upside down."

She motioned Ana ahead of her and looked one more time at Conrad. He didn't look particularly nervous. She watched Ana enter the room and set up the table p-pc to record the session. Conrad offered her a smile, and Ana ignored him. The constable was an attractive

woman. Kyra had spent a great deal of her youth trapped in the pageant world and understood more about physical attractiveness than she ever wanted to. Ana had good cheekbones, wide, pretty brown eyes, and wildly curly brown hair that she tried vainly to tame.

They were using the yellow interview room, again. Since every cop in the building avoided the space as much as possible, it was usually free and available for her impromptu interviews.

She left the observation deck and walked into the interview room as Ana sat down at the table. "Inspector Conrad."

"I see you took the time to get on the vid-panel this afternoon."

Kyra raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I did. Did I look abused and misused to you?"

He paused as if he was uncertain as to whether she was actually asking him a question. "Yes, but then you normally do."

She sat down in front of him. "Your partner of three years was murdered execution style in the house on Rose Street. A safe house for witnesses used by the NOPD and the reorganization committee. Her lover, Dane Tibideaux, was also murdered in that house. And as if this case wasn't already a fucking monster, the other body in the room was a Texas Ranger.

"The gun used in the murders was confiscated by Benjamin Darcy, a detective in Major Crimes. Then it was listed as destroyed, except obviously it wasn't. It ends up in his partner, Royce Foster's, estate in 2155. Phyllis Foster exchanged the gun for a stun weapon."

"I can assume you've already talked with Benjamin Darcy," Todd said as he pulled out his p-pc. "I only have about five years of data on this thing, but I have records from that time period at home. I can send you my notes and appointments for that month; maybe it could help you track Gina's movements."

"Darcy helped us identify her. It seems that someone took a great deal of time to erase this woman from the city employment database." She paused and looked over his face. "Was there a time in your partnership with Gina that you felt she was keeping secrets from you?"

"No, Gina was fairly open about everything." Conrad shrugged. "She didn't take shit, and that meant something to me. The day she told me she was moving to New York, I was surprised. She'd never once mentioned having family there."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"First part of May, I guess. Her paperwork for the job in the New York Dome came through, and I helped her sell the furniture from her apartment. Since she'd already resigned from the NOPD, I had a new partner. The last I heard, she'd gone to New York."

"She never arrived in New York."

"That's rather obvious." Conrad snapped. "Look, Inspector, I have a reputation for being hot-headed, but I had nothing to do with what happened to Gina."

"My admin was attacked in your station house, by men under your command or by men that were allowed to enter the building. The video footage we recovered shows two individuals with masks over their faces. Very dramatic and stupid but there it is. They thought that there was something important in those logs, something that might lead to them. They had no way of knowing that Abel had already finished his report and transmitted it to me."

"Our security wasn't engaged. Where did you get video footage?"

"That's something you're going to have to wonder about for the time being. You've made no effort to investigate the attack on my admin, and as such you'll get no information from me."

"And did you find anything in the log files?"

"No." Kyra shook her head. "The suspected week of the murders is missing from the log files. Someone took care to make sure it was never found. Just like they took care to erase Gina Webb from the city records as best as they could. I guess hacking the payroll records was beyond their scope. Did you know that Gina was pregnant?"

"No. When I heard that in the press conference, I was shocked. She certainly hadn't looked pregnant the last time I saw her."

"Had Gina complained to you about other cops in the station?"

"No, she kept to herself. A uniformed officer asked her out a few times. Wouldn't take the hint that he just wasn't her type. She preferred educated men, and she also happened to like men of color."

"Did that bother you?"

Conrad shook his head. "I have no problems with multicultural relationships, never have."

"What about the patrolman?"

"What about him?"

"How did he feel about her preference for black men?"

"I don't even know if he knew."

"His name?"

Conrad rubbed his face. "Give me a break, Kyra; it's been fifteen years. I know he worked Major Crimes, because he always managed to sit beside her during briefings. His first name was Roger."

"Roger Setterstrom?"

Conrad nodded abruptly. "Yeah. Christ, he's a detective in my unit in District 1."

"You never made the connection?"

"No. I mean, it was a long time ago. I haven't thought about Gina in years."

"How do you rate Setterstrom as a cop?"

“He gets decent reviews. He’s been disciplined in the past for his temper, especially toward non-whites.”

“He’s racist.”

“Yeah, there are a few here and there. Not the kind that preach tolerance but no mixing; the ones that would prefer if the NAU was entirely white. I don’t know if he belongs to any hate groups or anything. I try not to dig into my cops’ personal lives.”

“His partner?”

“Beau Grant. They’ve been partners since they came out of the academy. I tried to separate them once when I first became senior inspector; they both protested it so much that I just left them alone.”

“Would it interest you to know that both Roger Setterstrom and Beau Grant were on a list of bad cops provided to me by Sebastian Green?”

“I heard there was a list floating around. Very volatile situation you’re developing here.” He leaned back in his chair. “Any other cops from my district on that list?”

“I don’t know. I’ve only investigated the ones that relate to my case. IAB will be handling the rest.”

“Look, the other night I was pissed as hell about what happened in the archives area. It was a slap in my face that I couldn’t see to the safety of people in my own damn building. Then you sashay your way into my office and threaten me.”

“I don’t sashay.”

“The hell you don’t.” Conrad laughed at the outrage on her face. “You’re going to hold that against me aren’t you?”

“Until the northern glacier melts,” Kyra responded softly. “Excuse me. I need to speak with the commander before he leaves for the day.”

Ana sat back in her chair as her partner left the room. “She *is* a little swingy in the hips.”

Conrad laughed softly. “What’s the estimate on the end of the ice age?”

“About a thousand years.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“So, Conrad is clean?”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t seem to fit with what I see developing.”

“What do you see?”

“It’s complicated; I need some time to think about how things are connected. Do you know if Gina Webb ever had any connection with IAB here?”

"No, like most of the cops I knew back then, she gave Internal Affairs the cold shoulder. We were still working through the hostilities that the reorganization caused."

"I'm going to do a couple of things in the next few days that are going to piss off a lot of people."

"I have no doubt." Ethan stood up from his desk. "I need to brief the chief."

Kyra nodded. "Cops killing cops ... I feel like I have a laser sight pointed at my head."

"If it comes down to that?"

"They'd better make sure they kill me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra pressed her thumb against the ident pad by her door and rolled her head on her shoulders as the locks clicked. She was very glad to be home. "Lights."

The lights in the foyer clicked on. She put her workbag down in a chair and pulled off her jacket just as the smell hit her: smoke, cherries, and tobacco. Pulling her weapon, she glanced toward her door before moving into the living room. She thumbed her laser sight on; its stream of blue light slid across the room until it rested on a man sitting in her favorite chair. "Living room lights."

"Good evening, Inspector."

She lowered her weapon slightly and inclined her head. "Who the hell are you? And how did you get in here?"

"Brandon Porter. Most of my friends call me Brand." He puffed on his cigar. "Do you mind?"

"Yes, I do. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't shoot you, *Brand*."

He stood up slowly. "Let me get my ID."

"Carefully," she warned.

He eased out an ID case and flipped it open.

"Internal Affairs." She lowered her weapon to crotch level. "Why are you in my home, Detective Porter?"

"I wanted to talk to you." He walked toward the kitchen. "You shouldn't work such long hours; it'll burn you out." He stubbed the cigar out in her sink and turned to her as he pinched the tip. Dropping the cigar into the front pocket of his suit, he glanced briefly at the gun she still had pointed at him. "Your investigation into the murders in the house on Rose Street has caught our eye. The press conference was ill-advised."

"I don't play games." Kyra motioned for him to leave the kitchen and followed him out. He sat down where he'd been, and she sat down across from him. "Are you telling me to back off?"

"No. Actually, I'm here to help."

"I don't need your help, Detective."

"I think you might reconsider that." He reached into his jacket and withdrew a mini-disc. "The day after the bodies were discovered on Rose Street an encrypted transmission hit my desk. This is a copy of that transmission." He tossed it on the coffee table in front of them. "I think it's exactly what you're looking for."

"Were you able to trace its origin?"

"No. I've had some of the best techs from Computer Sentinel on it. It was bounced off so many damn relays that it will take years to trace it ... or at least that's what they finally told me." He crossed his legs at the knee and relaxed in the chair. "Conrad is clean."

"That appears to be the case."

"You don't agree?"

"I'm not giving anyone a pass on this until I'm positive."

They both turned at the sound of the door opening. Kyra relaxed when she realized it was Alex. "Hey."

Alex glanced from the gun she still held to the other occupant of the room. "Who's the suit?"

"IAB. I'm still debating about shooting him."

"Good luck, man." He touched her shoulder as he pulled off his jacket and headed toward the bedroom.

Porter glanced toward the hall Alex had disappeared into. "I believe I'll leave now."

"Yeah." She stood up and followed him to the door. "The next time I come home and find you sitting in my favorite chair, I'm going to shoot you."

"Good night, Inspector." He paused at the door and turned to look at her. "We've heard you've come to have in your possession an interesting list of names."

"Yes."

"Your case file is secured."

"Yes." Kyra nodded. "Since I'm dealing with the murder of cops in a city safe house I decided that it would be best to keep my case information on a need to know basis."

"I would be very interested in that list, Inspector."

Nodding, she looked over his face. "If this proves to be a good lead, you may get the list sooner rather than later."

"Then I'll expect the file first thing in the morning."

"If I send you the list, there are a few names I would like you to leave alone until after I've solved the murders."

"We would agree to leave the murders in your capable hands until you're confident that you have all of the pieces. However, if it comes down to putting fellow badges in jail, you'll want us around to take that collar."



"I don't care if other cops hate me for doing my job."

"IAB does care. You're one of the most honest cops we have on the streets, Inspector. We'd like to keep your reputation with cops and with the city's populace as clean and as righteous as possible."

"I'm your poster girl?" Kyra demanded softly.

"Enrollment for females in the police academy has gone up fifteen percent since you became senior inspector of Major Crimes for District 4. Donations for police charities in your district, even if we don't count your grandmother, are twice what any other district pulls in. In the past two years, you've stepped in front of a gun for the mayor and put a serial killer in a cell. Either one of those events would've made your career golden. Together, they make you practically platinum. We'd like you to stay that way." He strolled to the door and pulled out his cigar. "Have a good evening, Inspector."

Kyra shoved her gun back into its holster and went to the door to lock it. She made a mental note to get a better locking system for her door as she engaged the security system. She picked the mini-disc up off the table and walked down the hall to the bedroom. Alex was lying on the bed watching the vid-panel.

"IAB have a problem with what you're doing?"

"Apparently I'm their poster child, and they don't want me to get dirty. It might lower enrollment for women in the police academy."

Alex chuckled. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." She glared at him briefly and sighed. "As for the case, they might not like how I'm doing it, but I don't give a shit about that." She loaded the mini-disc and waited for the station to respond. "Someone sent Detective Porter, the jerk in the suit, a secure transmission the day after the bodies were recovered."

"And he gave it to you."

"Apparently." There was one file on the mini-disc, she called it up, and her mouth dropped open briefly. "Would you mind going into the living room while I review this?"

"Will the shower do?"

She glanced up at him and smiled. "Thanks."

"No problem."

Kyra waited until the bathroom door clicked shut and then opened the file.

In small print at the bottom of the picture, the date was a glaring piece of evidence. *May 15, 2147*. The video jerked around the small room showing the body of Mitchell Libby before a voice spoke.

*"You should have remembered who deserved your loyalty."*

Gina's tear-stained face filled the video image. *"Libby is a Texas Ranger, here undercover for the reorganization committee. You just did more to fuck yourself than my testifying could have ever done."*

*"Turn around."*

*"No. If you're going to kill me, have the guts to do it looking at my face."*

*"Turn around, bitch. Or I'll cut that half-breed bastard from you and let you watch it die."*

Gina's eyes widened, and she moved back from the camera. *"Look, just let me go. I'll go to New York like everyone already thinks, and then I'll disappear. No one ever needs to know."*

*"Turn around."*

*"You said you loved me."*

*"I did until I found out you were fucking that son of a bitch. How dare you share your bed with that animal? Don't you know those people are inferior? You stupid, stupid bitch."*

*"He's not an animal."*

*"Turn around, or I swear to God I'll find that nigger and put a bullet in him once I'm finished with you."*

Kyra pursed her lips. She didn't want to watch the rest, but she felt she had no choice. The woman turned, and the report of a handgun sounded just before the recording ended abruptly. Carefully, she ejected the mini-disc and put it in its case. She'd been a cop too long for the content of the file to shock her, but the fact that it existed at all had her mind racing. The voice on the tape hadn't been familiar, and she wondered who had sat on the evidence of a cold-blooded murder for fifteen years.

She stood, put the mini-disc in her work bag, and walked toward the bathroom. The shower was running. After a moment she moved away from the door, sat down on the bed, and tried to collect herself, but it was no use. Exhausted and furious, she stayed exactly where she was until Alex emerged from the bathroom.

"What is it?" Alex walked toward her.

"It's video footage of Gina Webb being murdered." Kyra looked up and met his gaze. "Mitchell Libby was already dead in the little closet."

Alex grimaced. "Dane wasn't killed with them."

"No. He probably searched for Gina and didn't buy the department's bullshit about her leaving the city. He had to know about the baby. Clara seemed to."

"Yeah."

His face was impassive, but she felt the anger moving around in his body. "With the recording I should be able to get a voice print on the shooter. I thought I'd call the team together and go down to the station."

"I think you and your team could use some time to relax and sleep."

"I just watched a woman get shot in the head." She met his gaze. "I want to get this processed immediately."

"When is the last time you ate? Slept?"

"I don't know."

"Then that's our agenda for the evening. I understand your anger, but justice for this woman and her child has waited fifteen years. It isn't going to hurt anything for you to get some sleep."

"No." She shook her head and stood.

He took her arm gently but firmly. "Kyra, look at me."

"That bastard executed her!" She jerked against his hold briefly and then took in a deep breath.

"Gina Webb was murdered fifteen years ago."

"They all deserve to be put to rest. I can't do that until I know who killed them and why."

"And you're not going to find any answers if you can't even stand on your feet."

She met his gaze and then sighed. "I don't know when I've been so tired."

"Then let's get some food and then sleep."

Kyra ran her hand down his stomach and curled her fingers into his belt. "Are you sure you want to eat?"

Alex laughed and plucked her hand from his waist. "Yes. I do. I'm not a superhuman like you. I need food and sleep on a regular basis."

"You're far more a superhuman than me." She groaned a little when he tugged on her. "I'm not cooking."

"Quite right." Alex laughed as he pulled her into the kitchen. "I'm not sure I'm ready to take that risk yet."

"I can cook."

"Sure, I've met literally hundreds of ex-debutante beauty queens who can cook."

"I was never a damned debutante." She punched him in the arm. "Jerk."

He laughed and shook his head as he viewed the contents of her cooler. "You need to eat better."

"Yeah, well, I eat out a lot." She peeked around him and chuckled. "Perhaps we should order in."

"Darlin' it's two in the morning."

"Okay, go out. Valteau's is open for another two hours."

\* \* \* \* \*

“So, then your sorry-ass brother tells me that someone he knows is interested in me, but he won’t tell me who it is.” Ana sat back on the bench and stared at Desi’s face. “How is that fair?”

Desi laughed. “If you’re seeing someone, why do you care?”

Ana shrugged. “I’m not really seeing someone. I have this guy that I meet up with for sex, but I don’t have any interest in him beyond that.”

“He’s a place holder until you find someone you’d like to spend your life with.”

A blush stole across Ana’s cheeks. “That sounds horrible.”

“He probably views you the same way.” Desi shrugged. “That’s the way of those relationships.”

“Yeah.” Ana picked up a french fry and looked around the busy diner. “I haven’t been in here since we came to notify the owner that his daughter was dead.”

“Valteau’s is an institution in New Orleans. I heard about it before I even got here.”

“So, what’s up with that tech who filed a complaint against you?”

Desi rolled her eyes. “The little jerk accused me of sexual harassment and said that I fired him because he wouldn’t perform sexual favors for me. So, now I have to take an hour in the morning to submit to a truth test.”

“Surely the commander doesn’t believe the story.”

“No, I don’t think he does. However, he’s duty-bound to investigate.” Desi sighed. “As if I’d ask him for sex. If I was going to pick a guy at the station to do some naked dancing with, it would probably be that new guy in traffic.”

“He’s hot. I loitered around the evidence lockers for a few minutes yesterday so I could get a good look at him. Everything I’ve heard about him is true.”

“And if I was going to hook up with a girl, it would probably be Janna in Anti-Crime.”

Ana frowned at her. “What about me? I’m sexy.”

Desi laughed. “You are, but I know Janna is into girls.”

“I’m open to new things.”

“I think you’ve had too many drinks at the bar.” Desi shook her head. “Come on. Let’s get a hover-cab and get the hell out of here.”

Ana laid back against the bench. “I don’t know why they call them hover-cabs. They really don’t do much hovering.”

“They hover every inch above the ground they are allowed. Since the city put them out on the streets, traffic fatalities involving public transportation have dropped by forty percent. You have to really work to hit someone or something with one of those things.” Desi tugged on her hand and chuckled when Ana gamely slid her way. “You’re really cute when you’re drunk.”

“Cute.” Ana sighed and leaned on her briefly. “Why can’t I be sexy, Desi?”

“Okay, okay. You’re sexy as hell.” Desi looped an arm around her waist and tossed the waitress a smile. “Hey, put that on my credit account, will ya?”

“Sure thing, Dr. Marcos.”

“Don’t forget your tip and don’t go cheating yourself on it either. I’d better at least see a thirty-percent tip.” Desi stopped suddenly and bit down on her lip to keep from screaming when Ana’s foot landed on her. “That’s it, girl. You’re not wearing those boots out with me anymore.”

Ana laughed and then frowned. “We stopped?”

“Yeah. I figured you’d want to collect yourself before the inspector gets in here.”

Desi grinned as Ana immediately tried to stand up straight. “Fuck.”

“Just smile and hope she’s more interested in that sexy man of hers.” Desi pushed her gently toward the door. “Don’t forget to smile.”

Kyra raised one eyebrow when Desi and Ana all but staggered out the front door of Valteau’s and winced when Alex tightened his hold on her. “I wasn’t going to jerk away.”

“The hell you weren’t,” he muttered, amused. “Good evening, ladies.”

“Hi.” Desi grinned and winced when Ana stepped on her foot again.

Alex laughed. “Do you need help, Dr. Marcos?”

“She’d never forgive me.” Desi tightened her hold on Ana.

“Hey, don’t talk about me like I’m not here.” Ana waved her hand. “What happened to the cab?”

“I haven’t called for one.” Desi maneuvered her toward the call station. “You guys have a good evening.”

Kyra shook her head and rubbed her face. “I’m going to go inside. I think you’d better help them.”

Alex walked to them and scooped Ana up. “Get the cab, Doctor.”

Desi hurried to the call station and pushed the button to call for a hover-cab. “Thanks.”

Ana swung her legs gently. “Do you carry Kyra around like this?”

“When she lets me.” Alex looked over Ana’s face and chuckled. “You’re really going to regret this drunk in the morning.”

She patted his face and shook her head. “I’ve got a sober-bot installed. All I gotta do is activate it.”

“My mother says that nanotechnology like the sober-bot is the root of our moral decline.”

“Gosh, I hope so.” Ana laid her head on his shoulder. “She should let you carry her around like this every chance she gets. It’s awesome.”

Desi glanced to her and then laughed when Ana's head drooped. "Maybe she won't remember it."

Alex shook his head as the hover-cab slid to a stop at the curb. "I've always found that incidents that degrade my dignity stick with me for a long time."

Kyra glanced up as the door to Valteau's opened and Alex entered. She waited until he slid into the booth in front of her. "I'm going to pretend I didn't even see them."

"She's been under a lot of pressure the past few weeks. Seems like she might need some time to unwind and do terrible things to her body."

"Yeah." Kyra nodded and swished her straw around in her drink. "I ordered for you."

"Good." Alex watched her in silence. "You've been under a lot of pressure, too. First, a serial killer and now a cold case involving cops killing other cops and a civilian. And God knows what else you've dealt with this year."

"I'm going to take some time off after this case is settled." She grinned when he gave her a doubtful look. "I don't have a choice. Baker ordered it. The safe house murders are the only thing on my desk."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra snuggled closer to Alex and tried to ignore her alarm. "Where's my gun when I need it?"

Alex laughed softly and ran his hand down her back. "Your comm-u is going off, too."

She sat up bolt upright, realizing that he was right. Pushing back the covers, she stumbled from the bed to the dresser where she'd left her comm-u. "Moray."

"Good morning, Inspector."

Kyra rubbed her face and pushed the earpiece more firmly into her ear. "Abel."

"The interviews are starting in an hour."

"Fuck." She glanced toward Alex and then walked to her compu-station. "I'm going to send you a file to distribute to the team. Ask your sister to analyze the recording for a voice print on the male in the background of the video."

"I'll get on it."

Kyra disconnected the call and sat still. "Today, I'm interviewing bad cops."

"That must be unsettling."

"Yes." She nodded.

"Do you think one of them is the killer?"

“Yes, and after viewing this footage I think far more was going on than what I first believed. Gina Webb knew something and while her killer had very passionate feelings about her ... it was far more than a crime of jealousy and racism.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana pushed her sunshields into her hair and glanced around the lobby area of the transport center. She'd slept in late; her sober-bot had cleared her blood alcohol level, but it'd barely put a dent in her hangover. She'd had to hurry to get to the center in time to meet the flight from Dallas. Just what did a Texas Ranger look like? She focused on a long-legged man in jeans and t-shirt coming her way.

He didn't look like a Texan, but the weapons harness sort of gave him away. “Ranger Hatch.”

“Constable Salanti.” He grinned. “Call me Jonas. If I'd known you'd be greeting me, I would have caught an earlier flight.”

Ana glanced at his travel bag. “Did you check your luggage?”

“No.” Jonas shook his head. “I received the report from yesterday; has anything broken since then?”

“Last night, the inspector received video footage of Gina Webb being murdered.” Ana checked her comm-u for the time and then looked toward him. “We are interviewing some of the men who were in the safe house in the weeks before the murders.”

She stopped in front of her transport and ran a hand over its cherry red surface. “Pardon me for not arriving in an official vehicle. I slept in.”

Jonas stared at the Corvette convertible and then sighed. “I'm in love with you, Constable.”

Ana laughed and moved around the car to get behind the wheel. “In that case, Jonas, you can feel free to call me Ana.”

Jonas tossed his bag in the backseat and settled into the passenger seat. “Where did you get this machine?”

“I inherited it.”

“How much of it is original?”

“All of it but the fuel exchange system and the dash work station.” Ana glanced his way and watched him run his hand along the leather panel in the door. “Stop molesting my car.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Desi ran her hands through the springy mass of blond curls on her head and then lowered her head to her desk. “And then she says, *I'm open to new things.*”

Abel burst out laughing. “Didn't you get her drunk so she would be more open?”

She lifted her head from the desk and glanced at her computer station to check the status of the voice printing. "Yeah, but I didn't expect her to get all soft and girly on me. And she looked at me with those gorgeous brown eyes and actually looked hurt because I didn't say her name instead of that twit Janna's."

"The constable is very attractive." Abel leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers through his white-blond hair before checking his comm-u for the time. "Have you set up the equipment in the interview rooms?"

"Heath is setting up the voice printing device in there now." She picked up her coffee and shook her head. "And Ana Salanti isn't just attractive. She's beautiful."

"So, why didn't you push her while she was still buzzing?"

Desi flushed. She'd been so tempted. "I want her but not that way. It would ruin our friendship."

"Yeah."

"And besides, unlike you I actually have some morals. Not many, mind you, but some." Desi stood up and picked up her p-pc. "The inspector put me and Ana together for interviews today."

"I know."

"Your suggestion?"

"No." He shook his head. "Look, I want you to be happy, and if hooking up with the sexy little constable rocks your boat, then I'm all for it. But I wouldn't push you two together that way. I'm much more subtle than that."

"Do you think the inspector knows?"

"Nah." Abel shook his head. "I think the inspector did it to make Ana more comfortable. She's throwing a lot of responsibility Ana's way, and she still isn't a hundred percent. She took the murder of her former partner very hard."

"Yeah. She mentioned it briefly last night. I didn't push her on it. I didn't tell you the really bad part."

Abel raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

"As we were leaving Valteau's, Inspector Moray and her man showed up." Desi flushed slightly. "I wasn't drunk enough to have forgotten. I can only hope Ana was."

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"Everyone showed up as requested. I want this first set of interviews formal but nonthreatening unless they provoke you." Kyra glanced around the table and then focused on the Texan. "Ranger Hatch, do you know what Mitchell Libby was assigned to do here?"

"No specifics. He was reporting to the reorganization committee, and his assignment here was ongoing. When he didn't report in as required, the committee contacted the



Rangers. We sent two men here to investigate, but Libby had kept such a low profile that they weren't able to gather much information about his movements."

"His reports to the reorganization committee?"

"They refused me access to those records." Jonas shrugged. "So, I've got my partner trying to hack the files."

"Let us know when he succeeds." She stood up from her chair. "Doctor?"

Desi focused on Kyra and nodded. "I retrieved a good voice print off the video recording. If our guy is here today we should know."

"Good. Ana and Dr. Marcos will take the two cops from District 2, and I'll take the ones from District 1." She looked at Jonas. "You're with me."

"Sounds good."

Kyra then focused on Abel. "Forward Green's list to Detective Brandon Porter in IAB. Mark my four suspects as off limits."

## Chapter Nine

Ana settled in the chair in front of Detective Julia Delaney and shot a look Desi's way. Desi was standing beside the observation window. "Thank you for taking the time to come in today, Detective."

"I wasn't given much of a choice, Constable."

"Does it piss you off that someone of a lower rank is interviewing you?"

"Yes, and I imagine that's why the inspector assigned you to interview me." She crossed her arms over her breasts and leaned back in the chair.

Ana looked her over. Her short black hair spiked all over her head like nails. Lines of frustration and anger edged around her mouth. "Then let's get this over with."

"Fine with me."

"You were in the house at 203 Rose Street on May 21, 2147."

"I was there if the log file says I was." Delaney shrugged and glanced briefly at Desi.

"During your time at the safe house do you remember seeing anything out of place?"

Delaney snorted. "That was fifteen years ago."

"Yes, it was. But I imagine a cop like you would remember seeing another cop in a safe house, especially if you knew she was turning evidence over to the reorganization committee."

"A cop like me?"

Ana nodded. "Yeah, a cop like you. Detective Gina Webb was in that safe house for protection, and someone found her."

"So?"

"So, what if I told you that we had evidence that proved positively that Webb was killed May 15, 2147? Do you honestly expect me to believe that you went into that house

and didn't know there were two dead bodies in that closet? After a few days they would have started to smell."

"I heard on the vid-panel that the room was walled up."

"Yes, sometime after May 27, 2147, after the body of Dane Tibideaux was placed in the room."

"Look, it was a long time ago."

"You're lying to me, Detective."

"Charge me with something, or I'm leaving."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Detective Roger Setterstrom." Kyra paused and looked over his face. "Do you know why you're here?"

"I was instructed to show up here for questioning."

"You've heard on the vid-panel that the woman in the house on Rose Street was named Gina Webb. Do you remember Detective Gina Webb?"

"She was in Major Crimes when I worked in District 4."

"I understand that you were infatuated with her."

"Sure, she was a good looking woman. I asked her out a few times, but she said no. I moved on."

"Did you know that she was going to testify before the reorganization committee?"

"No. It came down through the station that she was going to New York. People talk, you know."

Kyra focused on his face then, silent. He didn't look nervous. In fact, if anything, he looked relaxed and comfortable. "Last night a vid-recording of her being executed came into my hands."

"That must have been horrible to review," he whispered softly. "Gina was a good cop."

"It was disturbing on several levels. How did you feel when you learned that Gina was involved with a young black man?"

"Didn't bother me."

"You've had several reprimands on your record for inappropriate behavior with suspects of color. In fact, your record indicates that you were suspended for verbally abusing a young black woman five years ago. I understand you used some fairly graphic racist language in your conversation with her."

"I took my interrogation too far." Setterstrom shrugged. "The woman was a street hooker; I was trying to get information out of her. Her handler was running some underage girls."

“Do you feel that the reprimand was unwarranted?”

“No. I even went to sensitivity training.”

“You were a patrolman in District 4 when Detective Webb was here.”

“Yes.”

“You often took guns to be destroyed and recycled.”

“Yeah, a couple of times a year until I made sergeant.” He shrugged. “It wasn’t too bad. You got out of the city for the day, and the people at the recycle place would let us watch the machines breaking the weapons down.”

“Gina Webb was murdered with a gun that you and your partner Beau Grant were supposed to have carried to be destroyed.”

“Don’t know anything about that.”

“You don’t honestly expect me to believe that?” Kyra stood up and shook her head. “Really, Roger, I’m surprised by you. You’ve been a cop for twenty years. Why don’t you look at it from my point of view?”

“I realize it looks bad.”

“Yeah, it looks bad.” She jerked her thumb toward Jonas Hatch. “Hell, even the Texas Ranger thinks it looks bad, and he just got here.”

“I didn’t kill her. I liked her too much to hurt her. When I heard she was moving to New York, I went over to her apartment to see if she needed help with anything. She was already gone. The place was empty.”

“When was that?”

“Hell, I don’t know. It would have been around the first of May.”

“The vid-recording of her death was date stamped May 15, 2147.” Kyra watched his eyes widen marginally. “Is there something you want to tell me, Roger?”

“There’s nothing to say.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Detective Neal, our records indicate that you were in the safe house on Rose Street on May 10, 2147, and then again on June 1, 2147.”

“So what?”

“Ranger Mitchell Libby and Detective Gina Webb were murdered in that house on May 15, 2147.”

“And?”

“When you entered the house in June of that year, did you notice anything different?”

“Constable, that was fifteen years ago.”

“And?” Ana asked raising an eyebrow. “I can assure you that if I’d walked into a house that I’d been in over fifty times in four years, I would notice and remember a new wall.”

“I just don’t remember.” Kyle Neal offered her a grin. “I’m approaching fifty, you know. I don’t keep up with things the way I used to.”

“You may find the murder of these people amusing, but I can assure you that I don’t,” Ana snapped. “Four human beings died in that house, Detective. One before he even got to take his first breath. If you know anything about what happened in that house, you’re obligated to tell me.”

“Watch yourself, Constable. I am a superior officer.”

Ana stiffened. “I fail to see how your rank has anything to do with the events that took place in the safe house.”

“I won’t be spoken to like this by you.” He started to stand.

“You’ll sit down and answer her questions.”

They both jerked at Desi’s intrusion.

“Dr. Marcos ...”

“Detective Marcos.” Desi corrected. “Honorary, of course, because I’m so damn awesome. You can let the constable do her job or we can shove you in a cell until Inspector Moray has time to question you personally.”

Ana watched as he settled in his chair and then glanced briefly at Desi before she went back to the questions she’d prepared. “Detective Neal, at any time during the month of May 2147 did you see Detective Webb in the house on Rose Street?”

“No.”

“Did you ever meet Detective Gina Webb?”

“No.”

“Did you ever come into contact with Ranger Mitchell Libby?”

“No.”

“Did you ever hear rumors that a cop had been brought in from Texas near the end of the reorganization?”

“Yeah, actually I did.” He put his hands flat on the table. “I guess it must have been late June of that year. Couple of Rangers came through looking for one of their own. They looked around for a few days but I guess they didn’t find anything.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra looked up from the file she was reading on her p-pc as the door to the interrogation room opened and Detective Beau Grant entered. “Good morning, Detective Grant. Let me guess ... you don’t remember a damn thing.”

“I guess we won’t know until you ask your questions.”

“You were in the safe house on Rose Street on May 22, 2147, and then again on June 1 of that year.”

“If that’s in the logs, then it must be true.”

“Did you know that the bodies of Ranger Mitchell Libby and Detective Gina Webb were in a small closet just off the kitchen of that house?”

“Can’t say that I did.”

“Why did the city close that safe house?”

“Pest control problem. We found a nest of rats. The city had it professionally fumigated and then sealed off because the chemicals were harmful to people.”

“A nest of rats,” Kyra repeated softly.

“Yeah, rats.”

“I see.”

“Do you?” He asked.

“Far more than you think, obviously.” Kyra walked forward and pulled out a chair so she could sit. “I want you to listen to me very carefully, Detective Grant. What I found in that house made me very angry. Discovering who those unfortunate people were did nothing to make me feel better. In fact, I’m damn sure that the only thing that will make me feel better will be finding who did this and beating them nearly dead.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“That depends. Are you admitting to the cold-blooded murder of a civilian and two law enforcement officers?”

“Of course not.” He sat up straighter in his chair.

“Then I’m not threatening you. I can assure you, however, that every single person who participated in the murders of these people from the trigger man to the people who helped him cover it up will pay dearly for it.”

“Are you sure you’re not in over your head, Inspector?”

“You’d better hope not,” Kyra said softly. “When I get cornered and feel threatened, I start shooting people I don’t like. You know something, Detective Grant?”

“What?”

“I don’t like you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Well, Doctor?”

Desi shook her head. "None of them are a perfect match. Setterstrom came the closest in speech patterns and voice rhythm. I wouldn't feel comfortable marking him as the man on the vid. There are too many variables at work on the footage."

Kyra checked her comm-u for the time and then slumped a little in her chair. "Setterstrom pops for me, but only because of the vid-recording that was sent to the guy in IAB."

"It's prime evidence."

"It appears to be." She stood up and shrugged. "It just seems very convenient doesn't it? One man in the background, a tearful Gina on her knees begging not to be killed, and one dead body already in the room."

"You think it was manufactured?"

Kyra focused on Desi who had asked the question. "Why don't you take it apart and find out?"

"I have a tech whose specialty is vid work." She stood.

Kyra nodded. "Everyone but the Ranger is dismissed."

Jonas stood up, walked to the chair Ana had abandoned, and got comfortable. Once the door shut, he cleared his throat. "You know that part about shooting people you don't like and not liking him?"

"Yeah."

"I'm going to have to steal that."

She laughed and shook her head. "What do you think?"

"I've read the case work you've done. You know your investigation is top notch. You have a great team in place. I feel very unnecessary." He smiled and then shrugged. "The senator expects daily reports. I imagine I can come up with something to sate his need to know for the time being. He's already threatened to call in a few favors from the FBI."

"The FBI doesn't come in and mess around with my cases without permission. I don't play on their ground, and they don't play on mine."

"Catching a serial killer really put you on top of the dog pile in this area, huh?"

"Apprehending Aaron Belton was my job. I didn't do it for media attention, reward, or any other obscene reason the press might come up with. It was justice."

"I get it."

"Gina Webb is the center of the case."

"Yes." Jonas nodded. "Maybe if we can get Libby's reports, we can see who she was turning in evidence against to the committee. If Setterstrom didn't kill her out of jealousy and then Dane Tibideaux out of racist hatred ..."

"Libby and Tibideaux were killed to cover up the murder of Webb."

“Cold-blooded bastards.” Jonas cleared his throat and leaned forward in his chair a little.

“Indeed.” Kyra nodded.

“Libby because he’d probably been the one to approach her about testifying. They thought they had it all handled, the cover story Gina had put out about going to New York was perfect. No one would look for her.”

“Except Dane Tibideaux did.” He shook his head. “And they killed him to cover up the other two murders.”

“Yes.”

“So the root of this is finding out what Gina Webb knew.”

“Did Mitchell Libby have a partner?”

“I’m sure.”

“Do you think maybe he shared the work he was doing here with him?”

“I think his partner was a woman. I’ll find an empty office to work in and try to locate her.” Jonas stood up from the table. “This is probably going to get messy soon. You might want to bring IAB in sooner rather than later.”

“I can take care of my own, Ranger Hatch.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra shifted in her chair and turned to her desk comm-u station. She dialed the number Sebastian Green had left when he’d first contacted her. The transmission connected immediately.

A slightly messier version of the man she’d met earlier in the week greeted her. “Mr. Green.”

“Inspector.” He ran his hands through his hair. “You’ll have to forgive me; you pulled me from my bed.”

“No problem.”

“What can I help you with?”

“I realize you weren’t working in New Orleans during the time of the murders, but I was wondering if you could help me get some information.”

“I will certainly try.”

“Detective Gina Webb.”

“Your female victim?”

“Yes. We have reason to believe that she was going to testify before the reorganization committee. We’d like to know what they expected her to provide.”



“Those records were sealed for privacy concerns. I doubt seriously that I’ll be able to access them. I’ll give it a try and get back to you if I can pull anything.”

“I’ve found evidence of a large gun-smuggling operation here. It was in action before, during, and after the reorganization period. Two of the cops that I’ve tied to the operation were on your list. Can I see your case notes on why you thought Roger Setterstrom and Beau Grant were dirty?”

“All of my case notes stayed with the committee. I made the list without their consent and kept it for my own peace of mind. I should’ve turned it over to you folks a long time ago.”

“Do you remember two street cops named Remy St. James and Evan Horn?”

“No.” Green shook his head. “Be careful, Inspector.”

Kyra stayed where she was after he ended the transmission. She glanced over at Ana’s desk and frowned. “Hey. Something wrong?”

Ana turned to look at her and shook her head. “No. Yes.”

“One or the other, Constable.”

“I didn’t do well in the interviews.” She stood up and walked to the door of the office. Shutting it, Ana leaned against it and shrugged. “Those assholes didn’t take me seriously.”

“They didn’t take me seriously either.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I have good mind to show them exactly who they’re fucking with.” Kyra frowned when her desk comm-u buzzed and turned to answer the call. “Inspector Moray.”

“Good afternoon.” The woman’s voice came through the transmission shortly before her face appeared. “This may be a short conversation, Inspector.”

“Who are you?”

“Dr. Phyllis Foster.”

“SpaceTeko said I couldn’t speak with you directly.” Kyra sat back in her chair and looked over the woman’s face. “Aren’t you afraid you’ll be reprimanded?”

“I’m halfway to Mars, Inspector. What are they going to do?”

Kyra had to laugh. “Okay, thanks for getting in touch with me.”

“You’re welcome. I read the list of questions your admin sent. Unfortunately, I can’t answer most of them. My parents divorced when I was very young. As a result, contact with my father was limited. I liquidated nearly everything I inherited from him and turned the gun in because I didn’t want any of his things.”

“Do you know how your father came to have the gun?”

“Ask my brother, Kevin; he should know. They were close.”

“How close?”

"More like brothers than father and son. Me being female, my father didn't have much use for me, but he was very proud of his baby boy."

"A little bitter?" Kyra asked.

The woman laughed. "Yeah, but it suits me."

"Why didn't your brother inherit your father's things?"

"I don't know. I told my brother that he could have anything out of the house he wanted. He showed up about three weeks after we buried our father. I was in the process of selling the house."

"How did he react when he learned that you'd sold everything you could and turned the weapon in?"

"It made him angry, of course. However, I told him from the beginning I wasn't going to keep all that stuff. I turned the gun in the day after my father's funeral. I remember him being more upset about the gun than anything else. He wouldn't say why. Just be warned, Inspector Moray; my brother is a total jerk-ass. He throws his weight around, picks on people he considers weaker, and hits his wife like it's a hobby."

"I can handle myself."

"Oh, there's more." Phyllis glanced over her shoulder then and frowned. "Jason, you're supposed to be standing watch, not playing that silly game." She turned back to Kyra. "I didn't sell everything. My father had a safe deposit box. I closed it all out but never really had time to go through the stuff that was there. I'm sending you an encrypted file that contains the code to enter my apartment and my permission to do whatever you like with the box."

"Dr. Foster, you may be my new hero."

"I'm all about serving the greater good, Inspector. I gotta run before our mission commander catches me." The screen went black abruptly.

Kyra looked toward Ana. "Looks like we're going to go talk to a fireman."

"You know they actually prefer to be called firepersons."

"That's crap. Women in the fire department want them all to be called firepersons. All of those men are content to be called what they've always been called -- firemen."

"That's not very modern of you."

"Well, I'm sure there are a ton of women out there, working their modern asses off, who would like to kick the shit out of the women who got them out of the homemaking business."

"Well, the government will pay you to stay home with your children."

"Yeah, but it's crap pay. I get paid more in a day than some of those women do in a week."

“Well, in your defense, you do get shot at a lot. You deserve some kind of compensation.”

Kyra laughed. “Funny, I’ve always considered motherhood the scariest damn thing out there.” She pulled her p-pc from the desk docking station and grabbed her jacket. “Let’s go. We’ll invade Dr. Foster’s apartment after we harass her brother.”

“Good. I’ve been trying to work on my harassing skills.”

“Trust me, Detective Neal looked mightily harassed when he stomped out of the station this afternoon.”

“Yeah, that was Desi. She threatened to put him in a cell if he didn’t sit down and answer my questions.” Ana pulled on her jacket and reached for her uniform hat. “I received the confirmation for my testing slot. It’s set for Tuesday. Maybe I should postpone it because of the case.”

“There will always be a case.” Kyra adjusted her weapon under her jacket. “I can certainly go a whole five hours by myself on Tuesday.”

“Can we use the hover-system?”

“No.”

“That sucks.”

“Don’t I know it?” Kyra pulled open her office door and looked back at her partner. “We may have to take it outside the city limits soon and fly around in the bayou.”

“Sounds fun. Maybe we could trap that alligator that Clara feeds.”

“My idea of flying around the bayou does not include tracking and capturing that old alligator. The witch would probably put a curse on both of us.” Kyra paused. “So, how do you feel?”

“Fine, why?” Ana frowned as she pushed her p-pc into the dash workstation.

“Well, after last night ...”

“Oh, my God.” She paused. “Oh. My. God.” Slowly she lowered her face to her hands and sucked in a deep breath. “If I said anything ...”

Kyra laughed. “You didn’t. At least I didn’t hear anything. I went inside and left you with Alex and Dr. Marcos.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Desi looked up from the report she was writing. “Hey.”

“The inspector and Ana are out hunting up a fireman. Thought you might want to grab lunch.” Abel moved into her office and sat down.

“I’m ordering in. I’m a week behind on my reports.”

“Need help?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think the inspector would approve of me using your time like that.”

“Look, it’s no problem to put your reports into the system. Why don’t you have an admin anyways?”

“My position didn’t even exist a month ago. I guess no one considered that I might need clerical and logistics help. I’ve a hundred different things to do, and all the work the inspector is piling on me isn’t helping.”

“Have you told her that you need help?”

“No.” Desi crossed her arms over her breasts. “I’m handling it.”

“Yeah, it looks like it, too.” He stood up and glanced over her desk. “Tell me what I can do.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

She leaned down beside her desk and picked up a box. “These are my reports for the last week. They need to be filed with district records, the medical examiner’s office, and the archives at Police Plaza.”

He took the box. “Tell her you need help. There is no sense in you running yourself into the ground, and we both know that she wouldn’t expect it.” Abel chuckled. “Besides, how are you going to chase the constable around if you don’t have the time to do it?”

“I should’ve never told you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra killed the engine on her transport and glanced around the parking lot of the firehouse. “Did you ever notice that men with really manly jobs always drive big trucks?”

“I used to think that. Then I met you.” Ana unhooked her harness and plucked her ppc from the dash charging station. “Now I think that people with a great deal of arrogance drive big vehicles because they can.”

“Constable Salanti, are you saying I’m arrogant?”

Ana put on her hat as she exited. “Are you saying you aren’t?”

“You’re just lucky that I don’t have to evaluate you.” Kyra opened up her door and exited the vehicle.

“You don’t?”

“The commander will be in charge of your employment reviews. It would be a conflict of interest for me to review my own partner.”

“Okay.”

They walked to the administrative part of the station, and Kyra pulled open the door. “Put on your cop face, Salanti, and no drooling.”

"No drooling, check." Ana straightened her hat as she entered the building.

"Good afternoon. Can I help you?"

Kyra flipped open her badge. "I need to speak with Kevin Foster."

The woman looked from the badge to Kyra's face. "I'll check to see if he's available."

"Let's hope for your sake that he is." She watched the woman get up and hurry into a back office before turning to look at Ana. "That's your cop face?"

"Yeah, what's wrong with it?"

"Nothing -- if we were going to bust a bunch of old ladies for illegal gambling during their cribbage game."

Ana sniffed delicately. "That was a mean thing to say."

"Work on it."

"I'll just think about how insulted I am."

Kyra laughed. The door that the woman had disappeared behind opened, and an older man walked out into the lobby. "Captain DeVereaux."

"Inspector Moray." He stopped a few feet from her and glared. "What do you want with one of my firemen?"

"I'm here to ask Kevin Foster some questions. I can ask them here, or I can haul his ass to my station for my own amusement."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Constable Salanti, did I threaten Captain DeVereaux?"

"No. Should I let you know when you do?"

"Yes, keep up with that." Kyra glanced around the lobby. "It's your choice, Captain. I really don't have a preference."

"You have five minutes."

Kyra watched him walk away and then looked at Ana. "Maybe I should have threatened him."

"I wouldn't do it ... he might like it. You know some of those old guys are creeps like that."

"That's certainly something to keep in mind." She glanced toward the back of the room when the door opened again. "Kevin Foster?"

"Yeah." He nodded and pulled out identification. Ana accepted it, glanced at briefly, and handed it back to him. "What can I do for you?"

"We need to ask you some questions about your father."

"My father is dead, Inspector."

"Yes, if that were not the case, I would be asking him a few questions." She watched his face flush with anger. "Your sister inherited a weapon from your father. Phyllis told me that you were upset with her when she told you that she'd turned the weapon in to the NOPD."

"It was my father's. If I'd known she was really going to give it away, I would have offered to take it."

"You do realize that the weapon in question was on the banned list. As an employee of the city you would have been required to turn the weapon in."

"It was a family heirloom."

"It was a banned weapon. A banned weapon used to execute three people two months after the city supposedly destroyed it. Did your father ever discuss where it came from?"

"No. Look, I don't know what you're up to but you'd better make sure my old man's name stays out of it. He was a good cop."

"If he was a good cop you've got nothing to worry about."

"I won't tolerate you dragging my father down." He took a step toward her.

"What exactly, Kevin, can you do about it?" Kyra met his gaze without flinching.

"Just watch it."

Kyra watched him leave the room and turned to Ana. "Keep a record of people who threaten me."

"Already have one. I figure I may need it." She shrugged when Kyra turned to look at her. "You know ... suspects to interrogate if you mysteriously die."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"How long is the list?"

"Just a couple of pages, but I've only been your partner going on five weeks now."

Kyra glared at her briefly and headed toward the front door of the firehouse. "Is Madame Tibideaux on that list?"

"Of course, she's my number one suspect in the event of your untimely demise."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana followed Kyra into Dr. Phyllis Foster's apartment trying to keep her mouth from dropping open. "Wow, must be nice to have enough money to have this kind of bad taste."

"The instructions in her transmission indicate that the box is in her bedroom closet."

"Wonder why she kept the stuff for so long?"

Kyra shrugged. "Maybe going through it was painful. Just because her father wasn't a part of her life doesn't mean that she didn't want him to be."

"Yeah." Ana motioned down the hall. "Bedroom should be that way."

They walked down toward the hall and the lights flipped on. “Now that’s nice, automatic lights. I really want them.” Kyra sighed as they entered the bedroom. “Called out a guy to install them, and he said it would cost me ten thousand credits.”

“Do you own your place?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to pay the ten K?”

“Hell, no.”

Ana opened the closet door and frowned. “No clothes.”

“That’s odd.” Kyra stuck her head in and turned to look around. “The wall safe is still in place.”

Ana activated her p-pc and called up the message as Kyra slipped fully into the closet. “23455SP12.”

“I guess she wasn’t that big on security. A twelve-year-old could break that code with a twenty-credit digital-cracker from the Internet.”

“Tell me it isn’t empty.”

“No.” Kyra cleared her throat. “It’s not empty.” She stepped out of the closet with a small wood box. “Get the rest.”

Ana slipped in, grabbed the box, and followed Kyra to the bed. She set her box down and pulled out her p-pc to take pictures of the first box. “Nice box.”

“It’s a gun case.” Kyra flipped it open and found exactly what she thought she would. An empty slot where the gun should have been and a cache of bullets.

“Why didn’t she turn that in with the gun?” Ana took a couple of images and put her p-pc down.

“She said this stuff was in a safety deposit box. The gun was probably in his home somewhere.” Kyra picked up the box Ana had brought to the bed and lifted the lid. Papers and mini-discs filled it to the brim. Along with a p-pc that had to be at least ten years old. “Interesting.” She picked up the p-pc. “Let’s pack this crap up and take it back to the station.”

“Yeah, Desi will be jazzed by that old gadget.” Ana paused briefly. “Say, I think you should probably talk to her about getting an assistant. I’ve noticed she stays late to work most days so she can keep up the detail work.”

“I should have realized. I’ll tell her to hire an admin tomorrow.” Kyra paused. “Did she mention it to you?”

“No, I just noticed. She isn’t the type to complain.” Ana shifted on her feet and looked toward the closet. “Maybe Dr. Foster gave her clothes away to charity or something. She’s certainly going to be gone a very long time.”

## Chapter Ten

Kyra shrugged out of her jacket and laid it on the back of the couch beside Alex's. Another damn day had come and gone. It felt like a waste. She found Alex on the bed watching the vid-panel. Leaning against the doorframe of her bedroom, she gave herself a few minutes to look her lover over.

He was wearing a pair of boxers, concentrating on an arena-ball game. Lately, coming home was the best part of her day. She didn't bother to wonder when she'd gotten used to seeing him in her place and in her bed. Kyra figured she was in a bit of trouble on the emotional front.

"When you're finished looking, Inspector, maybe you could come all the way in and let me have a look." He turned to look at her. "Vid-panel off."

Kyra walked toward the bed pulling her shirt over her head as she did. "Mr. Waters, you and I have to talk."

"About what?" He left the bed and caught her around the waist as she tossed the shirt away. "Your long hours? A schedule for sex?"

She laughed. "How was the bar tonight?"

Sighing, he pulled her close and tucked his face against her neck briefly. "A little crowded. We had a live band tonight. They'll be here the rest of the week. It's good for business but hell on the staff."

"How about you? Is it hell on you?"

"No, I like things busy." He slid his hands down her back and cupped her ass. "Are you going to make me ask?"

"No." She shook her head. "We've uncovered very little. The interviews were a wash. Despite what we've gathered in evidence, we can't tie anyone to what happened in that house."



"It must be frustrating for you."

Kyra met his gaze. "Not nearly as frustrating as it must be for you and your family."

"We've been dealing with Dane's death for a long time. Having a body hasn't made it any worse than it was before. I want justice for him and his lover." He slid his fingers down her jaw and sighed. "I kept replaying that recording in my head today, thinking about how she must have felt to be betrayed by the men and women she trusted. But more than anything, I worry about you."

"They won't get me." She raised up on her toes and kissed his lips. "Let me take a shower and then we can have that discussion."

"Why do I feel like I'm about to be interviewed?"

She laughed and kicked the bathroom door shut with one foot.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You work too much."

Desi glanced up and smiled. "Hey, I'm almost done."

Ana moved into the office and pulled the door shut. "I told the inspector that you needed an admin. She said that she would talk to you about hiring one tomorrow."

"I can handle this." Desi flushed under Ana's stare. "I can."

"Sure, but why should you? There is enough around here for you to do without having to worry about this crap." Ana motioned to a stack of compu-pads.

"I could have spoken with her myself." Desi tried to glare but failed miserably. The constable was entirely too sexy for her own good. "Wanna grab dinner?"

"Yeah." Ana nodded and checked her watch. "I'll go down and change. Meet you at my car."

Desi nodded and watched her leave.

Ana leaned against the wall outside of Desi's office. It wasn't getting any easier to just be her friend. She'd never even been attracted to a woman until she'd met Desdemona Marcos. Crossing her arms over her breasts, she took a few calming breaths. Relationships, at least beginning relationships, had never been difficult for her. She enjoyed sex and made no excuses for her appetite for it.

Briefly, she considered the man she'd been seeing and frowned. Jim Dailey was exactly the kind of man she'd always preferred. He didn't demand anything from her and could fuck for hours. She'd been seeing him for a little over six months, but since she'd partnered with Kyra Moray, the relationship with him had started to get a little tense. Of all the cops that worked in District 4, Kyra was the most tight-lipped and ill-tempered with the press.

She figured it would be best for her career to let Jim go. That wasn't the real reason she was considering ending it with him, though. Irritated with herself for being indecisive, Ana hurried down the hall to the elevator. The doors opened, and she glared pointedly at Abel. He was totally to blame for her current condition. She'd been uncomfortable but determined to ignore her attraction to his sister until he'd started quizzing her about her personal life.

"Abel."

Abel raised an eyebrow. "Constable, you look irritated."

She entered the elevator and leaned against the wall as the doors closed. "Desi and I are having dinner. Want to come along?"

"Nah, but thanks."

She reached out and pushed the pause button on the elevator. It came to a halt, and Abel turned in her direction. "It's her, isn't it?"

"Her what?"

"Don't play games with me, Abel. I'm in no mood for them." Her gaze narrowed when he frowned at her. "I'm all twisted up inside, and it's all your damn fault."

He laughed then and leaned against the elevator wall opposite her. "Oh, I see. How did you know?"

"It just sort of connected when you said no to dinner. You've been giving me and Desi a lot of space lately." She pursed her lips briefly and forced herself to relax. "And I've caught her looking at my ass a few times."

"My sister has very good taste in asses."

Ana felt her cheeks heat, and she sighed. "I don't know how to deal with it."

"Are you interested back or afraid you'll hurt her feelings?"

"Interested *and* afraid I'll hurt her feelings. I haven't had a relationship that existed outside of the bed in more than a year. I've also never been with another woman."

"And you're interested in that."

"No ... well ... I'm interested in her. Just her. Is that normal?"

"It's no different than being attracted to a specific man. You don't find all men sexually attractive, do you?"

"No." She wrinkled her nose. "Far from it, actually."

"Would you like me to tell her you're available?"

"No. I'll handle that." Ana raised her gaze to his. "My personal relationships are private."

"I understand."

She pushed the button so the elevator would resume and rubbed the back of her neck. "This is a little overwhelming."

“Everyone needs to be a little overwhelmed now and again. It’s good for the soul.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra dropped her towel in a basket by the door and walked naked from the bathroom. Alex was back on the bed. “I think my partner has a crush on Dr. Marcos.”

Alex put down his p-pc and looked at her. “That’s hot. Do you think they’d let me watch?”

She laughed and crawled up onto the bed. “You’re *not* watching any woman, much less my partner, fuck another woman.”

“It could be educational.” He grinned and reached out for her. She moved easily into his arms and astride his sheet-covered hips. “Lift up.”

Kyra did and placed a soft kiss on his neck as he shoved the sheet away. “Anyway, I was wondering if I should do something about it.”

“It’s their private business.”

“Cops dating cops causes problems.” She frowned as she sat back on his thighs. “I’m serious.”

“I know you are.” He pulled her closer and cupped her ass. “But I think you should leave them alone. If they hook up, ignore it as long as possible. If it does go sour, you’ll have something to deal with, but until then let them have their fun. Now, is this really what you wanted to talk about?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“I used your DNA to compare to Dane’s body before I asked for his Citizen Identification Record.”

“My DNA?”

“Yeah, from the blood sample in my STD scanner.” She bit down on her lip. “You’ve every right to be pissed.”

“Yeah.” He leaned back against the pillows and stared at her face for a long moment. “But it helped.”

“Yes, it made it easier to get the CIR file from the NSA. The thing is that Dr. Parker took a good look at your sample.”

“My genetic alterations would be obvious to a first-year med student,” Alex murmured.

“He was impressed.”

Alex laughed softly. “Well, the North American Union government doesn’t do anything by half.”

"You told me that the alterations made you sterile, but you didn't tell me what they gave you."

"They increased my stamina, lowered my need for sleep, and heightened my senses. Sight, hearing, smell ... all of them are four times the average human being's. Unlike other soldiers in the program, they worked me over extensively. To develop a better killer."

"You agreed to all of it?"

"In order to serve my country, yes." He brushed her hair back from her face. "Without the alterations I doubt I would have survived North Korea. It bothers you?"

"Not like I thought it would." She pulled him close and wrapped her arms around him. "I love you." Kyra took in a deep breath as he stiffened in her embrace.

His grip on her tightened. "You certainly know how to have a conversation."

She laughed and sat back to look at his face. "I know I caught you off guard."

"Yeah." He pushed his fingers into her hair. "I want you in my life, Kyra. But a woman like you deserves children, and I'll never be able to give them to you."

"I'm thirty-five years old, and I never even think about children. Did I think about them when I was younger? Sure, but then I also thought about being Miss North American Union. Trust me; I wouldn't go near a beauty pageant now if my life depended on it."

"That doesn't mean that you're ready to say that you never want children."

She glared at him for a few seconds, slipped off his lap, and then the bed. "Fine."

"Kyra."

"Fuck you." She pulled on a robe and left the room.

Kyra poured herself a glass of milk and leaned against the kitchen counter to drink it. Alex appeared in a pair of pants a few minutes later. She figured that he wouldn't stay in the bedroom; Alex was anything but a coward.

"Okay, look, I fucked this up."

"Oh, yeah?" She glared at him briefly and looked away. "You're the one that pushed me into this. I would have been satisfied just to fuck you a couple of times a week. Yet I let you into my life instead of just my bed." Kyra turned her back on him and dumped the rest of her milk in the sink. "I'd like you to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm tired, and I can't deal with this right now. You've made yourself very clear." She bit down her lip, appalled at the sting of tears in her eyes. It had been years since a man had made her cry. "Just go."

"You're out of your damn mind if you think I'm just going to leave."

She sucked in a breath when she felt him move in behind her. He placed his hands on the counter on either side of her and pressed against her. "It would be easier if you just left."

"No."

“Alex.” She sucked in a breath as he moved one hand to her hip and then across her stomach. “It’s okay that you don’t feel the same way about me. I can deal with it, but you’re going to have to go.”

“I never said I didn’t feel the same way.”

“You said ...”

“I said that you’re a woman who deserves the chance to have children. Children that I’ll never be able to give you. It’s not a sacrifice I would ask of any woman.”

“I won’t have anyone make decisions for me.” She blinked rapidly to try to get rid of the tears.

“Turn around.”

Kyra shook her head. “I need some space. It’s not every day that I tell a man I love him, only to be treated like a child who can’t make decisions for herself.”

“I don’t think you’re a child.”

“I would hope not.” She crossed her arms over her breasts and took in another deep breath. “I’ve never said it to a man before, you know. Not once.”

“I already feel like a bastard.”

“Good.”

“I don’t want you to ever regret being with me.”

She leaned into him, still tense. “I don’t live with regret, Alex. If there ever comes a time when we don’t work and I can’t see a way for us to work again ... I’ll move on. It might hurt, but I promised myself a long time ago that I wouldn’t live with misery. My mother did, and she lost herself to it.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?” she asked softly. “It’s very important that you do. I’m not weak like her.”

“You think her weak because she killed herself?”

“Yes.”

“You do her a disservice. The woman chose to keep the child of a man who raped her. She brought you into this world and loved you no matter the circumstances that made you. Do you doubt that she loved you?”

“No. For a few years after her death, I did wonder. I couldn’t understand how she could have loved me and left me at the same time. I didn’t understand how complicated love could be.” She sighed when he wrapped his arms around her waist.

“Then you need to remember that she had the courage to give you life and love you despite the fact that you were conceived in rape. She let her feelings overcome her, and in the end she couldn’t cope with it.”

“And her inability to cope wasn’t a weakness?” Kyra asked softly.

"No. At least I don't think so. Aunt Clara says that Alicia Moray died of a broken heart and that no matter how her physical existence ended ... that it wasn't what truly killed her."

"Sometimes she would cry at night. I went to her once and tried to soothe her, but the more I said ... the more she cried. Finally, I just crawled into her bed, wrapped my arms around her, and cried with her. I never went back in her room after that night. She was the center of my world, my everything, and no matter how much she laughed or smiled, she had this dark place inside her that I couldn't reach."

"Tell me again."

"You don't deserve it."

"I know I don't."

Kyra let her head rest on his shoulder, her eyes blurry with unshed tears. "I love you."

He turned her abruptly and covered her mouth with his. She melted against him and shuddered when he lifted her off the floor and onto the counter. Alex lifted his mouth from hers reluctantly and leaned against her. "Are you sure it doesn't matter?"

"Of course it matters." She touched his lips with the tips of her fingers. "But it doesn't change how I feel about you and what I want. I want you, and I can deal with whatever you come with."

"There's a lot you don't know about me."

"Yeah, well, there's a lot about me you don't know." She patted his cheek. "Probably a few things I'll never tell you."

"We'll see about that."

"We will." She laughed when he pulled her off the counter and coaxed her legs around his waist.

"I've never said it either."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "When you're ready to say it, I'll make myself available to hear it."

"Deal." He carried her down the hall to the bedroom. "Still pissed with me?"

"Yeah, a little."

"I could make it up to you." He laid her on the bed and reached out for the belt of her robe. He pulled at the silk and the robe fell open.

Kyra sucked in a breath at the glide of silk on her skin. "You might have to work very hard to make this up to me."

"Then I'd better get started." Alex watched her move on the bed as he shed his pants and joined her there. He grabbed her ankles and spread her legs wide. "I've never known a woman like you." Running one finger along her inner thigh, he watched her shift and suck in a breath. "I like how pale your skin is against mine, and you take me like no other woman ever has. It's like you were made for me."

Her hands drifted over the hard tips of her nipples. "Alex."

He pressed his finger against her labia briefly before letting it slip inside to tease her clit. "Relax."

"I don't want to relax." She sat up and reached for him. "I want you inside me."

"We'll get there." Alex caught her chin in one hand and lowered his mouth to hers.

Kyra wrapped her arms around his neck and nodded her approval when he lifted her upward. "Now."

"Now?" he asked softly.

"Yes." She nodded and gasped when he lifted up further and impaled her with the thick length of his cock. "Yes."

"God, you're wet." His hands tightened briefly on her ass before he lowered her to the bed and began to thrust into her.

She strained against him, lifting her hips to meet the heavy push of his body into hers. "More."

"Yes."

She dragged her nails down his back, arched deeply against the bed as he pushed into her to the hilt, and paused. "I love you."

Alex lifted his head and met her gaze. "You're everything I need."

\* \* \* \* \*

Desi dropped her workbag into the backseat of Ana's car and slid into the passenger seat. "This is an amazing ride."

Ana smiled and patted the wheel. "It's my baby." She glanced in the back seat. "You brought work with you, didn't you?"

Desi squirmed a little and reached for her harness. "That depends -- did you?"

"Yep." Ana laughed. "We can pick up some food and go back to my place to work."

"Sounds good." It sounded like a bad idea. Desi had no idea how she was going to keep from jumping Ana. It had been a long time since she'd made a friend and whereas a part of her wanted to keep that safe ... there was another part of her that wanted Ana. Wanted her in a way that she'd never wanted anyone.

She pulled out her p-pc and checked through her messages as Ana exited the parking garage and headed toward the French Quarter. "Wonder what Hatch is up to?"

Ana laughed as she turned into a fast food place. "He told me he was going to go out and find a woman to make him forget about going home to Texas."

"Well, I hope he is very successful." Desi glanced up at the menu and frowned. "Get me a number six, no tomato."

"Milkshake?"

"No, I had to dig out my fat pants this morning." She glanced at Ana. "For real."

"I'm going to get a milkshake. I won't be sharing it, either."

"Fine, strawberry." She went back to her p-pc. "A good friend would let me take a few sips of hers instead of me having to risk outgrowing my fat pants."

"If your fat pants weren't a size four, I might consider it." Ana turned to input their order and then her credit credentials. "The inspector is on edge lately."

"The case must be difficult for her." Desi frowned. "I mean, I've only been on the job a year, and bad cops make me antsy."

"You could work in the private sector and make a great deal of money." Ana sat back in the seat and waited for the food.

"Yeah, but I wanted to do something that has value." She looked around the parking lot of the take out place and shrugged. "I considered going into nanotech development, but I wanted to be able to see the results of my efforts. I'm not big on patience."

"Instant gratification is the motto of our society." Ana turned as a box with their food was delivered. "I love this place, despite the fact that it'll add acreage to my backside."

"Your ass isn't big." Desi took the box and set it down between her feet. "So, you think the inspector and Alex Waters have really freaky sex?"

Ana laughed. "I try not to think about it. He's so damn fine, though. I don't know how she thinks around him."

Ana pushed open her door and motioned Desi in ahead of her. The conversation she'd had with Abel in the elevator had done nothing to soothe her. She put her workbag on the counter beside Desi's and went into the kitchen for napkins.

"Did you get the old p-pc to work?"

"No. Its charging system is shot." Desi spread out their food and stabbed a straw into her milkshake. "I have it with me. I'm going to have to take it apart and pull its hard drive."

"Do you think we'll get anything valuable off of it?"

"Any halfway decent cop would get rid of the evidence. I doubt we'll get much off of it."

"He kept the gun and the ammunition."

Desi shook her head. "He obviously wasn't much of a planner. I definitely would have had the gun destroyed, and I would've gone into the database and erased the test fire on the gun, too."

"Well, the biggest mistake was hiding the bodies in that house." Ana shook her head. "They should have dumped them in the bayou."



“There has to be a compelling reason why they didn’t. Also, if the house had never been sold ... well, it couldn’t have been a better arrangement.” Desi picked up her burger and gestured with her free hand. “The neighborhood is heavily developed and was even then. Still they should have been able to get the three bodies out of the house at night.”

“There isn’t an attached garage so they would have had to carry the bodies out the front door.”

“There are a lot of ways to hide a body for transport, and the time span between Webb’s and Libby’s murders is so drastic compared with Dane Tibideaux’s. I’ve only watched Webb’s killing once. I can’t get my head around a cop doing something like that to anyone, much less a fellow badge.”

“She must have found out something really bad.” Ana focused on Desi’s face. “It was horrible. I wonder who sent it.”

“I checked with IAB and got the original transmission from them. It bounced off the moon twice and relayed through nearly four hundred satellites. They’re still trying to find its origin, but I don’t think they’ll be successful.”

“Who would’ve sent it?”

“Not the shooter.” Desi shook her head. “But obviously someone involved. An accomplice would be my guess. The question is, why?”

“I think the shooter did send it.” Ana searched through her fries briefly and picked out one. “There is nothing on it that points to his identity except that one comment from Gina. If it’s been tampered with like you think, then the killer could be offering someone up.”

“Yeah. She thought the shooter loved her. For whatever reason, she believed his feelings for her would shield her from him.”

Ana nodded. “Yet she never said his name. Has your tech gotten anywhere with the breakdown?”

“No. It’s a smooth piece of work if it is altered. I’m thinking that if anyone messed with it, it was to alter the shooter’s voice. The voice pattern was the only real piece of evidence besides the date that came out of the footage.”

“But it’s doable.”

“Sure, I could do it.” Desi picked up her trash and tossed it in the box the food came in. “I mean, it wouldn’t be a hard thing to do. The real skill would be concealing it. If a voice filter was used to change the shooter’s voice, we should be able to find it in the digital code.”

“And if you can’t?”

“Then we are dealing with a serious individual. He’s offered someone up for the kill. I bet we’ll find a match on that voice pattern in the employment files of the department. They are hoping that Kyra will take the obvious choice and move on.”

“She won’t,” Ana murmured.

"No, they think that she'll back down because of Madame Tibideaux's son. What they can't possibly understand is that it's only going to make her more determined to find them."

"Yeah." She stood up and picked up her trash and then the box before she looked toward Desi. "Do you want to work at the table?"

"Sounds good." Desi stood up and went to retrieve their workbags. Once back at the table, she unzipped her own and pulled out a toolkit and the old p-pc in an evidence bag.

Ana came back and watched her for a moment. "What's your natural hair color?"

"This is pretty close, actually." She patted her blond curls. "I have nanotech-color implants. Everything from blue to yellow."

"Pretty cool."

"They were a gift to myself when I graduated from college." Desi slipped around the table and sat back down in the chair she'd abandoned. "You don't like the blonde?"

"It looks nice." Ana sat down. "I was just curious." She picked up her p-pc. "How's your sister?"

"Living it up on the moon." Desi shrugged. "I just hope that, for once, she sticks with something. Getting her that position with SETI took a lot of work on my part. I don't know how my parents managed to produce such a flighty creature. Neither Abel nor I is that silly."

"Maybe she's just trying to find the right spot for herself. All of my brothers went through that. I mean, one of them had ten different jobs in as many months. Finally, he chose to go back to school."

"Yeah, or she's just looking for a man to marry and support her."

"Well, if she's as attractive as you that shouldn't be a problem for her."

Desi's looked up and met her gaze. "You think I'm attractive?"

"Of course." Ana waved her hand. "You know what you look like."

"Yeah."

"So, I told your brother that I'm single ... I'm very interested in finding out who's talking to him about me." She glanced up to check Desi's reaction and smiled. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Ana."

"I'm a cop, Dr. Marcos. I wouldn't be a very good one if I hadn't noticed your interest in me. You look at my ass a lot."

"It's nice." Desi wet her lips. "You aren't insulted?"

"Only an idiot would be insulted because someone else found them attractive. I'm not an idiot." She put down her p-pc and gave up all pretense of working. "I've never been involved with a woman."

"I know."

"That doesn't mean that I'm not interested, just inexperienced."

"You're killing me." Desi rubbed her face briskly and bolted up from her chair. "I don't think I should have started this."

"Afraid of me?"

"No." Desi shrugged and walked away from the table. "It's just I consider you a friend, and I'd like us to be good friends. I haven't had much time to develop friendships ... and I really want to fuck you."

Ana laughed and stood up from the table. "Well, that's the bluntness I've come to admire in you."

Desi glared at her. "What about that guy you were seeing?"

"I'm going to take a few minutes tomorrow to contact him and sever things officially. We aren't exclusive, at any rate."

"Ana, we should think about this."

"You've been thinking about it already, otherwise you wouldn't have had your brother question me about who I was seeing." She paused when Desi took a step backward. "At this point, I honestly thought you'd be in charge of the pursuing."

"I think Inspector Moray is a bad influence on you. I don't think you were this aggressive before you partnered up with her."

"One of us has to be the aggressor."

Desi swallowed hard as her back met with the flat surface of the wall. She glanced down the hall and groaned when she realized she'd actually backed up toward the bedroom. Ana's bed looked almost as inviting as the woman herself did.

"Are you sure about this, Ana?"

"No, not really." She tilted her head and looked over Desi's face. "I've never been attracted to a woman before. It's certainly a new experience for me. I think I've wanted you since I set eyes on you. The other night when you talked about hooking up with another woman ... you just need to understand."

"Understand what?" Desi gave into the temptation to touch her. Her fingertips grazed Ana's arm, and she looked up to meet her gaze.

"I don't want to sleep with a woman because it would be a new experience. I want you. Just you."

"Oh." Desi flushed and pulled her closer. "Well, there's something you need to understand."

"I'm listening."

"I don't share."

"I get that." Ana nodded. "The fact is I doubt I'll be willing to share you, either."

"Good."

Ana groaned when her comm-u went off. "Fuck."

“We could ignore it.”

She glanced down at the wrist unit and then sighed. “It’s dispatch.” Ana backed off from Desi and engaged her comm-u with a frustrated sigh.

## Chapter Eleven

Kyra reached out for her comm-u as she rolled away from Alex. “Sorry.”

“I’m really starting to hate that thing.”

She offered him a grin as she slipped her earpiece in and engaged the call. “Inspector Moray.” Kyra stood up from the bed abruptly. “Tell them I’m on my way.”

She ended the transmission and then turned to look at Alex. “It’s Clara. We need to go.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra’s grip tightened on the stirring wheel of her vehicle as she killed the engine. Four uniformed officers were already on the scene. The red and blue flashing lights looked horrific. The scene reports she’d listened to as they drove hadn’t made any sense.

She exited her vehicle already focused on her job. Alex had been quiet the entire ride, and she knew that whatever faced them, controlling him might be the most difficult part of what was coming.

What greeted her as she came around the first car in Clara’s driveway nearly put her on her knees. Her partner, Ana Salanti, was on her knees beside Clara, holding her. They were both rocking. Clara’s sobs washed over Kyra so quickly that her own eyes dampened. The charred remains of the scarecrow still smoldered in front of them.

“God.” She glanced briefly at Alex and then moved forward. “Ana.”

Ana lifted her head; tears were streaming down her face. “The bastards set it on fire.” She tightened her grip on Clara as she said it. “She couldn’t put it out.”

Kyra went down on her knees in front of them. She picked up Clara’s hands, saw the blisters that were forming. “Clara.”

She met Kyra's gaze. "How could they do this?"

"I don't know."

"It was all I had." Clara's fingers curled around Kyra's.

"I know."

"How could they do this to my baby again?"

"I can't make this right." She cleared her throat. "I don't know how."

"It was the only connection I had with him, and they stole it away. Just like they stole him." Clara's breath caught and fresh tears sprung in her eyes.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Kill them. I want you to kill them." Clara pulled at her hands and stopped when she realized Kyra wasn't going to let go. "But you can't because you aren't like them."

"No. I'm not like them." Kyra looked at Ana. "Why aren't the med-tech's treating her?"

Ana looked to them. "They're afraid of her. When I got here the alligator was laying between her and the driveway."

"Alex."

Alex moved in and picked his aunt up off the ground. "This is intolerable, Inspector."

Kyra nodded and watched in silence as he strode through Clara's yard and disappeared into the house. "Get a kit from one of those twits and treat her hands yourself."

Ana nodded and hurried away.

She looked around the scene again and frowned when she caught sight of Desi. "Dr. Marcos."

Desi pulled her field kit off the hood of Ana's vehicle and started toward Kyra. "I was with Ana when the call came in."

"The two of you got here quickly."

"Ana's place is only about twenty minutes from here." Desi glanced around the scene and then focused on Kyra. "I can handle this personally, or I can call in a team."

"I don't want this place crawling with a bunch of techs. I don't think Clara could take it. Find out what accelerant they used."

"Smells like liquor of some kind." Desi got down on her knees and pulled on a pair of gloves. "This is seriously foul."

"Yeah."

"The uniforms said it was still burning when they got here." Desi pulled an evidence vial out of her kit and collected ashes. "It isn't safe for her to stay out here."

Kyra nodded and walked toward the four cops. "Who arrived first?"

"I did." The young man cleared his throat. "Tim Keller."

"What was the first thing you saw, Constable Keller?"

"The scarecrow was still on fire, and Madame Tibideaux had given up trying to put it out. She was kneeling on the ground in front of it. There was nothing we could do."

"The alligator?"

"Was sitting about where you are now, Ma'am."

"Did you fire on the animal?"

"Of course not." Keller stiffened. "Madame Tibideaux told us to leave him alone. He went back into the water when your partner arrived."

"I'll expect your scene report in an hour. You're all dismissed." Kyra turned her back on them and stalked toward the house. "Don't miss anything, Desi."

"I won't."

In the house, Kyra went to Clara's workroom and pulled out the ingredients for tea. The fact that she knew where they were gave her a slight pause, but she continued. She went into the kitchen and put water on to boil.

"My mother is on her way."

She turned and met Alex's gaze. "They think this will make me back off."

"It won't."

"You know damn well it won't." She turned and focused on the kettle. "Get the tray."

"Ana is treating her hands."

"She has medical training; it'll be fine."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I should have had men out here protecting her."

"It didn't occur to me that she would be in any danger." Alex walked to her and put the tea tray down on the counter. "How do you know how to mix her tea?"

Kyra paused in the process of mixing the leaves. "My mother taught me to make several teas as a child. Mostly for sleeping and calming purposes ... and I remember them."

"Terrorism against an old woman ... I wanted to think that you could handle this and that you weren't doing something that could get you killed."

"I *can* handle myself." She pulled the kettle from the stove and turned off the heating element. "Your aunt needs new appliances. This thing must be fifty years old."

"She's refused them the last four times I offered." He watched her pour the hot water into a small insulated pitcher and then fill up the one cup. "Kyra."

"I'll do my job," she snapped. "I'll find this son of a bitch."

"I've thought in the past that you and Clara hated one another."

"And now?"

"You both hate that you like each other." He touched her face. "Take care of what's mine, Inspector."

"I need to take her the tea."

"Yeah."

Kyra took the tray from the counter and walked quickly through the house. At the doorway of Clara's bedroom, she paused to listen to her complaining and Ana's patient responses. After a moment, she entered.

"Stop picking on her."

"Yes. Stop picking on me, Constable." Clara glared.

"I was talking to you." Kyra moved around the bed and set the tray down. "I've made you some tea."

Clara sniffed and then took the cup from the tray. "Your partner is a sadist. I can see why you recruited her into your super bitch cop squad."

"I doubt seriously she's enjoying what she's doing." Kyra looked to Ana who was patiently using a small epidermal healing wand on a blister on Clara's hand. "Does she need to go to the hospital?"

Ana shook her head. "Almost done. The damage is superficial and looks a great deal worse than it actually is."

"Hey."

All three turned to look at the door. Desi waved a hand. "Inspector, the press is here."

Kyra rose from the bed and checked her gun. "Good. I'm certainly in a mood to make a statement. Be nice to my partner, Clara." She looked toward Desi. "Where's Alex?"

"Probably on the front porch glaring at the reporters." Desi backed up and then went into the bedroom when Kyra exited the room. "Can I help?"

"Yeah, watch her and make sure she doesn't bite me."

Clara laughed softly and patted Ana's hand. "You'll do fine."

Kyra found Alex on the front porch standing in front of his Aunt's door. She slipped out of the house and moved out in front of him on the porch. "Good evening."

"Inspector Moray, any chance we can talk to Madame Tibideaux?"

"No. As you may have noticed, someone came onto Madame Tibideaux's property and destroyed something very important to her. The NOPD will take this act of terrorism seriously, and when we find the asshole responsible, we're going to teach him a lesson about picking on little elderly women."

"Is that a threat?"

"Yes, it is, and here's another one for your home audience. I *will* find out who killed Dane Tibideaux, Detective Gina Webb, and Ranger Mitchell Libby, and when I do, they'll pay hell for this and every other injustice perpetrated on Clara Tibideaux and her family."

"Do you have any suspects?"



“Yes, I have several suspects. Now, you’ve all got two minutes to get off the property before I sic Madame Tibideaux’s pet alligator on you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“You two make a nice couple.”

Ana glanced up abruptly. “Excuse me?”

Clara smiled and motioned to Desi with her teacup. “I thought so the last time I saw the two of you together. I hope you aren’t letting people’s prejudice get in your way.”

Desi chuckled. “Can I fill your cup, Madame?”

“Call me Clara.” She held out the cup. “I hope the inspector isn’t out there killing reporters. Old Henry wouldn’t be able to eat all of them.”

“Henry is the alligator?” Ana asked softly as she put down the healing wand and picked up another instrument from the med kit.

“Yes. I named him after Dane’s daddy.”

“Did you like this man?” Desi questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, yes, Henry was a good man in his way. Loved to laugh and carry on. He was also stubborn and ornery, just like that old gator. When I lost my Henry, I thought that I wouldn’t be able to go on, and then I found out I was going to have a baby. We’d been trying for years with no success. I’d given up on having my own children.” She sighed. “Dane was such a pretty baby. He had my heart from the moment he was born.”

“I know this has been very difficult for you.” Ana released Clara’s hand and closed the med kit. “We’ll get justice.”

“Yes. I know.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex walked down the dock and eyed the alligator that floated lazily in the water. “I sort of like him being around.”

“It’s like her to have such a weird pet.” Kyra crossed her arms over her chest and looked out into the bayou. The sun was rising. “Are you going to trust me to handle this?”

“As long as it doesn’t come near my aunt again. I’m going to call in a few favors and set up her protection myself.” He glanced briefly at Kyra and shook his head. “It’s not about not trusting you. I trust you with everything I am. I don’t, however, trust the rest of the cops in this city. The right cop could probably persuade even your cops to look the other way. Despite what you told the press, you don’t have all of the players on the field.”

“I know.” Kyra grimaced. “So, I suppose this place is going to be crawling with ex-Union Special Forces?”

“Yes.”

“If anything comes their way, can I trust they’ll be on orders to capture alive?”

“If you insist.”

“I must.”

Alex nodded. “For the moment, I can accept that condition.”

“You’ll stay with her until then?”

“Right.” Alex glanced back toward the house and watched Ana and Desi approach.

“You’re right. They’re either hooking up or about to.”

“They’re kind of cute together.” Kyra tilted her head and then sighed. “Man, they’d both better be tough enough to hang in there if things go bad.”

Alex pulled her close to him as they walked up the dock. “Good morning, ladies.”

Ana glanced out into the water. “Henry out there?”

“Is that his name?” Alex laughed out loud.

Desi nodded. “She said he reminded her of her late husband.”

“Yes, he’s out there.” Kyra looked around the scene. “Alex is going to stay here until he can arrange private protection.”

“Sounds good. If you come with me, I can program my car to take your identification.” Ana nodded her heads toward her car.

Alex looked at the Corvette. “You realize that I might fall in love with it.”

“It’s already been molested by a Texas Ranger this week. I’m not sure it can take much more.”

Kyra shook her head ruefully as they headed off together. “Dr. Marcos.”

“Man.” Desi crossed her arms over her chest. “Inspector, look, nothing happened.”

“That must have been disappointing for you.” Kyra checked her comm-u and motioned toward her transport. “We can wait for Ana inside.”

Desi trudged along after her. “You’re not mad?”

“Your personal life is your business. Just be careful that the two of you don’t end up making my office a war zone.”

“No problem.”

Ana joined them as they got to the vehicle. “I think your man is considering running away with my car.”

“He won’t go far, for the time being.” Kyra pulled her door shut and sat still for a minute. “I’ve seen some pretty bad things in my life. Anyone who would prey on the heart of an old woman has no point he won’t cross.”

“You don’t think it was a warning for you?”

"No." Kyra shook her head. "If they'd really wanted to get at me, it would have been my grandmother or you." She looked at Ana then. "You do understand that, right?"

"Yes."

"Whoever he is, he probably won't mess with Alex. Alex's past is hardly a secret."

"But whoever he is might view me as weak."

"Yes."

"I'm not." Ana pulled on her harness and activated the dash workstation in front of her. "I would have preferred they come at me rather than her." She looked out to where the scarecrow once stood. "I could have handled it better."

Desi scooted up and leaned between them. "When we catch up with this guy, I think we should feed him to Henry."

They all three looked out to the water. The old alligator was lurking just a few feet from the shore. He rolled in the water, making an exaggerated splash as if he'd heard Desi's suggestion.

Kyra laughed softly. "He seems game." She engaged the engine. "Buckle up, doctor."

Desi slid back into the seat and arranged her harness. "I could use my new saw."

"Ah, gross, you went too far." Ana wrinkled her nose and then rubbed her stomach. "Speaking of feeding, I'm starving."

"We can stop for food on the way in." Kyra activated the vehicle comm-u with a press of her thumb. "Commander Baker."

The comm-u buzzed once before it engaged. "Inspector Moray, I just finished watching you on the vid-panel. My wife thinks you need more sleep."

"Assholes keep interfering with my sleep efforts."

"Meet me at the station in twenty."

Kyra raised an eyebrow when the call ended. "We can't get to the station in twenty minutes."

"We could use the hover-system," Desi offered from the backseat.

Kyra's glanced over at Ana, and then they both looked back at Desi, who was digging around in her workbag. "We could."

She looked up and wet her lips. "You two look positively gleeful right now."

Kyra grinned and turned back to the road. She engaged the hover-system with an eager hand, and they all three took a deep breath as the vehicle lifted. The mechanical hiss of the hydraulic wheels retracting echoed through the silent vehicle.

"Gosh."

Ana blinked. "Did you just say 'gosh'?"

Kyra slipped her sunshields on and pressed the accelerator as if her foot weighed ten pounds. "Of course not."

Ethan Baker was standing at his window when Kyra entered his office. "You handle that monster far better in the air than you do on the ground." He offered her a half-smile and picked up his coffee from the desk.

"My partner and Dr. Marcos are still clinging to their harnesses. I expect to see them sometime before the end of the day."

"The mayor's office has been flooded with phone calls."

"Madame Tibideaux is a very popular woman in this city." Kyra sat down and stretched briefly. "I expected the calls, and we'll probably get a great deal of e-correspondence as well."

Ethan sat down at his desk and cupped his coffee in both hands. "Talk to me about this case."

"It all comes down to Gina Webb."

"She was slotted to testify for the reorganization committee." Ethan pulled a mini-disc from his desk and handed it to her. "The chief was able to pull a few strings and get the record of her involvement with the committee. Unfortunately, it has very little information. Mitchell Libby was here working for the committee, and she was recruited to testify by him. She never testified."

"Yeah." Kyra took the disc and flipped it over in her hand for a few seconds. "Webb found out that cops in the Major Crimes unit were smuggling guns out of the city. Once Ana gains control of her basic body movements, she's going to call Remy St. James and Evan Horn in for interview."

"Has IAB contacted you again?"

"No. They wanted a copy of the Sebastian Green list. That's why I received the vid-file of Webb's murder. I doubt they'll get involved until it comes down to arresting and charging those involved."

"What do you think Gina found out?"

"That Setterstrom and Grant were involved in gun smuggling. They worked in Major Crimes and were assigned regularly for gun destruction trips, as you're aware."

"Yes." Ethan turned to his compu-station and frowned. "The fact is that I don't really remember anything out of the ordinary during that time."

"I imagine you were spending a lot of your time dealing with officer turnover and the dismantling of the police force."

"It was a stressful period."

"Benjamin Darcy said that Royce Foster helped you a great deal with administrative tasks."

“Probably. During that time period it was difficult to hire anyone. I had several detectives in the unit helping me keep things on an even keel.”

“Would he have been in a position to pick out cops that he could trust with illegal tasks?”

“Yes. Your theory?”

“That Royce Foster was smuggling banned confiscated weapons. Roger Setterstrom and Beau Grant did the leg work along with Remy St. James and Evan Horn.”

“Pull the recycle records from the plant and match them against destruction trips that those four cops were involved in. If they were doing what you think, one or more of them might be willing to roll over on the trigger man.”

“Yes.” Kyra nodded. “If Gina knew, it’s likely that Todd Conrad knew as well. I don’t know what his involvement was, but his partner disappeared, and he never investigated it. He knew she didn’t go to New York. Conrad worked with Webb. He knew she didn’t have family anywhere.”

“The vandalism at Madame Tibideaux’s has created a situation in this city that is very volatile. Despite her religious beliefs and her standing within her faith, there are very few people in New Orleans who don’t have a healthy respect for her. And the scarecrow was something of an institution.”

“Yes.”

“How is she?”

“Devastated. Alex Waters is arranging for private protection. It would be in everyone’s best interest to avoid Clara’s property altogether.”

“This case is getting personal for you.”

“It appears that’s the norm lately.” She stood. “I’ll probably have to address the press again soon.”

“I’ll let you know if the mayor has any input or instructions regarding statements to the press.”

That was something to look forward to. Kyra glanced around his office and then cleared her throat. “You might get a little muddy on this one, sir.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be going over employment records for the time period and that will include reviewing your logs.” She shoved both hands into her front pockets and asked the question that she never thought she would. “Was Benjamin Darcy a bad cop?”

“If you had asked me that question last week, I would have torn a strip a half-mile wide off your ass.” Ethan shook his head. “Truth is, Kyra, I don’t know. I knew plenty of cops that turned out to be bad, and once the reorganization was over, we all felt like we could relax a little. Of course, no one doubted that a few corrupt people slipped through the net. New

Orleans was on its own for way too long after the last civil war. There was a lot of empire building within the city government and in the police force.”

“I went out and talked to Ben.”

“I read your log for the visit.”

“I don’t want all of this to lead to him.”

“But?”

“I think we both know that he knows what happened in that safe house. If they were smuggling guns within the Major Crimes unit, Ben would’ve known. Since he didn’t bust the bastards, that tells me he was involved. If he was involved in the guns ... it stands to reason he was involved in the murders.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Horn and St. James are in a snit, but they’ll be here in about a half-hour.” Ana leaned against the doorframe of Desi’s office and crossed her arms over her breasts. “Did you put out a call for an administrative assistant?”

“Yeah.” Desi glanced up from the report she was reading and smiled. “What’s on your mind, Constable?”

“Things.”

“What kind of things?”

Ana glanced over her shoulder and sighed. “Things that will have to wait. The inspector is on her way.” She straightened and stepped back from the doorway. “Inspector.”

Kyra eyed her and then looked at Desi. “I’ve asked Parker to pull the file on Royce Foster’s death; he’s overloaded because of the fire in the French Quarter. He said he’d pass the file to you.”

“Sounds good.”

“Until you have an admin in place, feel free to use and abuse your brother as you see fit.” Kyra turned to Ana. “I want Roger Setterstrom and Beau Grant back in for interviews. Put in a call to Inspector Conrad and let him know.”

“I’m allowed to contact them directly.”

“Yes, but I want Conrad to know I’m calling them in again.” Kyra checked her comm-u for the time. “I don’t even know when I slept last.”

“It’s been about thirty-six hours for me.” Ana frowned at her.

“It’s not my fault you were too busy chasing the good doctor around to sleep.” Kyra strolled away leaving Ana with her mouth hanging open.

“How the hell does she know that?” Ana glared at Desi.

Desi chuckled. “Didn’t you say that any decent cop would have known I was hot for your ass?”

“Yeah, but how did she know I was doing the chasing?”

“Oh, Ana, you’re definitely a top.”

## Chapter Twelve

Ana crossed her arms over her breasts and stared at Remy St. James. “He looks nervous.”

“He should be.” Kyra looked up from her p-pc. “He was a bad cop, and I doubt he’s a better private citizen.”

“Verbal and physical abuse of prisoners?”

“Yeah.”

Ana nodded. “He seems the type.”

“At least I won’t have to worry about hurting his feelings.” Kyra pulled off her jacket. “How did he react when you took his weapon?”

“He gave up the holster with no problems. When I asked for his second piece he got a little bent.”

“Suppose he threatened to report you.”

“Yep.” Ana looked toward her. “I made sure he had the correct spelling of my name.”

“Good. I suppose his permits are up to date?”

“Yeah. I double-checked. Both weapons are licensed, and he can carry concealed.”

“His firm pays for them?”

“Yeah.” Ana nodded. “Both permits and his bonding license are paid for by Elite Protective Services.” She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. “Say, in a lesbian relationship, does being ‘the top’ refer to being the ‘guy’?”

Kyra pursed her lips. “Are we actually going to have this conversation?”

“Apparently.”



She sighed. "Okay. Essentially the whole point of being in a lesbian relationship is that there is no 'guy.' So maybe it just means the more aggressive or dominant partner. There have certainly been relationships in my past where I was 'the top.'"

"Oh, yeah? What about Alex?"

"What do you think?" Kyra leaned on the wall. "This thing with Dr. Marcos have you messed up?"

"A little." She shrugged and straightened her uniform shirt. "But I'm handling it."

"Good. We haven't been partners long enough for you to cry on my shoulder yet."

Ana laughed. "Let's go pick on St. James."

"I'm going to glare at him for a while." Kyra jerked her thumb toward the interview room. "You can start with his role in the smuggling operation."

Ana pulled out her p-pc and put on her new, improved cop face. "I got this."

"I know you do."

He was on his feet the minute the door opened. "Inspector, I demand an explanation. This uniform has treated me like a criminal."

Kyra closed the door and watched Ana sit down at the table. "You aren't in a position to demand anything, and Constable Salanti was following orders. Since I understand that is a foreign concept for you, we'll overlook your attitude. Sit down."

He continued to glare as he regained his seat. "Fine, let's get this over with."

Ana engaged the recording compu-station embedded in the table and opened a document on her p-pc. "This is a formal interview with Remy St. James, who was employed with the New Orleans Police Department from 2145 through 2158. Constable Anastasia Salanti and Inspector Kyra Moray are in attendance." She looked up and smiled. "On April 4, 2147, you and your partner, Evan Horn, removed eight thousand weapons from the Police Plaza archive and took them to a metal recycling plant. On that same day, Neo-Metal, Inc., reported one ton of recycled metal from the New Orleans Police Department."

"So?"

"So, the approximate weight of the eight thousand weapons was nearly four tons. What we'd like to know, Mr. St. James, is where the rest of the guns went?"

"I haven't a clue." He sat back in his chair and stared at Ana's face.

"One of the guns you supposedly saw destroyed was used to murder two cops and a civilian. I would suggest that you find a clue."

"The safe house murders?" he asked softly.

"Yes."

"Look, I had nothing to do with the murder of cops."

"But you were involved in the smuggling of guns?" Ana kept her gaze on his face, resisting the urge to turn and see if Kyra approved of her questions.

"I'm not admitting to anything."

"You don't have to, Remy; it's all there for the world to see. You and your friends did a piss-poor job of covering up the evidence. But then, that wasn't your job, was it? You just hauled the guns out of the city for a drop. Were you ever in the house on Rose Street?" Kyra stepped away from the wall and walked to the table. "Did they tell you what they'd done?"

"I found out about the bodies in the safe house on the vid just like everyone else in this city." He lowered his gaze to the table. "I did some things when I was a cop that I regret. I might have gotten too rough during an arrest more often than was necessary. I'm sure you've read my file."

"Oh, yes."

"I didn't keep things legal, okay. At least not until the reorganization began. Once the committee was formed and the hearings started, I went straight as quickly as I could."

"The guns in April of 2147?"

"It was the last run I was a part of. Evan and I took two-thirds of that last haul, just like your numbers indicate. Royce Foster -- he was a detective in District 4 then -- met us outside of the city with a buyer from Texas. They'd been pushing guns through Texas for years, and business doubled after Texas joined the North American Union. Not all of those people were interested in giving up their weapons and happily paid through the nose to get their hands on anything that could make a hole." He paused and rubbed his face with both hands. "Look, I'll tell you every damn thing I know if you can get me a deal. I'm not going to go down for the murders of those people in that house."

"We'll see what Mr. Horn has to say on this matter. Are you holding anything back from me? Because if he tells me something you should have ... he'll get whatever deal I make."

"No. Look, it was me, Evan Horn, Beau Grant, and Roger Setterstrom. We handled gun runs to the recycle place for three years. We probably hauled a billion in credits worth of guns out of this city during that time."

"I'm sure your cut was decent." Kyra sat down in a chair at the end of the table and glanced briefly at Ana. "Do you think he's telling me everything he knows, Salanti?"

"He's a man." Ana shrugged.

"Yeah."

"Inspector, I'll submit to truth testing. I'll testify against the others, and I'll turn over every record I have of what I did during that operation. I have extensive records of my activities during that time period."

"What about the month of May?"

"After the last run in April, I was out. Setterstrom and Grant kept at it for another couple of years until they made detective. By that time, Royce Foster had retired and Benjamin Darcy had been promoted to inspector."

“What was Darcy’s role in the smuggling operation?”

“As far as I know he wasn’t involved in the smuggling operation. Grant told me that they ended the operation because it was getting harder to get things done with Darcy in charge of the Major Crimes division. The operation pretty much disappeared after Foster retired.”

“That’s convenient.”

“What do you mean?”

“The man is dead, St. James. It isn’t like he can defend himself.”

“Yeah, I guess that does make things rather simple.”

“Simple?” Kyra stood up abruptly. “There is nothing simple about three murders. Put him in a cell, Salanti. I’m going to go chat with Mr. Horn.”

“A cell?”

“Yeah, we put gun smugglers in cells around here. It satisfies my need for justice.” Ana pulled him up from his chair and raised an eyebrow. “Are we going to need restraints?”

Kyra left the room with a soft laugh. She was a bad influence on her partner. Crossing the hall, she pushed open the door to interview room four and smiled. “Hello there, Mr. Horn. Your partner has confessed to gun smuggling, and he’s implicated you. So, unless you have something to tell me that he doesn’t know, I’m going to charge you with felony gun smuggling.”

The color drained from Evan Horn’s face. “The hell he did.”

“Oh, he did.” Kyra sat down and put her p-pc on the table. “You see, one of the guns you and he supposedly destroyed was used to murder two cops and a civilian. Since I’m sure you’ve been paying attention to the news, you know exactly who I’m talking about.”

“If he said that I had anything to do with those murders, he’s lying.”

“Really? It isn’t your fault that the gun used in the crime wasn’t destroyed? Didn’t you, St. James, Setterstrom, and Grant haul those guns out of the city? Did you think they would all end up in Mexico? Are you so stupid that it didn’t occur to you that those guns might end up back on the streets of this city?”

“The ballistic information was deleted from the database.” He wet his lips nervously. “He promised us it would be erased.”

“Oh, it was erased. Here’s the kicker, Evan, and you’re going to like this. The gun that killed Webb, Libby, and Tibideaux was used in an officer-involved shooting. The ballistic fingerprint was easy to get rid of, but records involving two cops getting shot during a traffic stop can’t just disappear. That same gun was removed from the Police Plaza evidence archive by the four of you.”

“It’s impossible. He made sure that all the guns we took out were turn-ins. No guns that were involved in crimes.”

"He? Who's he?"

"Royce Foster. I know Remy told you that he was the head of the operation."

"Yes. He was quick to point his finger at a dead man."

"Foster handled the administrative stuff. Doctored the records coming back from the recycling plant and the ballistic print records."

"He took care of the ballistics records, but he scammed you on the recycling plant records. Every single run that the four of you made came up short on the weight end. He put the correct records back in the database just before he retired. He cleaned up after himself, Evan, and set the four of you up to take the hit."

"Look, that was a long time ago, and you don't have any proof that I was involved in that mess."

"Remy gave you up. He's offered us evidence including personal logs he kept during that time. It's funny how a conspiracy to commit murder charge can change a man's loyalties."

"We weren't involved in the murders."

"So he says." Kyra shrugged. "He's going to get a deal, Evan. You? I don't have a reason to deal with you."

"I was approached first. I didn't bring Remy into the deal until later. Royce Foster trusted me, told me a lot of things no one else knew."

"Like what?"

"Like who the real brain was behind the operation and why he retired from the NOPD." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I want an advocate and the DA in here. Seems like I can make a deal with what I have."

"Okay. Just make sure you don't leave anything out." She stood up from the chair and walked to the door. "By the way, the murder weapon? Benjamin Darcy was the arresting officer in that case, and he put the gun into evidence. There's no way Foster would have made a mistake like that. Think about it."

"You should watch your ass, Inspector. Three cops have already died for this."

"Three?"

"You don't honestly think Royce Foster died in an accident, do you?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well?"

Desi looked up from her compu-station and then briefly into the interview room where Evan Horn was meeting with an appointed advocate. "Royce Foster's death was ruled an accident. He drowned during a fishing trip; from all reports, he was alone."

“Yeah.” Kyra took a deep swallow of coffee and looked around the observation deck until her gaze met with Ana’s. “Did St. James give you any problems?”

“No, but he did whine a bit about forfeiting his clothes in favor of that nifty blue jumpsuit.”

Kyra smiled and then looked back into the interview room. The sound was muted for privacy. She could tell that the advocate was way over her head. “Make a note to let the DA know that Horn is going to need a more experienced lawyer. This kid looks like she might pass out any second now.”

“You think Benjamin Darcy was involved in this?”

“Yes.” Kyra nodded. “I don’t like it, but yes.”

“It doesn’t reflect on you.”

“A dirty cop training me doesn’t reflect on me?” Kyra offered Ana a practiced glare. “IAB will tear every case I’ve ever worked apart looking for mistakes or intentional error on my part.”

“Everyone in this city knows you aren’t dirty.”

“This is the kind of thing Lloyd Deller has waited on for years.”

“Isn’t it odd that he hates you so much?” Ana sighed. “I don’t get it.”

“We have more history than I first thought.” Kyra shrugged and then turned when the observation deck door opened. “Hey.”

Abel glanced toward the interview room and returned his gaze to Kyra. “The DA is in court. She won’t be here for another two hours.”

“Fine.” Kyra rubbed the back of her neck and looked around. “Ana, put him in an isolation cell when his advocate is finished. I don’t want him talking to anyone. I think I’ll go get us some lunch.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra exited her vehicle and glared at the six-foot-six mountain that was striding toward her. “If you pull that gun, asshole, you’d better be prepared to use it.”

He paused. “You’re on private property.”

She pulled out her badge and flipped it open. “Inspector Kyra Moray, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll back off. I’m in a mood, and laying your big ass out would be profoundly satisfying.”

“I’d let you try, except the master chief would have my ass.”

“Probably not; you wouldn’t have much ass left.” Alex said from his place on the front porch of Clara’s house.

They both looked toward the house, and Kyra motioned at the mountain. "You'd better warn the rest of them off." She walked across the yard, stopping briefly to stare at the darkened ground where the scarecrow once stood. "How is she?"

"Plotting."

Kyra raised an eyebrow. "Interesting."

"Yeah, she's been burning something in her work room all morning long."

She walked to the porch and stared at him for a moment. "I think I'm on to something."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "I need to talk to Clara for a few minutes."

"She might let you in."

The house reeked of some foul burning smell that Kyra couldn't readily identify. She walked down the narrow hall that lead to the workroom and stared at the shut door.

"You can come in, Inspector."

"God, I hate it when you do that." She pushed open the door and glared at Clara who was sitting at a small table in the center of the room. "It's creepy."

"It's by far the least creepiest thing I'm capable of." She motioned to a chair in front of her. "Sit. I've been waiting for you all morning."

Kyra sat and shrugged out of her jacket. "I'm getting there, Clara."

"I know." Clara nodded. "It's all about Gina then."

"Yes."

"Poor sweet girl." Her mouth firmed up. "I wasn't kind to her, and I regret that."

"Clara, Gina Webb had been a cop for nearly ten years when she met up with you. I doubt she was so thin skinned that you hurt her feelings."

"No." Clara chuckled. "Not at all, actually. You remind me of her. I suppose the men in my family have always preferred strong, ill-tempered women. You recently came to have the personal belongings of an ex-cop."

"Yes."

"They're important. I see danger coming for you and for those around you. Not the good exciting kind that you like so much ... but the kind that's going to tear open your soul."

"Can I do anything about it?"

"No." Clara shook her head and frowned. "I can't see well enough to give you specifics. You'll survive it, but I'm unsure about the people around you. Just be careful, Inspector."

"I'm always careful."

"You can tell that lie to Alex, but I don't buy it. You take risks like you don't care if you live or die. I thought when I first met you that maybe you did want to die. Now, I

understand that you just aren't afraid of it. Not being afraid of death can be dangerous for a woman with a job like yours." Clara spread a small square of blue velvet out in front of her and put a handmade bowl in the center of it. "What of Aaron Belton?"

Kyra thought briefly on the disturbed boy she'd put in jail for serial murder only two weeks before. "He's pled not guilty by reason of mental defect."

"That angers you."

"Yes."

"You know that boy ain't right. Never was right; suppose he came out of the womb all twisted and ready to do the will of evil. They'll never let him out on the streets again."

"I'd rather see him in a cell than in a room in a mental facility."

"Yes, more for your friend Glory than for yourself."

Kyra flushed and sat back in the chair. "Perhaps."

"Glory James is a strong and intelligent woman. She'll heal in her own time and in her own way. You can't be in control of everything. But I know you'll certainly try."

"I didn't come here for a lecture."

"No, you came here for answers." Clara paused. "Go ahead then, ask me your questions."

"Did Dane discuss Gina's disappearance with you?"

"Only to say that he was worried about her. He wouldn't tell me why, but I'd already gleaned from her that she was carrying a child. I could see my grandbaby laughing and playing, and then when I could no longer see him I realized that she was dead."

"Did you tell Dane?"

"No." Clara shook her head. "It's not often that I'm wrong, and I was hoping that I was. I've always felt that if I'd told him she was dead that he might have survived."

"No decent man would have turned away from the murder of his woman and child."

"I know."

"Dane had a room at the university. Did you keep anything from his room?"

"His clothes ..." Her mouth tightened briefly. "The police kept his computer and his p-pc was never recovered."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana tossed the remnants of her candy bar in the trashcan as she passed the sergeant's desk in the holding center. "Any complaints from my guests?"

"Not recently."

She nodded and opened the door that led to the solitary cells. The first thing she saw was the open door of Remy St. James's cell. Rushing forward, she pushed open the door as

she drew her weapon. For a few seconds she simply stared at his body as it swayed ever so slightly. He'd hung himself with his belt, or at least she would have thought so if his door had been shut and locked.

Ana turned, and silver flashed just outside her peripheral vision before her whole world went dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

Desi checked her comm-u for the time and then stood up from her desk to go find Abel. She found him in the inspector's office. "Where is Ana? She was supposed to meet me for lunch twenty minutes ago."

Abel looked up, startled. "She said she was heading that way when I saw her last. Have you checked with the holding center?"

"No." Desi turned on her heel and left the office. Once in the elevator she pushed the button for the underground section of the station and glanced briefly at Abel as he darted into the elevator car just before doors slid close.

The moment the door opened they caught sight of Sergeant Marseau slumped over the desk. Desi pulled the gun she'd only recently gotten used to wearing and moved carefully out of the elevator. The door leading to the isolation cells was open. "Check him."

Abel walked over to the sergeant's desk and checked for a pulse. "Looks like he's been hit in the head. Not much blood." He pulled the man's weapon and motioned toward the door. "I got your back."

Desi watched him briefly as he checked the weapon for ammunition and then nodded. "Yeah."

She used the barrel of her weapon to push the door open further and resisted the urge to hurry inside. Ana was on the floor halfway down the hall. Carefully she checked each door as they moved into the hallway. The isolation cells nearest Ana were both open. "You check her." Desi glanced briefly into the room and shook her head. "Damn." She stared for a few seconds at the body of Evan Horn hanging from the single light fixture in the room and then crossed the hall to see a nearly identical situation in St. James's cell. "Fuck."

"She's got a pretty good head wound here." Abel picked Ana up off the floor and looked to his sister. "But her pulse is good. We should take her to the med-tech."

"You go. I need to secure these two scenes." Desi looked at Ana's face for a moment, and took in her pale features. "I want to know as soon as she's awake, and have dispatch find the inspector."

\* \* \* \* \*



Kyra slammed her vehicle into park in front of the station and took a deep breath. Abel had said that Ana was fine, but that both men were certainly dead. After a few seconds she pushed open the door to her transport and exited. The lobby of the station was like a tomb when she entered.

The desk sergeant on duty jumped up from his chair. "Inspector."

"Sergeant Carson, where is my partner?"

"Raising three kinds of hell down in the holding center." He swallowed hard. "I've started pulling all of the security footage at the commander's request, but we're missing the discs for the holding center for the last three hours."

"Why am I not surprised?" Kyra demanded as she strode away from the desk.

She found Ana doing exactly what Carson had said. Kyra watched for a moment, relieved to see her on her feet and spitting mad. Ana was holding a cloth to one temple and had three uniformed officers jumping to her every command.

"Constable."

Ana turned immediately and looked at her. "Inspector."

"When you're ready to pull your foot out of Sergeant Marseau's ass, let me know." Kyra walked past them, taking note that Marseau had a large bandage on the back of his head. "Dr. Marcos."

Desi glanced up briefly and then stood up from the scene kit she'd been rummaging through. "The bodies are still as we found them." She motioned with one hand into the room she was standing in front of. "If Ana hadn't interrupted ... both would've looked like suicide. But it's sloppy. A cursory autopsy would've told the tale. Murder."

Kyra stepped over Desi's kit and walked into the room where Evan Horn hung. "What can you tell me?"

"They were sedated before they were hung, probably by someone they knew as neither of them have any wounds that indicated that they struggled." Desi pulled on a pair of gloves. "Dr. Rice is on his way here with a team. They'll handle the body removal."

"Has the commander been down?"

"No. He was downtown when Abel and I discovered Ana. He should be here any minute though." Desi looked down the hall and then back to Kyra. "Here she comes."

"You all right?"

Desi nodded abruptly. "Yeah."

Kyra walked around Evan's body once and then glanced at her partner who had taken Desi's place in the doorway. "Does your head hurt?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what happened."

Ana cleared her throat. "I came down to check on them to make sure they weren't giving the watch desk a hard time. When I opened the door, I noticed that St. James's cell door was open."

"Let me know when your head stops hurting so I can lecture you for this bullshit."

Ana jerked as if Kyra had struck her. "Excuse me?"

"You're one of the smartest cops in this unit. Just what made you waltz your ass down this hall without securing it?"

"I don't know." Ana firmed up her jaw and shook her head. "I didn't think."

"Not thinking is what gets good cops killed." Kyra glared at her briefly aware that she was more afraid for her partner than she was angry with her. "You never act on impulse or emotion. The only way you can keep control of what's going on around you is to think and watch. If you had, we might have someone in custody for the murder of these two men."

"I know that."

"Did the med-tech release you from the health center or did you leave on your own?"

"I left on my own."

"Then I suggest you haul your ass back over there. I can handle this from here." She turned her back on Ana and took a deep breath. The soft click of the door shutting made her look back. "Dr. Marcos."

"Do you think that was necessary?" Desi demanded.

"If I hadn't, I wouldn't have done it." Kyra watched her for a moment. "Ana doesn't need you to defend her, and she certainly doesn't need to be coddled when she makes a mistake. We can all just thank God that the son of a bitch who hung these men didn't kill her, too."

"She idolizes you."

"And?"

"Doesn't that matter to you?"

"It matters." Kyra looked away from her. "I don't think I could be a cop if I had to bury another partner. I need to know that she can handle herself and do what needs to be done. Today, she did something stupid, and she knows it."

"Bury another partner?" Desi asked softly.

"I'm surprised you don't know." Kyra looked at her. "You didn't read my file?"

"No." Desi shook her head. "Read Ana's, of course."

"You like her a lot."

"I do."

"Maybe you can go do the coddling I couldn't afford to do once you're finished with the scene work." Kyra turned as her comm-u buzzed and the earpiece engaged. The unit noted the name of the caller and she braced herself. "Commander Baker."

“Inspector, I’d like to see you in my office now.”

“Of course.” Kyra glanced briefly at Desi as she passed her. “Don’t miss anything. We can’t afford to make another mistake.”

“Yeah.” Desi nodded. “I got this.”

## Chapter Thirteen

“You instructed the watch desk in the holding center to allow them no visitors.”

Kyra nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“What happened?”

“No one signed in to visit them. Since Sergeant Marseau was at his post when Ana entered the area, we can all agree with some degree of certainty that the sergeant left his post sometime before my partner arrived in holding. During his absence, someone entered the isolation area and killed St. James and Horn. Then he knocked Ana and Marseau out and walked out of there as if he hadn’t a damn care in the world, carrying the security discs with him.”

“You’ve known Sergeant Marseau to leave his post?”

“Once before that I can remember. I don’t know if he’s just a sloppy cop, or a bad cop, sir.”

“Either way, he’s suspended pending an investigation.” Ethan stood up and paced the floor behind his desk. “Your partner?”

“Head and pride are probably smarting equally.” Kyra checked her comm-u for the time and then looked toward her commander. “Horn was going to give up a great deal of information. I need to talk to the advocate assigned to him to see if she learned anything important.”

“Fine. Be careful, Inspector, looks like we’re all going to get a little dirty on this one. Having prisoners murdered while they are in our custody is going to look bad.”

“I know.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra exited the elevator and stalked into the Major Crimes division. “We’ve a problem in our house, and we’re going to find it.”

“Ana hasn’t come up. How is she?”

She focused on Ryan Jennings, a detective who had transferred into her department when she’d been investigating a serial killer. The first time she’d met him, she’d passed him off as a glory hound. That hadn’t proven to be the case. “She’s fine. Angry, of course, but fine.”

Ryan leaned forward in his chair. “We’ve been tracking the movements of everyone in the building using the discs that we did manage to confiscate.”

“Good.”

“Nothing’s come of it, though. We can’t account for five people during the murders.”

“Ana, Sergeant Marseau, and who else?”

“Two unidentified delivery men who signed in at the front desk with only their company name, me, Sergeant Phillip Wilkes, and Abel Joshua.” Ryan shrugged. “I was in the gym, but the discs that would have proven that were taken. The assailant might have used the locker room area to escape to the parking garage.”

“He took the garage discs I assume.”

“Yes. It was a fancy bit of work, I must say; the security in this building is pretty damn good. We’ve had breaches before, but nothing that happened so fast and without a single witness.” Detective Darren Trane stood up and laid out a floor plan of the underground portion of the station house. “So, Ryan’s here.” He marked the gym area with a pen. “Wilkes said he was in the break room on six. That room is close enough to the stairs that lead down to the holding center that the killer might have used that hallway; at any rate, those discs are missing, too. In all, he managed to disable thirty cameras and swipe forty different discs. It would have been easier if he’d just snagged them all, but he chose very carefully.”

“The question is, why?” Kyra let her gaze move over the plans. “He tried to make the deaths look like suicide, yet he took all the security discs.”

“Maybe he hadn’t planned on killing them.” Ryan moved around the table. “Perhaps he just went in to see them to make sure they were going to follow the game plan. When he realized they were going to roll over, he had to kill them.”

“So he disabled the cameras before he entered the isolation cells,” Kyra murmured. “He realized that one or both of them couldn’t be trusted, and he tried to make it look like they killed themselves.”

“Except Constable Salanti interrupted. Since he couldn’t be sure how much time he had left, he went to the security offices and pulled the discs that would’ve put him in the area of the killings.” Ryan marked the location where Ana was discovered.

"Only someone who had worked in this building, and specifically in security, would've known which discs to take." Kyra inclined her head as she looked over the plans. "The question remains ... why didn't he take them all?"

"He wanted us to have enough information to account for nearly everyone in the building. Somehow he knew the two delivery men were in the building and wanted us to have enough information on them to make them suspects, but not enough to prove or disprove that it wasn't one of them." Detective Trane frowned. "Smart, but not smart enough."

"An effective decoy, at least on a surface level. He didn't have a lot of time to think it through. The men in the security area?"

"It was shift change. The killer had a minute and half to go into the security office and pull the discs that he'd chosen."

"Where was Abel?"

"In the parking garage. He'd just returned from taking a crate full of evidence to Police Plaza. He didn't see anyone in the area."

"The delivery men?"

"One delivered flowers to a secretary on the second floor, and the other is no longer in the building and we have no idea what he delivered or how he left." Ryan marked the secretary's office and leaned against the table. "What has Dr. Marcos said?"

"They definitely didn't kill themselves, and they were both sedated without a fight."

"So they knew their killer." Ryan nodded. "Trusted him."

"Yes."

"And he knew this place in and out." Kyra glanced over the plans of the building. "Where are Setterstrom and Grant?"

"They're both in interview rooms, and they have been since before the murders. Inspector Conrad made himself comfortable in your office about forty minutes ago. He wasn't logged into the building when the murders took place."

"Cut them loose. They aren't going to talk today. Not with two of their co-conspirators murdered in their cells." She went into her office and slammed the door. "Conrad, if you're looking at porn on my compu-station, I'm going to kick your ass."

Todd stood up and stretched. "I was sending my mother an email."

"Whatever." She glared at him until he moved away from her desk, and then she sat down. "Setterstrom and Grant are bad cops. They helped smuggle well over a billion credits in guns out of this city when they worked in District 4."

"Concrete proof?"

"Died with St. James and Horn. All of the records concerning the smuggled weapons have been altered several times over. We aren't sure we'll ever get accurate numbers."

"That must suck." Todd sat down. "Are you telling me that someone entered your building, circumvented your security, and killed your prisoners without getting caught?"

She deserved the snotty-ass comment, but she wasn't in the mood for it. "You should be more concerned with the dirty cops in your unit. If they were dirty then, God knows they probably still are."

"I'll keep an eye on them."

"They've been released, but I will be questioning them at a later date."

"I look forward to it." He grinned

She glared at him as he left and forced herself to relax in her chair. Kyra engaged her comm-u and input the code for Abel. "Mr. Joshua. I need you to locate the advocate the city assigned to work with Evan Horn."

"Right away, Inspector. I'll be back as soon I settle Ana in her apartment. The med-tech drugged her up very nicely."

"Don't go molesting my partner while she's high."

Abel laughed softly. "I like my women awake and feisty."

She ended the call and rubbed her face. Today, she most certainly didn't feel like a cop anyone should look up to.

If Setterstrom and Grant hadn't participated in the murders of Horn and St. James, they'd certainly gotten a clue as to what would happen to them if they confessed. It was time, she thought, to talk with Benjamin Darcy on her terms. She stood up and walked to her door. Opening it, she glanced over the detectives in her unit. "Trane, where's your partner?"

"Roger's out sick."

"Fine, take Jennings with you. I want you to pick up and escort Benjamin Darcy to the station."

"Inspector Darcy?" Darren Trane asked softly.

"He isn't an inspector anymore, Detective."

He nodded. "Of course, Inspector, we'll return shortly."

\* \* \* \* \*

Abel paused in the doorway of Kyra's office and stared at her for a few seconds. She looked like she hadn't slept in days, and what he had to tell her wouldn't help. "Jessica Calhoun from the Public Defense department was killed this morning in a single-car traffic accident."

"Excuse me?"

"It happened in District 3; they haven't released any details."

"Where's the Texas Ranger?" Kyra asked softly.

"He had a conference call this morning with Senator Libby and then left the station. He hasn't called in."

"I want him accounted for immediately."

"I understand." Abel pulled her office door shut and went to his desk. The unit was very quiet and had been since he'd come back upstairs.

Kyra stood up from her chair and walked to stand at the window. The traffic below was hectic, but then, it always was. Some industrious soul had moved her vehicle into the parking garage, and a cab whisked into the place her vehicle had been. She watched as Ranger Jonas Hatch hopped out of the vehicle and looked at the station. His gaze traveled all the way up to her window, but she knew he couldn't see anything through the screened glass. At least she didn't have another dead Texas Ranger to worry about.

She turned to lean on the window seal and input Alex's code. He answered immediately. "Hey."

"How is she?" Alex asked.

"Fine. At home resting and quite drugged."

Alex was silent for a few seconds. "Do you want me to send somebody over there?"

"No. She's fine, and I'm sure Dr. Marcos will join her as soon as she can." Kyra lowered her gaze to the floor. "They killed Horn's lawyer, too."

"You can relax about Clara. I've enough men on this property that even the alligator is approaching her with caution."

"Yeah."

"Do you need me?"

*Yes.* Kyra shook her head, and then laughed softly at herself. "Well, I guess you can't see me shaking my head no."

"Are you sure?"

"No. I want you to get her out of the city, Alex." She stood away from the window seal as the door opened and Hatch entered. "I have to run. Keep me informed."

"Will do."

Sitting down at her desk, she folded her hands in front of her and stared. "Where have you been?"

"Trying to get a lead on Mitchell Libby's partner. She's presumed dead. Her mother reported her missing in July of 2147."

Kyra stared in disbelief. "How in the hell can two Texas Rangers just disappear, Hatch? I was under the impression that you people took care of your own."

He flinched and rubbed his hands down his denim-covered thighs. "I've been asking that question for an hour this morning, and I can't get a straight answer out of anyone. As far



as we can tell, Iona Burns, Libby's partner, never came near New Orleans that year. Her vehicle was found parked in her driveway, and there was no sign of struggle."

"Evan Horn and Remy St. James were interviewed this morning. They both agreed to testify about the smuggling but denied any involvement in the murders. Both men were killed after being placed in isolation cells."

"Who?"

"No clue. They came in, did what they wanted, and left little if anything behind. We only know that they weren't suicides because Ana interrupted the killer in his work. She took a blow to the head."

"She's all right?"

"Yes." Kyra nodded. "I have Ben Darcy coming in for questioning. You'll sit in."

"Sounds good."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana waved with one weak hand and shook her head. "Your brother made me lock all the locks. I have trouble with that when I'm *not* medicated."

"How do you feel?"

"Don't hurt." Ana turned and walked toward her bedroom. "Sleepy."

Desi followed along after her. Pausing in the entrance of the bedroom, she watched Ana climb back into the bed. "I'm going to work from here this afternoon. Let me know if you need anything."

Ana patted the bed. "Come sleep with me. Just for a little bit."

Desi shrugged off her jacket as she dropped her workbag on the floor. "This is probably a bad idea."

Ana smiled. "Just for a little bit."

She pulled off her shoes and dropped them on the floor by her jacket and bag. "You're very cute right now, Constable."

"Better enjoy it. I'm going to be a real bitch when this shit wears off." She laughed at that and pulled back the covers. "Come on. Just don't get any ideas about playing doctor. I expect to be fully alert and participating in the sex part of this relationship."

Desi paused with one knee on the bed. "When did you decide we had a relationship?"

"Like yesterday or something." Ana reached out and tugged on her hand. "Come here."

She slid under the covers and took in a deep breath when Ana snuggled up close to her. "I don't think I can handle you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra opened the door and walked into interrogation room one. "Hey."

Benjamin Darcy stood up immediately. "You sent cops out to my home."

"Yes, I did."

"If you needed to see me, you should have called. I would have come in on my own."

"Frankly, I don't know if I believe that. Sit down." She motioned toward Jonas. "Ranger Jonas Hatch. He's here representing the Texas Rangers in the murder of Ranger Mitchell Libby."

"Do I need an advocate?"

"It's up to you. Make sure you pick one you don't like; the last one who was in this room was murdered this morning after she agreed to represent Evan Horn in a plea deal with the DA." Kyra sat down across from him and waited until he regained his seat before continuing. "Royce Foster, Evan Horn, Remy St. James, Roger Setterstrom, and Beau Grant were smuggling guns out of this city. Gina Webb found out about it, and she was murdered. They killed Mitchell Libby and then Dane Tibideaux to cover up Webb's disappearance. I'm not sure where her partner, Todd Conrad, plays into this mix, but I think I'll find out soon enough."

"Sounds like you've got it all figured out."

"Yeah. I'm close. I'm puzzled on a few things. For instance, what role did you play in the smuggling operation? Who did the shooting? And who sent IAB a recording of Gina Webb's execution?"

"I wasn't a dirty cop."

"Your partner helped smuggle a billion credits in guns out of this city, and you knew about it."

"And if I knew?"

"You should have reported him." Kyra stood up and walked away from the table. "The thing is, I think you knew, and I also think you were way too involved to report him to the reorganization committee."

"I wasn't involved in gun smuggling or murder. Have you checked my finances?"

"You make no appearance of having a great deal of money. However, there are plenty of ways to hide money. In fact, the more money you have these days, the easier it is to hide." She paused and glanced toward Jonas Hatch before centering her gaze on Ben again. "Before Evan Horn was executed in the holding center, he told me that he knew things no one else knew. He knew, for instance, who the real brain was behind the operation. Apparently it wasn't Royce Foster."

"I wasn't involved in any of it, and I didn't know for sure if they were involved in anything."

"What about when Gina Webb disappeared?"

“Look, her own partner thought she went to New York. Inspector Baker helped her get the job. Why on earth would any of us think that she didn’t actually go?”

“Because she was dead in that goddamned safe house on Rose Street. The same safe house that all of you were in!” Kyra snagged a small remote from the table and pointed it toward the vid-panel.

Gina Webb was kneeling on the floor beside the body of Mitchell Libby. “Don’t you turn your head. Look at what the son of bitch did to her!”

Ben focused on the vid-panel and stiffened only slightly when the gun went off. “I wouldn’t have been involved in this. Not the murder of cops. Truth is that if Royce had tried to cut me in on the guns, I probably would’ve done it. Times were lean then, and I had three kids in college. The thing is, he never approached me. Kyra, you know me.”

“I thought I did.” She looked at the vid-panel. The image of Gina Webb on the floor, a bullet wound in the back of her head, was frozen there in horrific detail.

“I wasn’t involved.”

“Then who the hell was?” Kyra tossed the remote on the table and turned her back on him. She watched him move and shift in his chair in the mirror in front of her. “Todd Conrad told me that Setterstrom had a thing for Gina.”

“Yeah, he wasn’t the only one, either. Gina was a beautiful woman. Tough, but soft in all the ways that counted.” Ben sighed. “I might have trailed along after her, too, if I hadn’t been married.”

“Did Conrad hang with Foster and the others?”

“Sometimes we’d all hit the bars together. I never noticed if Conrad had something going on with them or not. Look, right after I was made inspector, Royce retired, and the others transferred out of District 4.”

“Yes, I noticed.”

“Doesn’t that tell you that I wasn’t involved? Christ, if I had been involved the set up would have been perfect.”

“Perhaps.”

“Damn it, Kyra, I trained you. You and I went into situations that could have gotten us both killed. You trusted me then.”

“And the cop I trusted wouldn’t have let his own suspicions go uninvestigated. You thought something was wrong with them, and you let them transfer out of District 4 and put it all behind them when they should have all been tossed in a fucking cell.”

“It’s easy to look back now and say that I should have done something. Things were very different around here fifteen years ago. I didn’t know who I could trust.”

“I don’t know who I can trust now,” Kyra snapped and took in a ragged breath. “You’ve been home all day?”

“Yes, until you sent your little detectives to collect me.”

She overlooked his tone and met his gaze. “St. James and Horn are dead. Someone entered this station, disabled cameras at will, stole the security footage of the cameras they couldn’t disable, and murdered them in their cells.”

“Christ.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’ll submit to truth testing.”

She looked at him, visibly startled. “Excuse me?”

“Look, you need all the goddamned help you can get. I didn’t spend nine years training your ass for a bad cop to take you out. Get me the damn truth devices, and you can ask your questions again.”

“Ben.”

“Get them, Inspector. Once we’re both satisfied that we’re playing on the same team, I’d like to help. I shouldn’t have let the past slide, and I admit that. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“You aren’t on this team anymore, Ben.” Kyra stood up from the table. “Your offer of help, while certainly endearing, does not change anything for me. I won’t be misdirected by you or anyone else.”

“You really think I’m dirty.”

“I think that you taught me not to let my feelings get in the way of my job.” Her hand went briefly to her gun, and then she looked at his face. “Royce Foster wasn’t killed in an accident, Ben. If you didn’t kill him, I would suggest you watch your back.”

“I don’t even know you anymore.”

“I’m the cop you made me.” She met his gaze without flinching.

Kyra left the room without a backward glance, barely acknowledging that Jonas followed her. “He can be cut loose, Ryan.”

Detective Ryan Jennings nodded. “Sure thing, Inspector.”

Jonas pulled the door to Kyra’s office shut and cleared his throat. “Tough, but soft in all the ways that matter.”

Kyra looked up from her p-pc and raised an eyebrow. “Yes, that’s what he said.”

“I suppose the same could be said of you ... but who would know that about you?”

“That’s none of your business, Ranger Hatch.”

He laughed softly and raised his hands. “It isn’t a personal question.” He went to Ana’s desk area and sat down in her chair. “Tough, but soft, isn’t the way any man in this unit would describe you. They probably all think you’re a hard-ass all the way down to the bottoms of your feet. But your man ... he’s a different story. He’s seen you soft ... hasn’t he?”

Kyra pressed her lips together. "That son of a bitch."

"Indeed." Jonas shrugged. "It could be an assumption on my part. We don't know what Gina Webb was like as a person."

"True." Kyra nodded and then she stood. "But Todd Conrad would know."

"Yes. He would." Jonas nodded.

"I'll go talk to him. In the meantime, I want you to find a member of the reorganization committee for me to talk to."

"Their names were never released."

Kyra pulled on her jacket. "Will that be a problem for you?"

Jonas laughed. "I don't think so."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra swished her straw around in her soda and watched as Todd Conrad entered Valteau's. He hadn't acted particularly surprised to hear from her so soon after their last parting. He waved at the waitress behind the counter before heading to her table and sliding onto the bench across from her.

"I thought you'd be tired of seeing my face by now."

She raised an eyebrow. "I am far more familiar with it than I had planned."

"What do you need from me, Inspector?"

"Describe Gina Webb to me. Don't think about it ... just the first thing that comes to mind."

"She was honest."

"Tough?"

"Yes." Todd nodded. "She worked hard to get where she was, and the job was a priority. I could tell that there were things going on in her life that made her sad."

"What do you know about her private life?"

"I didn't even know she was seeing the Tibideaux kid until I heard it a few days ago."

"Who told you?"

"I called Setterstrom and Grant into my office and asked them about their involvement in the case you were working. They both promised they had nothing to do with the murders. Of course, I didn't know about the smuggling until this morning."

"Did you believe them?"

"Not entirely. I think they both knew about the killings long before those bodies were found."

"And you still have them on the job?"

"They are both on desk duty until this matter is resolved." Todd laughed when she looked surprised. "You may be a lot of things, but I do know that you're a good cop. I suspended them shortly after I left your office this afternoon. They weren't pleased, but they haven't approached their union rep, yet."

"They'll both go down for smuggling. I'm sure IAB is already digging into my case file despite the security seal that the chief put on it." Kyra glanced down at her drink and then pushed it aside. "Did you ever notice that Gina was particularly friendly with Ben Darcy?"

"No, but a few weeks before she left, they had an altercation. I only remember it because he hit her."

"He hit her?"

"Yes." Todd swallowed. "Like she was a man. It took about six officers to pull me off of him. I dislocated his jaw."

"Good for you."

He laughed. "The department gave us both four days of suspension, and we had to go through anger management classes. Gina made me promise that I wouldn't reveal why Ben and I tangled up. Darcy told Inspector Baker that we'd argued over a bet. I went along with it."

"Do you know why they argued and why she protected him?"

"No."

"Ben described Gina as tough, but soft in all the right ways."

"I see." Todd glanced up at the waitress. "Sweet tea and the number-four special." He waited until she left and then met Kyra's gaze. "I had no idea they were fucking."

Kyra glared. "Do all men think the same?"

"Yes. It makes our meetings short and to the point."

\* \* \* \* \*

Desi stood up from the table she'd been working at and cocked her head to listen for Ana. She'd been asleep for several hours. The remnants of the p-pc that had been in Royce Foster's box covered the table in front of her. The hard-drive had been a bitch to remove.

She walked down the hall and into the bedroom. Ana lay curled into the fetal position. Sitting down on the bed, Desi brushed dark hair from Ana's forehead and sighed. "You're way too pretty for your own good."

Desi ran her finger along the line of Ana's jaw and then briefly across her lips. The buzz of Ana's door broke her free from her thoughts. She stood up and pulled the bedroom door shut as she walked toward the front door of the apartment. A quick peek through the peephole and she opened the door to Kyra.

"She's still asleep."

"I figured." Kyra shoved her hands into her pockets. "You said you were working on the p-pc in your last report."

"Yeah." Desi motioned her in and was surprised when she saw Kyra relax. "I was out of line today."

"You didn't say anything that I wasn't already thinking." Kyra pulled out a chair and sat down at the table where Desi had been working. "The hard drive?"

"I was just about to test it actually. The charging mechanism had corrupted but I don't think it damaged the hard drive." She sat down and picked up the slim hard drive. "I did, however, discover a couple of things about the unit itself. For one thing, it doesn't have a GPS monitoring chip. It also has standard market security, not cop grade."

"It didn't belong to Royce Foster."

Desi shrugged. "If it did belong to him, it was a personal unit. I'm inclined to believe that it wasn't his. For the time period this was a high-end model, and it was geared more toward personal entertainment."

"Like something a college student might have."

"Yes, exactly." Desi looked up briefly. "You think it could be Tibideaux's?"

"There wasn't one in his belongings." Kyra glanced down at the hard drive as Desi continued to put wires into it. "Whatever Dane found out got him killed."

"Yes." Desi nodded and picked up her p-pc to plug in the transfer cable. "This wouldn't have held much information. Maybe some music, a few books, and an email program."

"How long before we know?"

"Maybe ten minutes." She snagged another tool from her work bag and glanced up hesitantly. "About your former partner?"

"The bad cop or the dead one?"

Desi's mouth dropped open briefly, and she snapped it shut abruptly. "The one that was killed on the job."

"We were going off duty. He interrupted a store robbery. The perp had a pipe-bomb. The clerk behind the counter, the perp, and my partner were all killed in the blast."

"It must have been difficult."

"Even more so because we'd been lovers for months." Kyra sat back in her chair. "I haven't been involved with a fellow badge since."

Desi carefully put down the p-pc. "I see."

"Do you?" Kyra asked softly. "We all know what's brewing between you and my partner, Dr. Marcos. Fairly soon there won't be a cop in the district who doesn't know. I realize you value your privacy ... but since Ana works with me, she's going to get a lot of attention."

"I don't care if anyone knows we're involved." Desi took in a deep breath. "Did you love him?"

"No." Kyra shook her head. "I felt guilty about that for a long time. We were great partners, and our chemistry extended beyond the job. Our personal relationship blinded me to his faults. I should've realized he wouldn't back off, that he had to be the hero in every situation. His name was Stephen Conroy."

"You blamed yourself for his death?"

"No. I blame him. He was sloppy, and he got himself and that clerk killed over forty credit chips. They could've all walked out of that alive if he'd stopped and assessed the situation. The perp didn't even have a way to light the pipe-bomb. A bullet from Stephen's gun set it off."

"I know that this job is dangerous," Desi said softly. "I figured that when they issued me a weapon with my shiny badge."

"Hey. Did you guys move in while I was out?"

Desi turned and offered Ana a smile. "She lives."

"Yeah." Ana tightened the belt on her robe. "Find anything?"

"We're just about to find out." Kyra looked over her partner's face. "How do you feel?"

"Like some asshole hit me in the head." She rubbed the side of her head and then headed toward the kitchen. "When we find out who hit me, I'd like to have about ten minutes of private time to tell him how I feel about it."

"We'll work on it." Kyra focused on Desi who was looking into the kitchen. "Doctor."

She glanced toward Kyra and a blush stole across her cheeks. "Of course." Desi activated the connection between the hard drive and her p-pc. "Standard file system, and it's full."

"Anything stand out?"

Desi pursed her lips as she started opening files. "This wasn't Dane Tibideaux's."

"Then who?"

"From the looks of it, Gina Webb. Makes sense she would have turned in her official unit when she resigned from the department." Desi lifted her gaze. "She had copies of shipping manifests and had outlined the movements of most of the participants if the names on these files mean anything."

"Jonas Hatch believes that Gina and Ben Darcy were involved. Is there a file on him?"

"Yes."

"Let's see what it says first."

Desi was silent for a moment while the file loaded and then cleared her throat as Ana came back into the room and sat down at the table. "Detective Benjamin Darcy. I am unsure of his role in the operation but it stands to reason that he would be aware of his partner's



sideline activity. The reorganization committee will have to sort that out when the time comes.

"I want to believe that Ben wasn't involved in this mess with the guns ... but there are little memories now and again from the time when we were intimate that come back to me. God, how I regret that relationship. After everything I've been through, I should have known better than to get tangled up with a married man. Thankfully, all of that is behind me."

Desi closed the file and looked toward Kyra. "What did he say during the interview this afternoon?"

"That he wasn't involved. But then, he also didn't admit to having an intimate relationship with the woman, even after he watched someone blow her head off." Kyra sat down and motioned to the hard drive. "The others?"

"There are documents on Evan Horn, Roger Setterstrom, Remy St. James, and Beau Grant." Desi hesitated. "And one on Ethan Baker."

"Commander Baker?" Kyra swallowed hard. "Read it."

Desi nodded and then chewed her lip briefly while the document loaded and displayed. "Inspector Ethan Baker is the head of Major Crimes for newly formed District 4. I've always believed him to be a decent man and a good cop. His help in establishing the story that I was going to move to New York was extremely helpful.

"There is a part of me that wonders if he isn't a part of it all, and that's what has kept me from confiding in him. I can only hope that I'm wrong. I did check over his financials and didn't find anything out of the ordinary. It would be difficult, considering his wife's own personal wealth. If he was involved, it would be easy to hide the money he was making in with his wife's assets.

"Libby has investigated him as well and apparently turned up very little. We are both concerned about his involvement, of course. He will eventually be notified that I'm in the safe house on Rose Street. It's in his district. Once he knows I'm still in New Orleans ... I just hope that I didn't do the wrong thing. A part of me wishes I was in New York.

"With Sebastian Green in Texas, we are all a little more leery of the cops in New Orleans. No one knows what he is up to, and Libby has hinted that Green had done a great deal of work with the Rangers recently. At first, I didn't believe him when he said he thought Green was involved in the smuggling. It just didn't seem possible. Everyone knows that Sebastian Green is a good cop. Yet, how could the smuggling operation have existed and even thrived during the reorganization period without someone high up making sure things didn't get looked at or even noticed?"

"What is the date on that entry?"

"May 7, 2147." Desi looked at Kyra and then dropped her gaze to the screen of the pc.

“Todd Conrad?”

“Yes. She created a document with his name on May 12, 2147.” Desi busied herself opening the file and trying to ignore her own worry. “Todd Conrad has been my partner since I was transferred into Major Crimes. When he found out I was moving to New York, he was a little put out by it, but only because he didn’t want to break in a new partner. I saw him today. I’ve been stuck in this stupid house for days, and I needed some air. He was across the street coming out of an all-night pharmacy. I don’t know for sure if he recognized me, but he looked me right in the face. The last time he saw me, my hair was blonde and nearly to my waist. Cutting and dyeing it had been Libby’s idea. I wonder if it was enough.” Desi put the p-pc down. “She was betrayed by those men.”

“Betrayal like that has no remedy.” Kyra pushed her fingers through her hair. “I could bring in Setterstrom and Grant for the smuggling. They’d both probably break in a matter of hours. But whatever happened in that safe house didn’t involve them. Gina Webb may have been marked for death because of what she knew, but her murder was intensely personal. So personal that the killer couldn’t even look her in her face when he killed her.”

“Some might say that making her turn away from him was another way he demonstrated his control over her.”

“Perhaps, or maybe it demonstrates how little control he had over himself. This man told her that he loved her. We may never know if he was sincere in that, but say by chance he was. Making her turn away would’ve made it easier to kill her.” Kyra watched Ana moving around in her chair. “How do you feel?”

“I’m hungry. What does she say about Mitchell Libby?” Ana asked as she tore open a package of chips.

“There isn’t a file with his name on it. Though there is a journal.” Desi put the handheld computer down and sighed. “Look, this just got really crazy. We need to talk about this.”

“Yeah.” Kyra nodded. “There are a lot of players to work through in this. I think we’re going to discover that the smuggling operation spread throughout most of the city. The guns from District 4 wouldn’t have been enough to maintain it.”

“And it all happened underneath the reorganization committee’s nose.” Desi paused and then met Kyra’s gaze. “That’s not really possible is it?”

“We can assume that they were altering the records left and right to cover up the guns not being recycled. As for why Royce Foster changed the records before he retired, they were pushing him out of the game. He wanted to leave evidence behind that would make their lives difficult.”

“But the committee had operatives in every single station in the city. There were two hundred cops from different cities here during the height of the reorganization. How could they have moved that much contraband without a single question being raised?” Ana shook

her bag of chips and peered down into the bag. "I need meat. These veggie chips aren't going to cut it."

Kyra laughed softly. "We can assume that Mitchell Libby did ask questions. He had Gina in that safe house to protect her until he could get her in front of the reorganization committee. Somehow her killer got word that she was still in the city and in that house on Rose Street."

"Did the murders make them stop?" Ana asked out loud and then shook her head. "From what we've recovered from the recycling plant they'd been at it for at least three years. With the gun market being what it was then, especially outside the NAU ... three years would've been enough to make them all very comfortable."

"So you think they had enough discipline to let it go when things got more difficult?" Desi asked.

"Maybe not all of them." Kyra leaned over and peered into Ana's bag. "Those look disgusting."

"They're healthy." Ana looked down into the bag and then tossed it on the table in front of her. "So, the ones making everything look legit could've backed off. Forcing those doing the physical work to let go, too. Royce Foster was a planner, and he knew what he had to do make things work the way he wanted. When Darcy was promoted to inspector instead of him, he probably saw it as a chance to break free from all of it and get on with the rest of his life. Why did he keep the gun?"

"He restored records that he'd been falsifying for years just before he retired." Kyra stood up from the table and walked to the one window in the room. "It was a way to implicate the four men who had done the physical labor in District 4 if things went wrong. Nothing could be linked to him, and he'd retired a decorated officer. I doubt he ever would've been tried."

"Foster kept the gun because he wasn't the shooter."

Kyra nodded and offered her partner a smile. "Yeah. I think so."

"He had the records to hold against Setterstrom, Grant, St. James, and Horn. He kept the gun for leverage against the man or men who did the killing."

"Yes." Kyra looked out the window. "You said you loved me. That's what she said when she was on the floor in front of the man who had a gun pointed at her. *You said you loved me.*"

"Some men use those words like they mean nothing," Desi muttered.

"And others use them to draw a woman in." Kyra sat down on the ledge of the window and looked to the two of them. "To bring a woman closer or to keep a woman close."

"A man with a crush or a man she was involved with." Ana ran one hand down her face. "The bastards."

"Setterstrom or Darcy." Desi focused on Kyra. "We should bring them both in for interviews again."

"We will tomorrow." Kyra looked at her comm-u. "You guys feel up to an hour at Still Waters?"

"Yeah, let me change." Ana stood up and stretched.

Kyra watched Desi give Ana a look, and she laughed. "I'll meet you at my transport."

Desi waited until Kyra left and turned to Ana. "You should be getting some more rest."

"I'd like to get some more food and air." Ana pulled at the belt of her robe as she walked away from her. "Maybe you should come along to make sure I don't overdo."

Desi laughed and threw up her hands. "You won't always win."

Ana turned and met her gaze. "I won't always argue."

"I think I can live with that." Desi stood up and walked to her. "There's something I think we should get out of the way."

"Oh, yeah?" Ana raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. I mean, it would break the ice and then we both wouldn't be all wound up about it." Desi reached out and ran one fingertip along Ana's collarbone. "Kiss me."

"Oh." Ana's eyes widened marginally and she wet her bottom lip. "I guess that would break the ice."

"Yeah." Desi nodded; her blonde curls bounced.

Ana leaned forward thinking to brush her lips across the full sweep of Desi's. Yet the moment their lips met, she knew it wasn't going to be a soft, gentle kiss. Desi's hands curled into the fabric of Ana's robe and she moaned softly as Ana pressed her against the wall. Desi's lips parted and shuddered as Ana slipped her tongue into her mouth.

She pressed her against the wall and fisted one hand in Desi's hair as the kiss deepened. Lifting her head, Ana took a deep breath. "I should've said no."

"No, we should go." Desi rubbed her leg against Ana's. "More."

Ana nodded and pushed her fingers into Desi's hair. "Yes." She brushed her lips against Desi's again and then sank in for a taste. Her tongue slid between parted lips and she moaned softly when her invasion met with no resistance. She pulled her lips free. "I could drown in you." She let her hands drift out of Desi's hair and down her sides. "So soft. I want to put my mouth all over you."

Desi sucked in a breath and took hold of Ana's hands. "This shouldn't happen all at once. I don't want to be a novelty experience."

"I told you before ... that what I feel for you ... it isn't about you being a woman. It isn't even about sleeping with a woman." Ana kissed the slender column of Desi's throat and sighed. "It's about you. Just you."

"Okay."

Ana reluctantly released her. “Now, I’m going to go get dressed and make nice with my partner.”

“She feels pretty bad for what she said.”

“I needed to hear it.” Ana shook her head. “I certainly wasn’t taught to be so reckless.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Kyra paused and let her eyes adjust as they entered Still Waters. Alex was behind the bar, and Marcus was on stage. "I love how he retired."

Ana laughed and shook her head. "We'll grab a booth. What are you eating?"

"Get me a steak -- medium rare." Kyra watched Desi and Ana move through the crowd to an empty booth. Once they settled, she turned toward the bar. Alex motioned her toward his office and she nodded.

The narrow hall that led to his office had never seemed longer. She paused briefly at the door when he pressed up against her. "I've missed you."

Alex reached past her, opened the door, and pulled her into his arms. She turned around and wrapped her arms around him as he closed the door and leaned on it.

"You look tired." He pushed her hair back from her face with gentle fingers and sighed when she moved closer. "She won't leave."

"I didn't think she would."

"And after she finished cursing me for suggesting it, she kicked me out."

Kyra laughed and lowered her head to rest on his chest. "Christ, that old woman will be the death of me. Did she at least keep the walking mountains you called in?"

"Yeah." He rubbed her back and kissed the side of her neck. "Tell me what's wrong."

"We found Gina Webb's p-pc with some things that Royce Foster kept in a safety deposit box. She'd had an affair with Ben Darcy." She moved away from him as she spoke. "I'm the cop I am because of Ben Darcy. And if you'd asked me yesterday what I thought of him, I would have told you that I trusted him with my life."

"And now?"

"I know he was involved in the gun smuggling, and he had more reason to kill her than anyone else. Sure, the others would've felt threatened by what she knew and what she was going to do with that knowledge. But her murder was personal, so personal that when he was done he lured her twenty-two-year-old lover into that house and killed him, too."

"Lured?"

"Gina wouldn't have contacted Dane. She knew how much danger she was in, and she loved him."

"How do you know?" Alex asked softly.

"She kept his baby." Kyra looked to him. "In the recording, the whole time she was trying to keep him from pulling that trigger ... all I could think was that it was more for her baby than for her. Gina Webb agreed to testify about the smuggling because she wanted a better world for her son."

"And how does that make you feel?"

"It makes me want to kill Ben Darcy. When I entered that interrogation room today -- I knew he was responsible. The arrogant son of bitch murdered all of them. I don't know if he pulled the trigger on Libby, but it was done on his order. In the end, only his needs mattered."

"You spent a lot of years under the command of Benjamin Darcy." Alex watched her pace in front of him for a moment. "You feel betrayed by him."

"Any decent cop would." She turned to him; saw the anger lingering in his eyes. "Promise me you'll let me handle this."

"I'd like to rip the man to pieces, but as long as this ends with him in a jail cell, I'll let you handle it."

"And if I can't put in him in a cell?"

"I'll put him in the ground."

"Alex."

"The man ripped my aunt's heart apart, twice. He murdered her son and her grandchild. I assure you if you don't put the son of a bitch out of my reach, I'll kill him."

"I guess we'll deal with that when the time comes."

"Relax, Kyra, I'd never get your playground dirty. Besides, there wouldn't be much of a body left." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Does it bother you?"

"That you've killed more people than you can count?" Kyra asked softly. "Yes, but not as much as it bothers you. The fact that it bothers you is what keeps me in the picture."

"I like you in my picture, and I trust that before this is all over you'll have Dane's killer in a very small place for a very long time. Now, who do you think killed Horn and St. James?"

"It would have been very easy for Ben. He knows the station house in District 4 inside and out." She walked to the small couch and sat down. "But I don't think it was him. In fact, I'm beginning to think that there were more big players than I thought."

"Who?"

"Sebastian Green for one. He would've been in a position on the committee to help hide the operation. He brought me that list ... full of dirty cops because he wanted me to latch on to the smaller players in the operation. He figured that I'd get so distracted by a list of bad cops that the murders wouldn't be my focus."

"Foolish mistake on his part."

"Yes." Kyra nodded. "He would've run the plan by Ben Darcy. Ben would've known that it wouldn't work, yet he let Green bring the list anyway."

"He knew he wasn't on the list. Didn't think you'd make the connection to him."

"Because he didn't know I had the gun." Kyra murmured. "Still, neither Darcy nor Green killed Horn and St. James."

"You have a good idea who?"

"Yes." Kyra looked to him. "But I'm not ready to say it yet."

Alex walked to the couch and sat down beside her. "What say you and I find some out of the way place with a bed and spend a week there when this is all over?"

Kyra laughed and leaned on his shoulder. "Sounds like a plan."

He tugged at her gently and she willingly slid into his lap. "I need you to promise me that you aren't going to take any chances with this."

"That's a pretty hefty promise to make." She met his gaze and nodded. "I won't take any unnecessary chances."

He laughed softly. "God, you frustrate me." Cupping the back of her head, he pulled her closer and kissed her mouth gently.

"But I satisfy you, too."

"Yes." He nodded. "In ways I never thought possible. I haven't been fair to you."

"Well, you're a man." She laughed softly when his mouth dropped open briefly. "I'm a grown up, Alex. I don't expect the world to be fair."

"I pushed you into a relationship when I wasn't even sure I could handle one."

"That's only because you wanted to stake out your territory." She turned and positioned herself astride his thighs. "But I'm here, and I won't be going anywhere; that's a promise."

He ran his hands up her thighs and moved under her, restless. "Are you going to go home and rest after you eat?"

"Yeah. I don't even know when I slept last." She leaned into him.



“Good.” Alex pulled her closer and sucked in a breath. “Maybe you’ll be rested enough to indulge in a few hours of mindless fornication later on.”

“Oh, I think so.” She laughed softly and curled against him. “I don’t want them involved in what’s going to come next.”

“Your partner and the tiny doctor can make their own decisions.” Alex rubbed her back gently. “I kind of like knowing you have those two at your back. They don’t strike me as the kind to back down.”

“Clara calls them my bitch cop squad.” She lifted her head. “I asked Ranger Hatch to hack the sealed files of the reorganization committee.”

“This Texas Ranger ... do you think you can trust him?”

“I think he’s playing his own game here, but I don’t think he’s out to do anything but find out who killed Mitchell Libby.” She sat back on his thighs. “No more than what I want to do for Gina and Dane.”

Alex closed his eyes briefly. “My mother and aunt are making the baby a little blanket. I told them that I could go buy one ... but they insisted that he deserved something special. They are making it out of Dane’s old clothes.”

“Christ.” Kyra rubbed her face and slid off his lap. “I can’t think about him without my heart hurting. Of all the people who died in this bullshit ... I think that baby will haunt me for the rest of my life.”

“I understand.” He stood up and walked to his desk.

“I don’t have any fucking proof,” she whispered softly. “I can tie Setterstrom and Grant to the gun smuggling because of the recycling evidence, but I don’t want to bring either of them in until I know who did the shooting. If I handle this wrong, they could get a few years in a government prison and then be out to live the rest of their lives. There is nothing to connect Ben Darcy to this mess. The vid-recording of Gina’s murder was heavily doctored. I doubt we’ll ever get a legitimate voice print off the killer.”

“And if you approach the wrong target ... it could all fall apart.”

“Yes. Evan Horn was the weak link in this, and now he’s dead. What he knew was so damn important that whoever the hell was pulling the strings in the smuggling operation risked murdering him in a holding cell. I have a request in to a judge to search his home, but I imagine his wife is going to have a lot to say about that.” Kyra crossed her arms over her breasts. “I need to eat and make nice with Ana.”

“You lost your temper with her?”

“I rode her ass a little for not following procedure. It was the right thing to do, but our partnership is new ... hell, almost as new as you and me.”

“Must be hell juggling all of these new relationships.”

Kyra laughed. “It makes life interesting.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Abel Joshua slid into the booth beside his sister and sighed. "I read through the files you sent from Webb's p-pc. She barely scratched the surface." He paused as he took off his jacket. "Jonas has been sending me files for the last hour. Both from the reorganization committee and from Texas. Hatch's partner found a copy of Libby's notes mixed in with his partner, Iona Burns's, personal possessions that were logged and filed as evidence during her disappearance. The Rangers made note of the material and forwarded a copy of it to Sebastian Green so that he could take it back to the committee. There are no records of the committee ever receiving Libby's case notes from Green.

"I'm not sure how Libby planned to use Gina's testimony, but she was more like icing on his cake. Since he sent his case notes out of the city to his partner, he must have realized that there was something in play that could get him killed." He looked around the bar again. "This place certainly is cop heavy in clientele."

"Yeah." Ana nodded. "I guess if Alex gets tired of it, he'll let the inspector know." She paused and then focused on him. "Is there anything solid?"

"No. Just very detailed observations and a few speculations. I have a feeling the real evidence was destroyed a long time ago. Their financial records are clean as far back as the computer records can go. If there were ever any holes, they've long since been plugged up."

"Why did Royce Foster put those recycling records back in the system?" Desi paused and then flushed when she realized they were both focused intently on her. "He knew we would be able to trace the alterations back to him."

"The information is identical to what was on Gina Webb's p-pc. In fact, he probably used the records she'd found to fill in the holes in his knowledge of the operation. There's no way to know if those records are accurate at all. But he did put up security making it impossible for the records to be altered again without the city controller's office being notified." Abel shrugged. "The inspector knows that. We'll never know for sure how many weapons they smuggled out of this city."

"She doesn't care about the smuggling, at least not right now. She wants the man that pulled the trigger." Ana sighed and then looked up to meet Abel's gaze. "You know."

"Yeah. She has all of the smuggling records marked to be turned over to Internal Affairs once the murders are resolved."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Looks like your food should be out."

"God, I hope so. I could eat a cow." Kyra offered him a grin and left him at the bar. The crowd was moving to the music, and she chanced a glance to Marcus who was singing about a woman who'd done him wrong.

Shrugging out of her jacket, she moved past a large group of people in the process of abandoning their table in favor of the dance floor. There was a rush of activity behind her. She turned, dropped her jacket, and pulled her weapon in one smooth move. The blue laser of her weapon danced briefly on Roger Setterstrom's forehead. The hum of the weapon engaging seemed to vibrate out around her as the music and the dancing ground to a halt.

Kyra took a deep breath as she pointed the weapon down to the floor. "Alex."

Alex tightened his hold on Roger Setterstrom and the eight-inch knife he had at the man's throat. "Inspector."

"You're holding a knife on a police officer."

"I'm holding a knife on a piece of shit coward who was going to put this knife in your back." His hold tightened on Setterstrom, whose feet jerked when he left the floor. "Your name?"

"Detective Roger Setterstrom." Roger struggled against him, but dangling nearly a foot off the floor left him little purchase to free himself.

"Let me tell you something, Detective Setterstrom. You're in my place, and in case you're unaware of it, you just tried to put this ridiculous excuse for a weapon in my woman."

"I'm a cop."

"Right now you're a man in my place who tried to attack what's mine." Alex's gaze flicked to Kyra, who looked torn between fury and fascination. "You come near her again and don't manage to get arrested for it, I will hunt you down and skin you alive." He released him abruptly and watched with cool eyes as Setterstrom caught hold of an empty table to steady himself.

Alex turned and threw the knife. It slammed into the middle of the table that Setterstrom had staggered away from. "The lot of you can get the fuck out of my place. Now."

Kyra nodded toward Setterstrom as his friends headed for the door. "Constable Keller, take this asshole in for the attempted murder of a police officer and being a pain in my ass."

The young constable jumped up from his seat a few tables away and another uniform followed suit. "Right away, Inspector."

She watched in silence as the uniformed officers restrained Setterstrom and dragged him from the bar. Once the front door shut, she looked to Alex. "Say, how do you feel about my cops coming here all the time?"

"*Your* cops are welcome."

Kyra nodded and watched him stalk toward the bar. "Marcus, why don't you play something dirty?"

Marcus laughed and motioned to the band. "You heard the lady."

She put her weapon away as the music started up again and turned to look at her partner. "That'd better not be my steak."

Ana shook her head. "I had them keep yours until you came out. Figured you wouldn't want your bloody cow cold."

She slid into the bench and put shaking hands down on the table. The fact that someone had just made an attempt on her life was starting to sink in. "Christ."

"That part about his woman was really hot."

Kyra looked up and met Desi's gaze. "I was thinking I might have to kick his ass for it."

Desi smiled and shrugged. "I'm thinking that it should be a good time either way."

"Alex calls you the tiny doctor."

"That's okay. I call him the big black warrior." Desi turned her attention to her food.

"I feel it's my duty to point out that there still hasn't been a law passed that would make being a pain in your ass specifically a crime." Ana offered Kyra a wrapped set of silverware. "Here comes your food."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I was surprised that he didn't drop dead on the floor a few seconds after you grabbed him."

Alex's gaze moved to the open doorway of his office where his brother now lounged. "It was very tempting."

"It would have made things difficult for her."

"Which is why the little bastard isn't waiting to be carted out of here in a body bag." Alex focused on the untouched glass of scotch in his hand. "I've never felt this way about a woman before. Her job is going to be the death of me."

Marcus came fully into the office and pulled the door shut. "She certainly isn't the sort of woman I imagined you hooking up with on a permanent basis. Still, I understand the attraction."

"Yeah."

"And she looks damn fine all in a temper. Do *not* doubt that she's furious with you."

"Yeah. I was something of a barbarian out there." Alex stood up from the couch and went to his desk. "She can't expect me to be anything less than what I am."

"And what are you?" Marcus asked as he sat down on the couch.

"I'm a man who's killed so many people that I can't even give you a legitimate estimate. The first time I took a life, I was sick over it. The last time I took a life, my pulse didn't even elevate. I am what the NAU made me."

"You make it sound like they took your heart out."

"No." Alex shook his head. "They just damaged my soul enough that in the end the lives of those strangers meant nothing to me. I've spent two years trying to get past it, and tonight it rushed against me so fast that for a scant second, I could have killed that man."

"You would have been within your rights."

"I doubt the inspector would agree."

"Yeah, well, she's a woman." Marcus picked up the scotch that Alex had abandoned and downed the contents. "Her partner and the tiny doctor hooking up?"

"Apparently."

"Christ, that's hot. I wonder if they'd let me come over to their house to play." Marcus grinned and opened the office door to leave. "I'll take care of the bar. Maybe you should go home."

"Yeah." Alex nodded.

"Would you consider this a strategic retreat?"

He supposed it was, but he didn't say anything as Marcus left. Alex pulled on his jacket; he figured he should go home, but the moment he was outside, he headed for her apartment.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Nothing usable?"

"Nothing." Abel shook his head. "It looks like there should be something else to go along with all of the observations he made. I think there is another mini-disc out there somewhere. Several times he refers to financial records he'd collected, video footage, and still images."

Kyra nodded. "Yeah. When did he arrive?"

"January of 2147. Libby approached the reorganization committee about several thousand weapons he'd confiscated in Houston, Texas. I checked with the Rangers, and the weapons were destroyed years ago. However, they still have the serial numbers and ballistic fingerprints on them. They will be forwarding a report to you in the next twenty-four hours on that front." He paused. "I'd like a permit to carry a weapon."

"I can get you a temporary permit for a lethal weapon, but if you want to carry one full-time, you'll have to go through the academy training and get a badge. If that happens, the bastards in SWAT will snatch you right out of my hand." Kyra glared at him briefly and then sighed. "I'll clear the permit tomorrow."

"Don't worry, Inspector. I won't let SWAT snatch me. I prefer to work around a bunch of good-looking women. The ladies in District 4 are plenty hot enough for me." He grinned when all three of them glared. "You're a bad influence on these two."

"The smuggling evidence is circumstantial, but it's enough to pull in Setterstrom and Grant. With Setterstrom being stupid enough to get himself arrested tonight ... he'll be really eager to talk when he wakes up in the morning."

"Are you going to press charges?"

"Absolutely." Kyra looked down at her steak as she nodded. "If he'd managed to stick that thing in me, I would have been way more pissed than I am."

"You'd likely be dead," Abel muttered.

Since Kyra liked to consider herself invincible, she glared at him again. "Whatever Evan Horn had to tell me was so important that it got two other people killed. What Remy St. James had to say wasn't all that important; it would have been hard to prove even with his records. We have the smuggling evidence ..." She glanced around the bar then and sighed. "We can't talk about this here."

"Maybe you should cut it off for a while. Dealing with all of this murder and betrayal is bad for digestion." Ana raised an eyebrow when her partner shook her head.

"It was a cold case before today," Kyra said softly. "I thought I had time to maneuver the players into position. There are two men and an innocent woman in the city morgue. They were murdered while in my custody, and that isn't something I can just cut off."

"Clara is under constant guard, and frankly, at this point the only people the bad guys are putting down are the other bad guys." Abel rested against the booth and shrugged. "That may mess with your sense of justice, Inspector, but there it is. The only dead people in this case that deserve your attention are the ones killed fifteen years ago and that unfortunate young advocate."

"Murder, no matter the circumstances, is unacceptable."

"There're times when murder isn't only acceptable, it's justified." Abel said evenly. "Having Horn and St. James rot in a cell would have soothed your ego. You feel betrayed by these men, and we're all a little afraid that the betrayal goes a lot deeper and a lot higher than anyone could have thought. Libby named men who're still working in the city government as co-conspirators in the gun-smuggling operation. The four who moved guns out of District 4 weren't the only ones doing it, and the way Libby figured it out was astounding. These men and women smuggled weapons for years. What guns weren't shipped out of state went right back out on the street without anyone but them knowing."

"And those men and women would do anything to keep their past a secret." Kyra put down her silverware. "You're right. Bad cops do make me furious and even a little hurt. When I accepted my first badge, I took an oath to serve and to protect the people of this city. Every cop in this city did, and it sickens me that their word could mean so little. So, yes, I wanted them all in jail cells, but there's going to come a time when I may have to put a few of them in the ground. I can live with that. What I can't live with is my failure to protect those two men that I had arrested and put in holding. I did exactly what every cop in this

city would expect. You don't put bad cops in general population cages. You don't house bad cops together. By following procedure, I set them up to be murdered."

"That wasn't your intent."

"It's what every goddamned cop in this room probably thinks." She glanced at Desi and Ana who were glaring. "You aren't *goddamned* cops; you're just cops. And stop giving me that look. I invented it -- it doesn't phase me."

"I think Ana's right." Desi grinned when Kyra focused on her. "If you can't get the rest you need, you could at least go home and take a ride on that big black warrior of yours."

Kyra stared for a moment in shock and then started to laugh. "Dr. Marcos, I sincerely don't know what I'm going to do with you."

"It's best if you just stand back and watch the show." Abel stood. "How about I walk you home, Inspector?"

She nodded and stood up as well. "Ana, take my transport. Just don't forget to pick me up in the morning." Turning, she stared pointedly at Ana. "No hovering."

Abel nodded gently to the bouncer at the door and pulled on his jacket. "That thing earlier about the police academy ... I'll think about it."

"I'd assumed you already were."

"Here and there. I'm not ready to put on another uniform. Maybe I won't ever be." He shoved his hands in his pockets as they walked down the sidewalk. "You should know, I'm already carrying my service piece."

"Its configuration?"

"Civil."

"Abel." She turned and stared at him. "Are you serious? The Air Force discharged you with it?"

"It's my personal weapon, and I was instructed to see that it was reconfigured when I left the base. I chose not to do it."

"Why?"

"Because self-defense pellets and stun guns wouldn't even slow down the kind of people that might one day come knocking on my door." He checked traffic and then urged her across the street. "There's a reason cops still carry lethal weapons, Inspector."

"There isn't nanotech out there that can stop a hole, at least in the short term." Kyra pressed her thumb against her building's recently installed security panel and nodded.

"Okay. Just don't make a mess for me to clean up. I'll get the permit done first thing in the morning, and then I want you down in the gun range to qualify. I can assume the Air Force taught you how to use that thing."

"You can."

“Good.”

Abel nodded and stayed where he was until the locks engaged. After a few seconds he turned back toward the bar and walked across the street.

Kyra dropped her jacket, weapons holster, and workbag on the couch as she passed by. Alex was at the kitchen table on his portable compu-station. The station, like the man, had become something of a constant in her apartment. “You threatened to kill a cop tonight.”

Alex looked up and rested back against the chair. “It was more like a promise.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I know.”

“I don’t need to be rescued and tossed over your shoulder.”

“I don’t recall tossing you over my shoulder.” He stood up and looked her over. “I’m ashamed that I neglected such an integral part of my barbaric performance.”

Kyra took a step back and then blushed. She could hardly believe she’d actually backed up. “I’m armed.”

“I noticed.”

“I could kick your ass.”

“Baby.” Alex shook his head. “You’re a strong and incredible woman, but you couldn’t kick my ass.”

“I could if I put a few holes in you first.” She raised an eyebrow when he advanced. “I’m angry with you.”

“You’ll get over it.”

“Alex.”

“Come here.” He reached out and slid his hand around her shoulder and into her hair. “You’ll have to forgive me, Inspector, but seeing him come at you like that ...”

“I know.” Kyra nodded. Her breath caught a little bit when he swept her up in his arms. “We should talk.”

“Yeah, probably.”

She swung her feet a little. “Maybe after sex.”

“Everything is better after sex.” He walked down the small hall that led to her bedroom. “You’re important to me, and while I can’t fight all of your battles, I won’t ever stand by and let you handle things on your own when I’m around. No man could.”

“I get that.”

He tossed her on the bed and looked her over. “Good.”

Kyra moved to her knees and pulled her fitted tank top from leather pants. “Dr. Marcos told me to go home and take a ride on my big black warrior.”



"Well, I suppose she can call me that, since I call her the tiny doctor." He watched with interest as she tossed the shirt aside and ran her hands gently over her bare breasts. "I still have a lot of adrenaline moving around in my blood. If you keep that up ... I won't be responsible for my actions."

"I can take anything you can give." She held out a hand when he reached out for her. "You'll tear off my buttons and that would be unacceptable. It's obscene how much real buttons cost."

He watched with hooded eyes as she unbuttoned her pants. "You're teasing me."

"You still have all of your clothes on."

Alex yanked his shirt from his jeans and pulled it over his head in one swift motion. His boots and pants quickly followed before he reached out for her. Deftly, he pulled her boots off and tossed them aside. "Come here."

Kyra pushed her pants down to her ankles and grinned when he pulled them free. He snagged one ankle and pulled her until she sat on the edge of the bed. "You look positively feral."

"Lady, you have no idea."

He pushed his hands into her hair, covered her mouth with his, and pulled her up off the bed. Alex groaned into her mouth when she eagerly wrapped her legs around his waist. His cock, thick and throbbing, pressed between the firm muscles of their bellies. When the flesh-to-flesh contact was no longer enough, he laid her out on the bed, his mouth latching onto the peak of one firm breast as he covered her.

She arched against his mouth and spread her legs wider as he pushed one knee between them. Running her hands across his shoulders, Kyra pulled at him and groaned when his cock slid against her labia. Planting her feet flat on the mattress, she lifted her hips against his, urging him silently to give them what they both needed.

"Alex." His name came out in a rushed whisper as his teeth grazed her nipple.

"Not this time," he murmured as he lifted his head. "You're mine, and I'm going to enjoy you at my leisure."

"I don't belong to anyone." She gasped softly when he grabbed both of her arms at the wrist, lifted them above her head, and held them firmly against the bed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm correcting you." Holding her hands firmly, he slid his free hand down the length of her body as he moved to rest on the bed beside her. "Everything you are ... everything you will be ... belongs to me."

"You are by far the most arrogant man I've ever known." She bit down on her bottom lip as his large, blunt fingers slipped between the lips of her sex and brushed roughly against her clit. "I'm not *in* to being dominated."

“Oh, really?” he asked softly against her slightly parted lips. “Your body is telling me an entirely different thing.” Her hips arched against his hand as he pushed one finger into her. “Tell me what you need.”

She closed her eyes and turned her face against his shoulder as he dipped a second finger into her. “Don’t you know?”

“I want you to say it.”

“Is this gun envy or something?” she asked softly. “I’ve known plenty of men who can’t deal with dating a cop.”

“I have no problems with what you do, and I’ve got a much bigger gun than you.”

“Is that so?”

“Absolutely.” He thrust his fingers into her. “Maybe if you’re lucky, I’ll let you play with it.” He pressed his cock against her hip and chuckled when she tried to turn toward him. “Tell me.”

“No.”

He released her hands abruptly and moved down her body. Clasp large hands on her hips, he pressed her to the bed and nuzzled against the damp flesh of her sex with his lips. Alex thrust his tongue against her clit and tightened his grip on her hips when she tried to pull free. Her hands drifted briefly over the back of his head, and as he pushed the tip of his tongue into her, she came.

A soft sob of unexpected pleasure burst from her mouth. “I need you inside me.”

“What do you want?” Alex asked softly as he trailed a soft kisses from her hipbone to the rigid tip of her left breast. “Tell me.”

“I want you to fuck me.” Her hands gripped at his shoulders. “Fuck me.”

“Then say it.”

Kyra pressed her feet against the bed as he pushed the head of his cock into her. “I belong to you.”

He slid into her without pause, stopping only when buried to the hilt. “Again.”

“I belong to you.” Her nails dug into his shoulder blades. “Just you.”

“How do you want it?”

His silky question sent a shiver down her back. “Hard. Make it hurt.”

## Chapter Fifteen

“I think you’re tempted to let that bastard from last night walk.”

Kyra pulled on her holster and met Alex’s gaze in the mirror. “Yes, but not for the reason you think. Setterstrom could be another weak link in the chain. I don’t know what he knows, but I’m certainly going to try to find out. He tried to hurt me last night because he was drunk and angry. A lot of cops in this city are going to blame me for the deaths of Evan Horn and Remy St. James. The fact that they were no longer cops doesn’t matter.

“They were murdered in my custody. They were in my custody because I believed they were involved in the murder of your cousin. Your performance last night probably cemented a lot of suspicions. Do you know how it’s going to look to people who don’t know me?”

“They’ll think you’re trying to avenge Dane’s death on my behalf.”

“Yes.”

“Are you?”

“No.” She hooked her p-pc to her belt and strapped her comm-u onto her wrist before picking up the comm-u earpiece. “If I get revenge for anyone, it will be Clara. I owe somebody a kick in the face and not just for what they did to her son fifteen years ago. No one picks on old women in my district.”

“So, what have you learned?”

“Gina Webb knew that the four cops were running guns, and she suspected that Benjamin Darcy and perhaps Ethan Baker were involved with the operation. She knew that Royce Foster was running the operation on the work level. He handpicked the cops who were doing the gun-running work in District 4.”

“And Gina Webb was going to testify about all of it.”

"She only knew for sure about Grant and Setterstrom. How, I don't know. We did find out that her partner, Todd Conrad, had seen her after she was supposed to have left town. Whether he recognized her or realized what purpose she had in that safe house ... we don't know. I'll be interviewing him today." Kyra winced briefly when her comm-u went off and engaged it with a punch of her thumb. "Go ahead."

"We're waiting, and we didn't even hover on the way over here."

She smiled briefly at Ana's chipper tone. "Did you girls go home and play house last night?"

Ana gasped and then laughed softly. "Actually, no. Come on, we got you chocolate espresso, but I can't guarantee it'll be hot if you don't climb off that man and come down here."

Alex watched Kyra blush and laughed when she closed the call. "I guess she got you back for that playing house thing?"

"Yeah." She pulled her jacket on and looked at him. "I'll be careful."

"I'll worry." He went to her and pulled her close, inhaling the soft hint of perfume she wore and the distinct smell of leather. "I don't know how I got so lucky."

"Are you kidding?" She glanced up at him and grinned. "Do you know how long a woman has to search to find a man who actually is hung like a horse? I'm the lucky one."

He laughed and pulled her in for a kiss. "If I wasn't supremely arrogant and sure of myself, I'd think you were using me for my dick."

"I love everything about you." She touched his face and sighed. "Come on, before one of them drinks my espresso."

The walk down to the front of her building didn't give him a whole lot of time to think about what he wanted to say. When she opened the door, he snagged her arm and pulled her back. "Wait."

Kyra turned to him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He touched her cheek with the tips of his fingers and sighed. "I love you."

She laid her head against his chest and took in a deep breath. "How in the hell am I supposed to work after that?"

"You'll just have to make do." He ran his hand down her back. "You're everything I ever wanted, Kyra. Everything I thought I'd never be able to hold onto."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm starting to understand that."

She stepped back from him and ran her hands through her hair. "Christ, you sure know how to knock a woman off her stride."

"It's only fair. Just looking at you flips my world around backward." He laughed when she glared at him. "Why don't you go kick some ass, and we'll finish this discussion tonight?"

"Yeah." She nodded, pushed open the door, and smiled at the sight of her big, shiny black transport.

"Get your ass off my ride, Marcos."

Desi laughed and slid off the hood of the vehicle. "You didn't use the doctor part. Does that mean I'm in trouble?"

Alex laughed softly and watched the young woman who probably had to pray daily to be five foot two scramble into the back seat. "I doubt she damaged it."

Kyra turned to him and grinned. "I think I keep her around because she's so cute."

"Yeah. I'm beginning to think so, too." He touched her shoulder and frowned. "Wait."

"What?" Kyra glanced around the nearly empty street and then focused on him. "Is something wrong?"

The thin red line of a laser sight bounced off her a few seconds later, and Alex moved. He barely acknowledged the impact of the first bullet as he pushed Kyra into the apartment building. The second hit sent them both to the ground.

Kyra struggled to pull Alex completely free of the doorway as both Desi and Ana pushed in. On her knees, she ripped open Alex's shirt as the glass window in the front door of her apartment building was shattered by the impact of another bullet.

She barely glanced up as she heard Ana calling for backup and a med-tech team.

"What did you do?" She demanded as she found the first exit wound. The flesh of his shoulder was ripped open at the place where the bullet had left him and entered her. The ache in her arm was hot but tolerable. The second bullet hadn't exited.

"It's all right."

"The hell it is." Kyra snapped. "How could you fucking do this?"

"I told you."

"Stopping a guy with a knife and taking a fucking bullet for me are two entirely different things!" She met his gaze. "Are your bots activated?"

"Yes." He coughed and closed his eyes briefly.

"Are they ever!" Desi murmured in awe as she stared at the screen of the scanner. "I haven't seen battle nanotech like this in anyone."

"It serves." Alex winced and closed his eyes briefly.

"The bullet punctured his lung," Desi whispered as she pulled a syringe out of her med-kit. "I have an injection of stasis bots."

"Those are for cops," Alex whispered. "I'm cool. Give them to her."

"I don't need them." Kyra struggled out of her jacket and put it under his head. "Give them to him."

"Inspector, you're bleeding." Desi glanced over the wound in Kyra's arm; the jagged flesh made her stomach clench. "They're using shatter ammunition."

"Give him the goddamned bots!" Kyra snapped.

Desi jerked her gaze to Kyra's face, saw the desperation there, and nodded abruptly. She pressed the syringe against Alex's arm. The hiss of the bots injecting echoed through the nearly silent foyer. "Ana, I'm going to need your kit for the inspector's arm. I don't have enough Nuskin bandages for them both."

Ana shook her head. "I left my kit in the transport."

"No one goes out that door until we have backup," Kyra snapped. She turned back to Alex and caught his face with her hand. "Hey, look at me."

"I got this." Alex glanced briefly at Desi, who was fitting a Nuskin bandage to his chest wound. "I've suffered worse, Kyra."

"This isn't a war zone." She touched his lips with the tips of her fingers when he returned his gaze to her. "I would've never asked for this from you."

"I know." He closed his eyes briefly and coughed roughly.

Ana unbuckled her utility belt and then pulled her uniform shirt out of her pants. She unbuttoned it quickly and tugged it off, leaving her in a thin t-shirt. "Use this."

Desi pulled a knife free from Ana's abandoned utilities and started to cut the shirt. "Did you get your new bots, Inspector?"

"Yes." Kyra nodded. "They aren't putting him out."

"They will," Alex whispered. "Stasis bots don't work on me the way they work on you."

"They'll help?"

"Yes." Alex nodded. "I'm going to go to sleep soon, Kyra."

"It's okay. I'll take care of everything." She bit down on her lip when Desi started pressing on her arm. "Tell me what you need."

"You'll need to contact a man named Reginald Craig. He's a bioengineer in the Washington Dome. He'll come for me."

"Okay." She leaned down and placed a soft kiss on his mouth. "I'll make sure he gets here."

"I love you."

"I love you." Kyra sucked in a breath and watched in silence as the stasis nanobots finally won their battle. His breathing slowed, and his eyes glazed over. "Where are the fucking med-techs?"

"On their way. I have a SWAT team dropping down on the two buildings across the street from us. I'm fairly certain the shooter is or was on one of them."

She nodded. "Desi, get on the comm-u and find the man he was talking about. I don't care how you do it, but I want him in this city in the next two hours. Ana, find his brother." She glanced at Desi, who was tying off the makeshift bandage on her arm. "That barely hurts now."

"That's because I gave you a sleeper," Desi responded. "You can kick my ass later."

"You bitch," Kyra snapped and then promptly passed out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana stood with her arms crossed over her breasts watching in silence as the emergency doctor pulled the bullet out of her partner's arm. "I need her up and functioning in the next hour."

"The bullet hit the bone; she's going to be out for hours."

"She's going to be awake and walking in an hour, Dr. Wilbanks," Ana repeated. "If she isn't, when she finally wakes up, she's likely to kill you."

"It was her man rushed into surgery?"

"Yes."

"I see her on the vid-panel a lot." He shook his head as he picked up a slim healing wand. "I can knit the bone but she's going to hurt like hell when she wakes up."

"It won't matter to her." Ana glanced up briefly when the door opened, and Desi hurried in. "Well?"

"I put Jonas Hatch on the surgery wing along with Detective Jennings. No one's getting past them." Desi moved closer to the doctor and peered around him to Kyra's wound. "Good. Good. Once we wake her up, we'll want to give her a lot of room."

"You knocked her out?" Wilbanks asked as he continued to work.

"Yes."

"You look rather charming. I have a good friend who's a plastic surgeon."

Desi laughed softly and shook her head. "She'll get over it."

"Did you find the man he talked about?"

"Yes. I had him hustled onto a jet twenty minutes ago. Abel is going to meet him at the transport center and bring him directly here. Once he found out that it was about Alex he stopped arguing."

"Good."

"Inspector Givens is working the crime scene. She told me to tell Kyra that she would handle this until we know ..." Desi paused and shook her head. "It's bad, Ana. The bullet that lodged into his lung exploded on impact. There are pieces in his heart and the lung collapsed."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra woke abruptly, her gaze darting around the room until she settled on Ana.  
“Alex?”

“In surgery. The man he asked for has landed at the transport center, and Abel is bringing him here.” Ana helped her sit up. “Inspector Liz Givens is working the scene, and Desi is observing Alex’s surgery. She also put Detective Jennings and Ranger Hatch on guard duty outside of the surgery center.”

“My arm?”

“The bullet fractured your humerus, but it was repaired. It’s probably going to hurt like hell for a while. The doctor wanted to keep you knocked out.”

“Where’s your uniform shirt?”

“Desi used it to dress your arm.”

Kyra swung her legs around so that she could sit on the side of the bed and rotated her shoulder. “Yeah, this hurts like a son of a bitch.”

“If you think you can stand, we can go upstairs to the observation room.”

“Marcus?”

“His family is here, including Clara.”

Kyra slid off the bed and grimaced at the weakness in her knees. “When Alex gets better, I’m going to kick his ass.”

“For saving your life?” Ana asked softly. “You and I both know that you would’ve had no chance of surviving. The bastard used shatter-rounds.”

“Has there been any word on who it was?”

“No. The shooter was long gone by the time backup arrived. The crime-scene techs have identified his location based on bullet trajectory. The asshole didn’t even bother to pick up the spent shells.”

“Any prints?”

“No prints, no DNA.”

Kyra glanced around the small room and then focused on Ana. “You’re wearing my gun.”

“Yeah. The med-tech wanted to confiscate it.” Ana shrugged out of the weapon harness. “Let me help.”

“I’m not an invalid.”

“Humor me.” Ana motioned her to turn around. She didn’t miss the hiss of pain from Kyra as the weapon harness settled on her shoulder. “You don’t need it.”



"Yes, I do." She touched her badge briefly, still secure on her belt, and pressed her lips together. "Where is Alex?"

"On the fifth floor. We've had the surgery suite isolated so that only authorized personnel can enter. I didn't want to take any chances. We don't know for sure that he wasn't the target. I imagine what he did to Setterstrom last night pissed off a few people."

"What about Setterstrom?"

"He's alive and well. I had him transferred to a high security cell at Police Plaza. Only you and the chief of the police have access to him."

"Commander Baker?"

"He's outside waiting for you." Ana bit down on her lip. "I didn't want anyone near you until you were on your feet."

Kyra leaned against the bed briefly. "Why?"

"Because there are things happening all around us, and I don't trust any cop right now who had a badge fifteen years ago." Ana shook her head. "I can't explain it."

"You don't need to. I want to go upstairs." Kyra straightened up from the bed and looked toward the door. "Don't you dare let me pass out."

"Okay."

"And I'm kicking your girlfriend's ass."

"We aren't there yet."

"I'm kicking her ass anyway." Kyra met her commander's gaze the moment Ana opened the door. "Sir."

"Inspector. It's good to see you on your feet." He took a step back as they both walked out of the room. "I know you want to go upstairs ... is there anything that I can do?"

"Inspector Givens is handling the crime scene." Kyra glanced toward the elevator. "Let's talk on the way up."

Once in the elevator she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. She could feel both of them staring at her. "I just need to see him."

"I understand." Ethan studied her face for a moment. "What did you find out from Webb's p-pc?"

Kyra's eyes snapped open, and she met his gaze. "Nothing substantial. She kept a diary and had a few log files on people she suspected might have been involved in the smuggling. Mitchell Libby's case notes were much more helpful. Hatch's partner in Texas found them."

"And Setterstrom?"

"He tried to put a knife in my back in front of a hundred witnesses. He was pissed drunk so I can only imagine one of the cops he was with convinced him that I needed to be taken out."

"You've made someone very angry."

“Yes, I took note of that when someone took a couple shots at me. Unfortunately for them, they missed. If they thought I was too close or too personally involved before ... they are about to realize how wrong they were.”

“Constable Salanti transferred Setterstrom to Police Plaza.”

Kyra looked briefly at Ana who was staring at the floor. “Yes.” The doors opened to the third floor, and she walked out of them without another word.

She didn’t know if Ethan Baker was involved in the gun smuggling and for the moment, she didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was Alex. She gave Jennings and Hatch a brief nod as she walked to the observation deck. Kyra had witnessed two surgeries; both had been on her grandmother. Observation decks in hospitals had always seemed rather misplaced to her.

But as she walked to the window and caught sight of Alex, she couldn’t help but be relieved that it was there. Just seeing him, even attached to machines, was a huge relief. She leaned her forehead against the cool glass and didn’t move until someone touched her.

Kyra’s gaze snapped to Marcus and she said nothing as he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her back from the glass.

“You need to sit.”

She shook her head. “I need to see more.” Kyra looked toward Desi who was a few feet away. “Marcos?”

Desi’s gaze collided with hers. “The lung was too damaged to repair. From what I can tell, that bioengineer he requested specializes in organ regeneration. When he arrived they started prepping Alex for reconstruction. That’s why they have him opened up.”

She nodded and swallowed hard. “Survival?”

“On anyone else I would’ve said less than ten percent. However, I’ve never seen nanotech in a human being like that. I don’t know what to expect, Inspector.”

“Will they let me in there?” She touched the glass briefly.

“I’ll go ask.”

“Come sit,” Marcus murmured.

Kyra shook her head but didn’t fight when he pushed her onto a couch beside his mother. Morgan Waters reached out and picked up Kyra’s hand. “He’ll be fine, dear.”

She nodded. “Have they talked to you yet?”

“No.”

Kyra turned to the sound of the negative answer and looked over Clara’s worried face. “Clara.”

“Inspector, how’s your arm?” Clara rose and walked to the couch where they were sitting. Morgan immediately stood up and gave Clara her seat.

"It hurts like hell," Kyra muttered and winced when Clara reached out and plucked the bandage off. "Christ, you old witch, I'm being tortured enough as is."

"Relax." Clara pulled a tiny bag from her pocket and pulled out a vial. "Alex has suffered far worse in battle. Though they did some things to him that were wrong, the government made him a survivor."

Kyra winced and wrinkled her nose. "That smells dead."

"It is." Clara glanced up briefly as she continued to spread the salve on Kyra's neatly sealed wound. "But it will help. Your nanobots will be attracted to it. They'll concentrate their efforts solely on your wound." Clara grinned when she glanced up and saw Kyra's expression. "This old witch can learn new tricks. I've already offered my formula to the government. They've been very receptive."

"I bet."

Clara pressed the thin bandage back into place and put her vial away. "You're angry with him."

"Yes."

"Get over it. If the situation were reversed he would be sick with guilt."

Kyra started to respond, but the door opened, and a man no taller than Desi entered. "You're Reginald Craig."

"Yes." He nodded abruptly and motioned toward the surgery room with one arm. "He'll be up in a matter of hours. I've flushed the stasis bots. They are being sanitized, and then they'll be returned to the police."

"They said there was damage to his heart," Devon Waters murmured. "How can he be up in a matter of hours?"

"The work we did on his body involved stamina and healing. He'll be awake in a few hours and on his feet by morning. His nanotech was designed to heal enough to get him on his feet. If he hadn't been put in stasis, the bots would've had him up and moving within minutes of his injury. There is still some healing, of course, so the bots will put him into a deep sleep about fifteen hours from now."

"All to be a better soldier?" Marcus demanded.

Craig shook his head. "No. All to live. I've worked with the military nearly all of my life. They plucked me out of elementary school, and I've been with them ever since. One day I realized that instead of building weapons, I should be trying to find ways to give our fighting men and women an advantage. I was tired of seeing them come home in bags. So, I started working on enhancements. Alex Waters was one of the first men to volunteer for the project. Thanks to his sacrifice, the process is now safe and has helped thousands of soldiers just like him come home to their families. I can't give him back his ability to have children ... but I'll always be available to him. As long as he lives."

Kyra watched the little man turn and leave; then she walked over to the window. They were prepping him for a move. “Ana, get Givens on the comm-u. Ask her if she can come here. I want to talk to her.”

Liz Givens paused, struck by the scene before her. She’d never seen Kyra Moray look more defeated. “Inspector.”

Kyra glanced up from Alex’s face and stood up from her place on his bed. “Thank you for coming.”

Liz nodded and glanced around the room. “I’m sorry to intrude.”

“It’s all right.” Morgan Waters took Kyra’s place on the bed and wrapped both hands around one of her son’s.

Kyra followed Liz out the door and when she pulled it closed, she relaxed a little. “What have you found?”

“The weapon was abandoned on the roof of the building directly across from you. It’s clean ... no prints, fibers, or skin cells that we could find. It was loaded with shatter-rounds.” She cleared her throat. “Is he going to live, Kyra?”

“Yes.” She walked away from the door. “I need to trust someone, Liz.”

“Okay.”

“How much do you know about the safe house murders?”

“Your admin sent me the case file, but I’ve been working the scene. You might as well know we didn’t find much.”

“I didn’t figure we would.” Kyra’s hand went briefly to her arm and sighed. “This is the second damn time in two months that someone has shot this arm. The gun-smuggling operation that Gina Webb uncovered had connections all over this city after the official reorganization ended. She believed that Ben Darcy was the head of it. Texas Ranger Mitchell Libby implicated city employees all the way up to the mayor’s office. Evan Horn was prepared to cut a deal and give up everything he knew.”

“And they killed him.”

“Yes.” Kyra nodded.

“And tried to kill you.”

“Yes.”

“Well, now that I’m more pissed off than I was before ... tell me what I can do.”

“We need to round up the players we are sure of. Setterstrom is at Police Plaza. I’d like to see Beau Grant, Kyle Neal, and Julia Delaney there with him.”

“What about Darcy?”

“Darcy passed truth testing.”

“You know that those things aren’t a hundred percent.”

"I figured he had a nanotech blocker when he volunteered for the scan. They're expensive, but with the kind of money that he moved through this city, it wouldn't be hard to purchase a nanotech system that would make it impossible to determine his body responses to questions. The truth monitoring system isn't designed to detect things like that." Kyra sat down in a chair and looked around the empty waiting room before she focused on Liz. "They shouldn't have missed this morning."

"I'm sure they are regretting it."

"They will." Kyra murmured. "I need to stay here until he wakes up."

"I understand." Liz stood up and offered Kyra her hand. "You look half dead."

"Yeah. I'm sure I do." Kyra released her hand once she was on her feet.

"There aren't many people in this world who would do what your man did. I realize you're probably pretty damn angry with him, but you shouldn't hold on to it too long."

"My partner is downstairs getting some food. Why don't you snag her and Dr. Marcos? Tell them I'll join you guys at Police Plaza once Alex wakes up."

"I will."

She watched Liz leave then started back toward the room. Todd Conrad was standing in front of the door talking with two of Alex's men -- the two men that Alex had brought in to protect his aunt, an indication that Clara had returned.

"Conrad?"

Todd Conrad turned and met her gaze. "These two haven't been very forthcoming."

"From what I understand, they were trained to kill people, not chat with them." She raised an eyebrow when Todd moved toward her. "You don't think I'm any less dangerous than they are, do you?"

"Look, you've got one of my men in solitary confinement, with four cops from District 4 guarding him. I demand to know what is going on."

"You haven't heard?"

"Someone took a few shots at you. Since Roger Setterstrom was in jail when it happened, I fail to see why he was moved."

"He was moved for his own protection." Kyra inclined her head. "You see, I've already had two witnesses murdered, and they aren't going to get that chance with Setterstrom. If you came down here to convince me to drop charges against him, you wasted your time. That stupid little son of a bitch tried to kill me, and I take threats on my life very seriously."

"I don't like not being in the loop, Inspector."

"I could give a flying *fuck* what you like or don't like. This area of the hospital is off-limits to everyone but authorized personnel." Kyra walked past him and toward the door to Alex's room. "If this asshole doesn't leave, gentlemen, you have my permission to prepare

him for organ donation. I understand there are quite a few people on the second floor waiting for organic kidneys.”

She paused at the door as she listened to Conrad’s hurried footsteps. “Should he get brave and come up here again, I want him put down until I can have him arrested.”

“The organ donation option sounded better.”

“Yeah.” Kyra nodded.

“The master chief is tough.”

Kyra focused on the man who had spoken. “Yes.”

“You’re wondering how he knew?”

“Yes.”

“Rifles and handguns make a distinct sound. The gunman was close enough for the master chief to hear the gun’s electromagnetic system activate. His reaction was like breathing, though I’m sure that doesn’t make you any less angry.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“You needn’t worry that anyone will hurt him here.”

Kyra nodded. “That I do know.”

The room was silent when she re-entered. She watched his mother for a moment and then walked to stand by the single window in the room. The heat of the sun through the thick glass felt good, but it didn’t warm her. She’d been cold since she’d woken up in the emergency clinic.

“You look worried, Inspector.”

Kyra looked toward the bed and fixed on Alex. “Worried?”

He raised an eyebrow at her cool tone. “Mother, you might want to get out of the line of fire.”

Morgan Waters stood up from the bed with a sigh. “Devon, why don’t we get some food?”

“Sounds good.” He paused briefly at the end of the bed and looked at his son. “Your brother has taken Clara home, and we called the other two young men you brought in to meet them at her house. We figured we might keep the other two here until you’re released. He’ll be back soon.”

Alex nodded. “I’m fine, you know.”

“Yeah.” Devon glanced toward Kyra and chuckled. “At least for the moment.”

Kyra stood where she was until the door clicked shut. “You arrogant ...” She paused and took a deep breath to calm herself. “I can’t even curse you properly now that I’ve met your parents.”

Alex laughed softly and carefully tried to sit up. “I won’t tell them.”

"It just wouldn't be as rewarding." Kyra walked to the bed and pressed her thumb on the control that would raise the back for him. "You scared the hell out of me."

"I know."

Kyra sat down and stared at his face. "How could you?"

"I told you." He reached out and touched her face. "I love you."

"I don't need anyone to protect me."

"I can't change what I am. If you don't like me putting myself between you and bastards with weapons I suggest you take care of them before I can get out of this bed."

She leaned in and tucked her face against his neck. "I haven't had you long enough for you to even think about leaving. I don't know how I could have lived through it if you'd died for me today."

"I know what my body can handle."

"Are you saying that you wouldn't have done it if you weren't sure you could survive it?"

"No. I'd have still done it. Because I couldn't have lived with myself if I hadn't." His hand fisted briefly in her hair. "I like my world with you in it."

"I'm not going anywhere." She sat up and met his gaze. "I'm going to go verbally abuse a few cops, and then when that's done, I'll come back."

"They'll probably release me this evening."

"Alex, they had your chest splayed open like you were being autopsied."

"I know. But if Reginald did his job, most if not all of the damage is nearly healed. He made me a better man."

"No." Kyra shook her head. "He made you a better soldier. You were already an amazing man."

He pulled her forward and took her mouth. She relaxed in his hold and opened her mouth to his invading tongue. When his hands moved to unbutton her pants, she pulled free.

"We're not doing that here."

"We could."

"We won't," Kyra returned evenly.

"Too bad. I think you two probably look pretty hot when you get it on."

Kyra's gaze lifted to the doorway. "Glory."

Glory smiled and hurried in as Marcus entered and closed the door. "I got here as soon as I could. I even took one of those sonic jets which you know I hate." She hurried around the bed and wrapped herself around Kyra in a tight hug. "Some asshole shot you?"

"Yeah." They both said at once.

Kyra looked toward Alex and smiled. "Some asshole shot us."

Glory glanced between them and then nodded. "I'm going to stay and take care of everything."

Kyra turned to look at her. "Everything?"

"Yep. You go catch the bad guys. I got this." She waved her hand around the room. "You just tell that big walking mountain outside that I'm in charge."

Kyra stood up from the bed and laughed when Glory took her place. "I believe I'm going to wish you luck."

Alex eyed Glory as she arranged his pillows and then his covers. "Kyra."

"Don't go looking at her. She's got work to do." Glory winked at Marcus who laughed. "You stuck with me when I was all laid up. I figure I owe you a favor."

Kyra walked around the bed, leaned down, and kissed his mouth. "I'd keep her if I were you. This has made the news by now ... which means my grandmother should be on her way."

"That's not fair."

"You should have thought of that before you got between me and that gun." She patted his cheek. "Don't forget to compliment her on Rufus. She's very proud of him."

"Who's Rufus?" Glory asked.

"Mrs. Moray bought a dog for protection. A Scottish Terrier," Alex answered dryly as Kyra strode toward the door. "Kick the asshole who shot us in the face for me."

"You bet I will."

Alex nodded and then turned to Glory as the door shut firmly behind Kyra. "How are you?"

"Good." Glory offered him a smile. "Better, at least. I drove Mrs. Moray's pilot crazy on the way back here." She fiddled with his blankets a minute. "You're okay for real?"

"Yeah." Alex nodded.



## Chapter Sixteen

Kyra sat down at the nearly full conference table and relaxed in her chair. It was the first time she could remember relaxing since that first shot rang out. Ana and Desi were sitting side-by-side in silence. Liz Givens was at the end of the table, tapping her fingers on it, and Abel was leaning against the window.

“Alex was awake when I left him. He’ll make a full recovery.” She leaned forward a little but resisted the urge to lay her head down on the table. “I’ve had some time to think ... and I’m going to lay out this situation as I see it, and you guys can jump in when you feel that you need to.”

Liz pulled out her p-pc and placed it on the table in front of her. “We’ll use this as your statement about your shooting as well.”

She nodded. “Yes, that’s fine.” Kyra watched Liz engage the device and wasn’t surprised to hear the gentle hum of Ana’s p-pc. “Ben Darcy, Royce Foster, Sebastian Green, Roger Setterstrom, Beau Grant, Remy St. James, and Evan Horn helped smuggle guns out of District 4 during the summer of 2147. We’ve uncovered evidence of gun smuggling in all four districts after the reorganization. Remy St. James and Evan Horn were killed in police custody, in *my* custody, because they were going to testify against the men involved in the smuggling and in the murders in the house on Rose Street.”

“Do you have a line on who killed St. James and Horn?” Liz asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No, at least not yet. I have an idea, but I’m not prepared to make my suspicions official at this point. Julia Delaney and Kyle Neal were cops on the edge of the operation, and when they realized they were guarding a woman that Ben Darcy was searching high and low for, they figured they had a way into the smuggling operation.” Kyra stood up and turned her back on them. “One or both of them killed Mitchell Libby and called Darcy who came to the

house and executed Gina Webb. Then he killed Dane Tibideaux, the one person in New Orleans who would miss Gina and look for her.”

“Royce Foster?”

“He did the leg work in the department. Kept the records and books clean as a whistle until the day he retired and was forced out of the game. I don’t know how they did it, and I’m not sure exactly why, but he was pushed out. Once that was done, Ben Darcy was promoted to senior inspector of the division and the operation was slowly dissolved over a period of months. Leaving the bigger players profoundly wealthy. The cops who actually did the legwork were given enough money to make them happy in the short term. Eight commanders retired that year; only one was near mandatory retirement age. Their names will be included in the report sent to IAB.”

“Sebastian Green was a dirty cop.”

Kyra’s gaze connected with Liz’s; she recognized the hard anger on her face and sympathized with it. No one liked having their heroes turned into the scum of the earth right in front of them. “Yes. He kept the reorganization committee off their backs and probably helped them get guns out of the city. We may never know the extent of his involvement in the smuggling or the murders. But he’s played a heavy role in our current investigation.”

“How do you mean?”

“He sent the vid recording of Gina’s murder to IAB. I doubt I’ll be able to prove it, but he was the only one who could’ve done it. No one has connections like he does -- at least no one who is playing on our field.”

“Did Ben Darcy know about the recording?”

“Ben was a flashy son of a bitch, even when I was partnered with him. He never bought synthetic and kept up with the tech better than even our own Dr. Marcos, the renowned technocrat that she is. Sebastian Green used that vid recording to keep him in line. To keep him from retiring too soon, spending too much money. And when the bodies were found, he had it sent here.”

“How did he know?”

“Because someone called him. Sebastian Green knew about the discovery of those bodies before I ever even got my feet wet in this investigation. He brought me a list of bad cops to distract me, to try to refocus my attention.”

“Who called him?” Ana asked with a frown.

“The same person who told Ben Darcy that Gina Webb never went to New York.” Kyra glanced around the room. “Everything they’ve done since the discovery of the bodies was an effort to keep me off balance and on edge: killing St. James, Horn, and that young advocate, burning Clara’s scarecrow, shooting at me.”

“Setterstrom?”

"The cops that were with him last night weren't important, but they used his temper against him in the hopes that one or both of us would end up dead. There are plenty of cops in the district who don't like how I do things or how things were going in this case. They didn't anticipate Alex."

"So you don't think the sniper hit him on purpose?" Liz asked softly.

"No. He put himself in the way."

"So, what are you going to do about Setterstrom?"

"It depends on how much he knows and what he says," Kyra murmured. "In less than an hour, I'm going to lose control of this case. IAB would've pulled me off already if they could've."

"They used the shooting to pull our case?" Ana demanded.

Kyra shook her head. "No, I contacted Detective Porter to handle the arrests and the rest of the case."

"This is our collar," Ana almost stood up and would have if Desi hadn't put a calming hand on her arm. "Why?"

"She's following the rules, Constable," Liz Givens stood. "I had Setterstrom brought up from holding when you called to say you were on your way. I figured he needed a little more time to wonder who was going to be questioning him. Ben Darcy is in the large conference room on this floor. Commander Baker joined him shortly before you arrived."

"Are they being monitored?"

"Yeah. They've been chatting about the old days and Darcy has said a few times that he regrets retiring."

Kyra nodded. "Ana, I need you to get in touch with a real live person in New York Dome and have Gina Webb's file checked physically. I need to know if there were any notes in the file."

Ana stood up. "Of course."

"Hey, we need to let this one go," Kyra met Ana's gaze unflinchingly. "You don't want this on you, Salanti."

"I'm not weak," Ana tightened her jaw.

"If you were your ass would still be on patrol duty. I need that information from New York as soon as possible," Kyra looked toward Desi. "I want you to file an APB for Sebastian Green. I want him back in New Orleans today if possible."

"Yeah. You got it," Desi followed Ana out of the room with a slight glance in her brother's direction.

"Any tasks for me, Inspector?"

"Yes," Kyra nodded. "Find the Texas Ranger and tell him he can take his man home now. Arrange for Ranger Libby's remains to be transported back to Texas and adhere to any

of Ranger Hatch's needs. Call on any city personnel that you need to ensure that his remains receive the proper care. Tell Dr. Parker that I would prefer that he attend to it personally."

"Of course."

Kyra swallowed hard as Abel left the room. "You sure about this, Liz?"

"I'm here for the duration, Inspector Moray." She offered Kyra a smile. "Besides, I might come in useful."

"Yeah, I might need to be prevented from killing him."

Liz shook her head. "Don't count on me for that. I probably would've put a bullet in his head last night if he'd tried to put a knife in me."

"Yeah." Kyra sighed. "If Alex hadn't stopped him, I surely wouldn't have been in any condition to kill him. Though my partner already has plans to avenge my untimely death should the situation arise."

"I thought you were making a mistake when you pulled Ana Salanti out of patrol."

"And?"

"I was wrong. She's the perfect foil for you. Ana already has more poise and skill than most of the cops in District 4. She has great instincts and took over the situation with the shooter this morning like a ten-year veteran. Her command style is sharp, and no one stopped for an instant to question why she was in charge out there." Liz shook her head. "I can't say that I would've been able to do the same in such a situation. My partner and her man gunned down on the street. I probably would have gone out of that building looking for the shooter before backup arrived."

Kyra grinned. "If Dr. Marcos hadn't drugged me I probably would've done the same damn thing."

"She's afraid you're going to kick her ass."

"I've been thinking about it." Kyra focused on Roger Setterstrom. "Let's go see what he has to say."

When she and Liz entered the interview room, Roger Setterstrom bolted up from his chair. "Inspector Moray."

"Sit down, Detective."

"I was very drunk last night."

"You were."

"They tell me I pulled a knife on you."

"You did." Kyra stared at him until he regained his seat and then closed the door on the interview room. "Gina Webb was executed because she'd found out about the smuggling operation that was being orchestrated out of the District 4 station house. You, Beau Grant, Remy St. James, and Evan Horn did the legwork. Ben Darcy and Royce Foster pulled the strings and covered up the paperwork. I don't know how long Gina had known, but by the

time Ranger Mitchell Libby came into town, she was ready to talk. She told him everything she knew. Gave him financial records on the participants she knew about, surveillance footage and images. Two days before she was to testify before the reorganization committee, she was shot in the back of the head with a weapon that you and Beau Grant supposedly destroyed several months before.”

“You think you know everything?”

“No, I don’t think I know everything. That’s where you come in, Roger. I want to know what you know.”

“Don’t know nothing.”

“Sure you do.”

“Look ... sure I helped smuggle some guns. Worked with Horn and St. James on runs.”

“And Beau Grant.”

“I ain’t saying that.” Roger snapped.

“Roger, you tried to kill me in front a hundred people last night. I also have the records that implicate you specifically in the smuggling operation. If you tell me what you know I might be inclined to forget about the incident with the knife.”

“They hung Remy St. James and Evan Horn.”

“Yes, they did. That wasn’t very loyal of them was it?” Kyra pulled her p-pc off her belt and browsed through it until she found the vid-file of Gina’s death. She turned the screen to him and watched as the blood fell from his face. With the sound muted, she couldn’t tell what was going on but when Setterstrom shuddered, she knew he’d seen enough. “You were infatuated with Gina Webb?”

“She was a pretty lady.” Roger cleared his throat. “She was pregnant.”

“Yes, about five or six months along. Her baby mummified in that little room they walled her up in.”

He lowered his head to the table and took a deep shuddering breath. “They said it was an accident.”

“What was an accident?”

“Him shooting Gina. They were just supposed to offer her money to leave town. He said she fought with him and pulled her own gun.”

“This wasn’t a self-defense killing.” Kyra put the p-pc down. “Who killed Gina Webb?”

“Ben Darcy. They’d been lovers the year before. That’s how she found out about the smuggling. She left him, and when he found out later that she’d all but disappeared, he knew that she’d gone to the reorganization committee. He had an inside on the committee so he knew that she hadn’t presented evidence or testified.”

“How did he find her?”

"Neal and Delaney were on duty in the house with her. Neal had been trying to get in on the action for a while and when Darcy put the word out that Gina was going to testify against him ... Neal contacted him with the information on her location."

"How did he find out that Gina had 'disappeared'?"

"Everyone knew she'd gotten a hot shot job in the New York Dome. That Baker had arranged it personally."

"Yeah."

"Darcy never said how he found out that she wasn't in New York." Roger cleared his throat. "You gotta get me protection. I'm going to need some serious protection."

"Darcy killed Mitchell Libby, too?"

"No. Kyle Neal killed him. Libby had gotten wind that Gina's location was no longer secure. He'd come to remove her from the safe house."

"Dane Tibideaux?"

"Darcy. He hated that kid, and when he found out that Gina was involved with him, he was furious. Not only was he ten years younger than she was, but he was black. Darcy ... well, he hates the mixing of the races. Says it's obscene." Roger cleared his throat. "They moved me because someone shot at you and your man."

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

He shrugged. "Cops talk. Is he going to make it?"

"Do you really care?" Kyra asked as she stood.

"Yeah."

"He'll make a full recovery." She paused. "Do you know who shot at us?"

"What was the situation?"

"Sniper rifle. The shooter was on top of the building across from my apartment."

"Delaney is a level-ten marksman. She's one of the few cops still around who was involved in the smuggling and who can do that kind of gun work." He stood. "Inspector, I mean it. I need protection."

"You'll get it."

"I can't go to prison. I'll never survive it."

"You won't go to prison as long as you testify truthfully. I'll work it out with the D.A."

"You'd get me immunity on the smuggling?"

"Yes, as long as you weren't involved in the murders."

"No. I wasn't. I wasn't even in town when the three of them were killed." He glanced toward Liz, who had remained silent during the conversation. "You're my witness in this."

Liz raised an eyebrow. "It appears so." She glanced briefly at Kyra who had moved to the other side of the room near the one-way mirror. "Why did they leave the bodies in the house, Roger?"

"Didn't have any choice. The week that they killed Libby and Webb there was a crowd of protestors down the street. They were there for five or six days, just before Darcy contacted Dane Tibideaux and told him where he could find Gina."

"What were they protesting?"

"The city was tearing down a few older houses. People were saying that they should've been preserved as historical landmarks or something." Roger shrugged.

"Ben Darcy lured Dane to that house?"

"Yes. The kid had come to the station a few times looking for information and from what I understand he was going to go to New York to find her. When Darcy found out about that he called Tibideaux and told him about the safe house."

"He didn't want Gina's disappearance to be public knowledge?"

"No. It would have raised too many questions. Of course, when Madame Tibideaux started raising all kinds of hell about her son disappearing, he realized that he'd made a mistake. He tried to get the bodies removed from the safe house but couldn't."

"Why?"

"The mayor's office had had it officially closed, but the reorganization committee was really behind its closing. About three months after the murders, they started using that house for visiting lawmen. Darcy's contact with the committee couldn't do a damn thing about it. We all kept expecting someone to notice the wall and find the bodies. But no one ever did. I heard when the city auctioned it off last summer, Darcy was furious that he'd been outbid by that woman from New York."

"And why didn't he go into the house before the new owner arrived?"

"She had a cleaning crew installed and put to work the same day of the auction. They were there until the day she arrived cleaning the place out."

"Unfortunate for him."

"Yeah, well, I guess he wasn't as smart as everyone always thought he was."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana stood up as Kyra entered the room and wasn't surprised when Julia Delaney rose and started to complain.

"Inspector, I demand to know what is going on here!"

Kyra pulled her gun and thumbed it on. The hum filled the small room they were in. Calmly she walked toward Julia and stopped just seconds before the barrel of her gun met

with the other woman's forehead. "You've got guts, Delaney. Anyone else would have taken a few steps back."

"You're not going to shoot me."

"You're right, of course. That's the difference between you and me. I don't take shots at fellow cops."

"What are you saying? I had nothing to do with the murders in the safe house. We've already been over this."

"You had everything to do with the murders in the safe house. Your partner, Kyle Neal, used the whereabouts of Gina Webb to secure the two of you a position in the gun-smuggling operation. You let Benjamin Darcy come into that house and kill Gina Webb, but not before you stood by and watched your partner gun down Mitchell Libby." She pressed on the trigger until the laser sight engaged. The blue light seemed to radiate around Julia's head. "But I was talking about the bullet you put in me this morning."

"I want a lawyer."

"You aren't under arrest."

"Get your gun out of my goddamned face."

"Inspector." Ana started to move toward them.

"Stay out of this Ana," Kyra snapped. "My partner's nervous, Julia. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because two of the bullets you fired at me went into my man."

"I heard you were fucking that nig--"

Kyra jerked her gun back and used the barrel of the weapon to strike Julia across the face. She put away her gun as Delaney picked herself up off the floor. "You're going to jail for the smuggling and for your participation in the cover-up of four murders. I also plan to charge you with two counts of attempted homicide. If you're lucky, you'll die in prison." She pushed her to the wall and held her there. "I'm going to know where you are every day for the rest of your pitiful life, and if I'm ever alone with you like this again ... I'm going to kill you."

"I'm going to file charges against you for this. The whole damn thing was recorded."

"I pulled the disc before I came in here." Kyra looked to Ana. "Salanti, what happened in here?"

"Detective Delaney fell and hit her head."

"You think this makes you better than me?" Julia hissed at Ana. "You're no more of a cop than me."

"She's already four times the cop you ever were." Kyra grabbed Julia and pushed her into a chair. "I'm going to ask the DA to put you in a federal prison." She smiled as Julia



paled. "You're a little ragged, and you haven't kept up with even the most basic of enhancements, but I have a feeling you're going to have no problems finding a protector."

Kyra motioned Ana to come with her and once the door closed, she turned to her. "Where's Conrad?"

"In with the chief. He's complaining you have it in for his men." Ana looked across the hall to the door of the conference room. "If she reports you I'm not going to lie."

"I didn't expect you would. Call Detective Porter in IAB and invite him to our party." Kyra walked to the door to the conference room. "Inspector Givens is babysitting Setterstrom. Why don't you join her and find the D.A.?"

She watched Ana walk away and nodded. Taking her on as a partner had been the right move.

Both men stood up when she entered the room and pulled the door shut behind her. Kyra walked to the front of the room and pulled out a chair to sit. "When I began this case I thought I was dealing with a hate crime. The guns, the money, and the murders didn't really seem to connect. It was one thing to kill the cops. That had purpose." She turned and looked at Ben Darcy. "You killed Dane Tibideaux because you were jealous of a twenty-two-year-old kid. No matter how Gina Webb felt about him and that relationship, she had decided to keep his child. What was more embarrassing, Ben? The fact that he was ten years younger than her or that he was a black man?"

"Kyra."

"I'm not really interested in listening to you deny the charges. IAB will be taking over this case shortly. I don't think I can stand to be in the same room with you for much longer."

"You used to be someone I could count on. Does loyalty mean so little to you?"

"Loyalty?" Kyra demanded. "I'm being loyal to the only people in this case that matter. As you know, Ben, the dead have always come first for me." She stood up from her chair. "Your partners in crime were loyal to you, weren't they, Ben? How long did Sebastian Green sit on the tape of you murdering Gina Webb before he let you know about it?"

"Sebastian Green was the driving force behind the reorganization committee and a decorated cop," Ethan Baker said softly, glancing between the two of them. "Ben?"

"It doesn't have to be this way." Ben stood up and walked toward her. "I've a lot of money left."

"As you might realize, I already have a great deal of money." Kyra stared at him pointedly. "My grandmother is filthy rich. I've never understood the way money affects some people, but then that's probably because I never had to do without it."

"Kyra," Ben Darcy snapped. "I was your partner for eight years."

"Yes, but you've been a son of a bitch for much longer." Her hand lingered on her gun as she watched him move a few steps back from her. "Clara will know that you are

responsible for the murder of her son. She will know that you came onto her property and set fire to her scarecrow.”

“I’m not afraid of that old witch.”

“No, I don’t imagine you are.” Kyra stared at him for another moment, and then she turned toward the door as it opened. She gave Brandon Porter a nod as he entered. “Today, I am absolutely ashamed to be wearing a badge.”

She sat down as Porter cuffed Ben and escorted him from the room without a word to her or Baker.

“Well done, Inspector.” Ethan Baker sat down in a chair.

“Thank you.” Kyra pulled her p-pc free from its waist holder when it vibrated gently against her. She opened the file and read through the message from Ana silently. “When I read through Libby’s files, I was confident that he’d found all of the players.”

Ethan nodded. “I’ve read through them. He was thorough.”

“Yes.” Kyra stared at him intently. “I imagine if he’d lived long enough, he would have caught up with you.”

He stiffened in his chair. “Excuse me?”

“The first mistake was the vid file of Gina Webb’s murder.”

“Inspector, are you implying that I was involved in her murder? You’ve already made one backhanded accusation against Sebastian Green. Just how much leeway do you think you have around here?” He stood up abruptly. “I’ll have your badge by the end of the day.”

“Gina Webb was murdered on May fifteenth.”

“Yes, and in her own files she said that Todd Conrad had seen her outside the safe house.”

“Yes.” Kyra stood up from her chair and walked to the window. She wished she could open it; the need for fresh air was almost overwhelming. “Did you honestly think I wouldn’t check? New York Dome contacted you on May twelfth and asked you where Gina Webb was.”

“No.”

“Yes. You did well to alter your own records, but you had no way of altering theirs. NYPD has records indicating that they called you and told you she’d never arrived there.”

“There are plenty of ways that Ben Darcy could’ve found out that she wasn’t in New York.”

“Yes, but as I said, your first mistake was having Green send the vid-file. The only thing we know about it so far is that it was altered by an expert hand and that it didn’t hit the New Orleans data-net until it was delivered to Detective Porter. That means that someone outside the city sent it. You assumed watching someone execute that woman in

cold blood would cloud my judgment, and I admit for a while it messed with me. Did Darcy even know you and Green had recorded him butchering that woman?”

“Since I’m privy to your case file, I know you have no proof of these charges.”

“New York is sending me the communication records. I’ll be filing a report with Chief Dennis in a few minutes.”

“And you think that he’s going to believe you?” Ethan demanded.

“Yes.” Kyra walked toward the door. “And you know it.”

“You said my first mistake was the vid-file ...”

She turned and looked at him. “You’re wondering what the second mistake was? It wasn’t the murders of Horn and St. James -- that was perfect. I imagine it’ll take a lot of work on IAB’s part to connect you to them.” She focused on him. “Royce Foster used the gun and smuggling records to protect himself. He couldn’t have known that Green was involved as well; who would’ve suspected the hero of the reorganization committee of being involved in gun smuggling and murder? I can’t prove it, of course, but Foster went to Green and when you were all sure that you had contained what he knew ... you had him killed. None of you could have possibly realized that Foster wouldn’t give over everything to his son. A young man you had all prepped to protect the memory of his father. He would’ve given that gun to you. Phyllis Foster didn’t. Did you even know he had a daughter?”

“This is all speculation.”

“I’m sure that Porter in IAB won’t have a problem making this stick. I doubt he appreciates being used.” She glared at him. “You underestimated me, Ethan. You thought I would be blind to the rest of the operation because of the murders. That was your second mistake.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“How is Mr. Waters?”

“Fine.”

Chief Joseph Dennis watched Kyra pace around his office. She looked like a caged tiger. “This doesn’t make you any less of a cop than you were before those bodies were found in the safe house.”

“How could I not know how twisted they both were?”

“Pardon me, Inspector, but I didn’t know either. And I’ve known both of those men for almost thirty years.”

“Yes, sir.” She sat down in the chair she’d abandoned and looked her chief in the eye. “I feel like a complete coward for turning it over to IAB.”

“It was the appropriate course of action.”

“Yeah.”

"There are some noises about you being elevated to commander."

Kyra resisted the urge to jump out of her seat in protest. "No. It wouldn't be right."

"I happen to agree." He smiled when her look of horror turned to one of anger. "You're a good cop. In fact, you're probably one of the best I have on the street. My reason for not considering you for the commander position in District 4 is twofold. One, you aren't ready for it. Two, there is someone in the station who deserves it more."

"Yes. I agree." Kyra nodded. "Have you told her?"

"I'm meeting with her next."

"Good." She stood up and shoved her hands into her pockets. "I'll be going off duty to take care of Alex."

"I expected so."

"I'm sure I'll spend a few days at the mercy of IAB."

"They have their hands full with the murders and the smuggling. I doubt they'll require more from you than an official report. If I remember correctly, Inspector, you were going to take a few days off after this case was resolved."

"Yeah."

"Dismissed then."

Kyra nodded abruptly and picked up her jacket. "I'll finish my report this afternoon and submit it."

Once outside the chief's office, she took a moment to gather herself and breathe. Leaning against his door, she considered what had happened and the pain it had caused.

"Having a problem, Kyra?"

She lifted her gaze, and she met Liz Givens's eyes. "No, it's just been a difficult week."

"Yes." Liz nodded. "I hope you plan on shutting down for a while."

"Yeah." Kyra motioned toward the chief's office. "Considering the circumstances, he seems to be in a good mood."

"Do you know why he wants to speak with me?"

Kyra smiled. It was odd to see a woman she considered so strong look nervous. "Yes."

"How do you feel about it?"

"Chief Dennis is very capable of making the decisions that will benefit both our district and our city. I'm going to take a few personal days, but I'll see you next week sometime."

"Sounds good." Liz watched Kyra leave and then turned to the chief's door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, I've been thinking we should take this slow."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes." Desi pulled her legs up to her chest and looked around Ana's living room. "This is a great couch."

"I spent weeks looking for it." Ana frowned. "Why should we slow this down?"

Desi stared at her for a moment and then looked away. "Today when he was shot ... he told her that he loved her."

"I heard him." Ana slid down the length of the couch until she was sitting in front of her. "And?"

"And if you get shot?"

"What if you get shot?" Ana asked in return. "Just because you do most of your work in a lab doesn't mean you're never going to be exposed to some jerk with a gun." She reached out and brushed an errant curl from Desi's forehead. "And if I'm killed? What do you want your biggest regret to be?"

Desi cleared her throat. "What are you saying?"

"Life is for living. If something happens that we can't control, the only thing I want to regret is that we didn't have more time."

"That's a fucked-up thing to say."

"Why? Because it's true?" Ana laughed when Desi looked away. "You're so cute."

"I'd prefer to be considered sexy."

"You're certainly that." Ana stood up from the couch and offered her hand. "Come on. Let's go take a shower."

"A shower?"

"Might as well have a bit of an adventure."

Desi let Ana lead her down the hallway toward the bedroom. "You've got a great ass, Constable. It's one of the first things I noticed about you."

"I look awesome naked."

"I just bet."

Ana grinned as she pushed off her shoes and watched Desi do the same. "Just because I'm probably the top in this situation doesn't mean I'm ready to buy a strap on and fuck you with it."

Desi laughed as she pulled off her shirt. "Are you sure about this?"

Ana pulled off her shirt and rubbed her stomach as she walked to where Desi stood. "Yeah. I'm real sure." She reached out for her and sucked in a little breath when Desi so easily moved into her arms. "So sure." Ana moved her hand from Desi's hip to run it up her ribcage and cup one pert breast. She raked one thumb over the hardened nipple she found there and sucked in another breath when Desi's hands tightened on her shoulders. "You like that?"

"Oh, yes." Desi nodded abruptly and took in a ragged breath when Ana lowered her head to her breast.

Ana sucked the tight nipple into her mouth with more eagerness than skill. She flicked her tongue over the nipple again and again until Desi was clinging desperately. She slipped one hand between them and found the closure of Desi's pants. Ana pulled and sighed with relief when the magnetic strips parted.

"The shower?"

Ana released the nipple and took Desi's mouth almost immediately, thrusting her tongue between soft and giving lips with a groan. She could only nod her consent when Desi's fingers dipped into the front of her pants. When she could, she lifted her mouth and helped push her pants and panties down her legs. "Yeah, the shower."

Desi kicked her pants and panties free of her feet and held out her hand. "You do look amazing naked."

"So do you. You didn't tell me you had a tattoo on your back." She ran her fingers over the spot. "Did it hurt?"

"It's a temp." Desi turned to her and casually pulled her comm-u earpiece out to toss it on the counter before reaching out and pulling Ana's free as well. "If the inspector needs us, she's going to have come bang on the damn door."

Ana grinned as she pulled off the wrist unit. "Yeah." She watched Desi enter the shower stall, heat pooling in her belly. "I don't want to disappoint you."

Desi grinned and held out her hand. "Come in here."

She took the offered hand and sucked in a little breath as Desi pulled her under the water. "I'm serious."

"You could never disappoint me." Desi ran her hands down Ana's back and then around to both of her breasts. "You're so sexy and strong. The first time I saw you I nearly forgot what I was doing. There I was, trying to impress Inspector Moray with my skills, and you stood there in this tidy little uniform, distracting the hell out of me."

"Should I apologize?"

Desi laughed. "You certainly can't help being so hot." She pinched her nipples and watched, pleased, as Ana arched a little against her. "Every time I look at you, I get soaking wet."

"I know what you mean." Ana swallowed hard. "At first I was going to ignore it. I've never had a physical reaction like that to a woman before." She ran her fingers through Desi's hair and pulled her in for a kiss. "I couldn't ignore it."

"I'm glad." Desi maneuvered her toward the wall and grinned when Ana's eyes widened. "Just because we both agree that you're the top doesn't mean you're always going to be in charge."

Ana sucked in a breath as her back met with the cool tile of the shower stall. "Okay."

Desi snipped briefly at each of Ana's ripe nipples before she slid down further to rest on her knees. "Is this going to be too much for you?"

Ana laughed and then groaned when Desi placed a soft kiss on her thigh. "It's my favorite part of sex."

"I want to slide my tongue into you and eat you until you come."

"That sounds perfectly amazing." Ana whispered weakly as Desi gripped her hips and nuzzled gently against her pussy.

She shuddered and gasped as Desi's tongue slipped into the folds of her sex to tease at her throbbing clit. Her knees weakened briefly, but she pressed against the wall and curled her fists against her thighs. Petite fingers pushed into her and pressed firmly as Desi's attention to her clit became unbearably pleasurable.

Ana shuddered and cried out with relief as an orgasm rushed over her. The gentle sweep of Desi's tongue continued for a few seconds more and then she rose to her feet. Ana reached for her and pulled her close. She ran her hands down Desi's back. "You'll teach me to please you?"

"Yes."

Ana reached out for her bath sponge and pushed the button on the wall to release soap. "Let's start with how you like to be touched."

Desi bit down on her lip as Ana soaped the sponge and then rubbed it across her rigid nipple. "I'll let you know if you do something I hate."

Laughing, Ana tilted Desi's head and covered her mouth with hers. She lifted her head and maneuvered them under the pulsing showerheads. "I'm an excellent student."

"Yes." Desi nodded and then she stilled. "Don't let me fall in love with you if aren't in this for everything."

Ana pulled her closer and kissed her gently. "We'll work on this together."

"Okay." Desi nodded. "Together."

"I think we're nearly done with the shower."

"Are you inviting me into your bed, Constable?"

"Yes." Ana nodded.

Desi pulled her towel free as she left the bathroom and tossed it into a basket beside the door. She glanced up as Ana exited the bathroom. "You really do look amazing naked."

Ana grinned and ran her fingers through her damp hair. "I always wanted to be more curvy, like you. I spent hours as a teenager discouraged by the fact that I was never going to fill anything beyond a B-cup."

Desi stretched out on the bed and grinned. "Come here."

Nodding, Ana discarded her towel and went to her. She put one knee on the bed and then crawled up between Desi's legs. "You're so tempting."

"I'm glad you think so." She spread her legs further and watched with interest as Ana moved her hands up her legs. "What are you thinking?"

Grinning, Ana moved over her and kissed her mouth. "I was thinking that maybe I would buy a strap-on."

Desi laughed. "I do love a big, thick cock."

"Me, too." Ana settled between Desi's legs and rubbed her pussy against hers. "I love how soft you are."

"Ana." She closed her eyes briefly against the friction of Ana rubbing against her.

Desi moaned softly when Ana moved down and sucked one nipple into her mouth. Her fingers tangled in the wet strands of Ana's hair, and she stilled completely when Ana's hand moved between her legs. Nimble fingers found her clit and teased it gently, as Ana's mouth drifted to her other breast.

She thrust two fingers into Desi's pussy and lifted her head as Desi arched against her hand. "I want to watch you come."

"God." Desi closed her eyes against the pleasure and curled her hands into the bedspread beneath her. "I never thought you'd be like this."

"Be like what?" Ana asked softly. "Tell me."

"Comfortable with making love to a woman. I figured we had a long way to go before you'd touch me like this." She thrust upward against Ana's hand as a third finger slid into her pussy. "Fuck."

"Are you disappointed?"

"Hell, no."

Ana grinned and then wet her lips. "Good. You should know that I've never really been shy about sex."

Desi groaned and cried out when Ana started to thrust her fingers repeatedly into her pussy. "Yes."

"That's it, baby." Ana moved upward and sucked one nipple into her mouth briefly. "Come for me. I want to watch you come. Then you're going to teach me how to eat pussy."

"Jesus Christ." Desi arched hard against Ana's fingers and came in a rush of hard pleasure.

Ana pressed firmly against Desi's G-spot as she rocked desperately against her hand. "You're so sexy."



## Chapter Seventeen

Kyra stepped back and crossed her arms over her breasts. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yes." Alex tilted his head and watched her hover near the side of the bed. "Why don't you join me?"

"You're still injured."

"I'm not an invalid, Kyra." He took off his shirt and pulled the thin skinlike bandage off to reveal the neatly sealed surgical incision. "In a week there won't even be a scar."

She sat down on the edge of the bed and moved her hand gently down his chest to the incision. "It's smaller than I thought it would be."

"My nanobots have already taken care of the entry wounds." He took up her hand and brought it to his mouth. "Tell me what happened when you left."

"Roger Setterstrom was very willing to talk when I arrived. He outlined the murders, and when I left, he was detailing the smuggling operation. The guys in IAB are having orgasms left and right over this. They're pulling some cops off the street they've been watching for years."

"Dane?"

"My ex-partner Ben Darcy was in love with Gina Webb, as we'd already suspected. She found out about the smuggling operation sometime during their affair and left him because of it. By the time she'd met up with Dane, she was starting to think that she should tell someone about the smuggling. Ranger Mitchell Libby approached her at just the right time, it seems."

"She must have been afraid for her child."

"Yes."

"So you were right -- Darcy killed them both?"

"Yes." Kyra nodded.

"How do you feel about that?"

"I'd like to beat him to death," Kyra admitted softly. "He betrayed everything he promised to be, and it makes me sick that I once respected him so much."

"I heard on the news that Ethan Baker was taken into custody?"

"He didn't do any killing, but he was heavily involved in the smuggling. The last thing I heard was that he'd agreed to testify fully on the murders in exchange for a plea deal. Since there is no direct evidence he was involved, IAB was pleased with his cooperation."

"It's been a tough week for you."

"Some have had it worse. Even with Dane's murder solved, I don't know how to make things right for Clara."

"There are times when making things right is impossible. Clara has known for years that Dane was murdered and telling her that the man responsible will be punished is the best thing you can do for her."

Kyra leaned forward and brushed her lips across his. "When you get better, I'm going to do some really freaky sexual stuff to you."

"I could probably manage now if you did all the work."

She laughed and kissed him again. "I need to go out and talk to Clara."

"It'll be dawn in an hour."

"I know." She stood up from the bed. "I have to pick up something and then I'll be out there for a bit. I'll bring some food back. Do not overdo." Kyra glanced over him. "I wish you'd stayed in the hospital."

"I'll probably sleep pretty heavily tomorrow."

"Why did you need that bioengineer to come in?"

"I had the regeneration bots deactivated when I left the service. I wanted to be as normal as I could be. I kept my battle bots because, frankly, they aren't sure what would happen if they were deactivated or removed."

"What does it do for you?"

"The regeneration nanotech is designed to get a man on his feet and then to safety. The bots concentrate on catastrophic injury and repair as quickly as possible. It takes a lot of body energy, but makes it possible for an injured man to survive long enough for evacuation." He paused and watched her as she nodded. "Then once the repair work is done, the bots will go dormant until another injury makes them necessary. They are currently taking a great deal of my strength away to repair me. I'll probably sleep for a couple of days."

"You won't go to sleep before I get back?"

"No. No, they keep me alert for about twenty-four hours. I'll need food in about three hours."

"I'll bring it." She leaned down and kissed his mouth again. "I love you, and when you get better I'm going to show you exactly how much."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyra exited her transport and walked to the back. She pulled out the two-year-old tree she'd picked up from a bio-nursery and looked to Clara's house. It was a relief to see her standing there on the porch looking irritated and slightly dangerous. Snagging the shovel she'd purchased with the tree, she moved around the vehicle and walked to the darkened earth that marked the place where the scarecrow had once stood.

"Inspector."

"Madame." Kyra set the tree down and swung the shovel gently. "Suppose I'll need a gallon of water."

Clara nodded, turned, and walked into the house.

She pushed the shovel into the ground and glanced briefly out toward the bayou. The alligator hadn't made an appearance but she doubted that he was far from shore. Kyra returned to her digging and didn't look up when Clara returned with a large container of water. Once the hole was deep enough she tossed the shovel aside and went down on her knees to pull the tree free from its packaging.

"It's lovely," Clara whispered as she helped Kyra settle it in the hole.

"It's a weeping willow." Kyra started to push the dirt into the hole around the exposed roots of the tree. "We have the man who killed him."

"I heard the news this morning." Clara patted the dirt down around the tree.

"Some people think that the weeping willow is weak because of the way it bends against the wind." She paused and then met Clara's eyes. "But I've always thought that the ability to bend instead of breaking under the pressure of life's challenges is a strength."

"There are times when you can be a real lady, Inspector."

Kyra grabbed the water and uncapped the container. "I do hope you'll have the good taste to keep that to yourself."

 THE END 

## Deanna Lee

Deanna Lee lives in the southern United States. She has been writing for eighteen years. Deanna is engaged to be married, works in a library, and spends her spare time writing and reading.

To learn more about Deanna's day-to-day trials, check out her website. She would love to hear from you! You can visit her on the Web at: [www.deannaleebooks.com](http://www.deannaleebooks.com).

\* \* \* \* \*

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

*For The Love Of...*

by Kally Jo Surbeck

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## For The Love Of...

It was cold. Dark and cold. The spitting snow should have cooled my raging hormones. The years of experience in the business should have steadied my racing heart. Or vice versa. But it didn't happen. I'd walked the perimeter. I'd climbed to the roof and secured the entire property. All systems were go, including my libido.

I needed a physical release of the tension coiling like a pit viper in my gut. Its venom leaked, making me sick. I thought the climb would help. I thought the cold would help. Nothing but Gabe's touch was going to ease my discomfort. I needed to know that things were O.K., even though they weren't. We were two of a kind, and if he didn't understand my need, no one ever would.

Now wasn't the time. I'd told Gabe that, and I was exactly on target. Our focus needed to be on the mission ahead. That was where our thoughts *should* be. But mine weren't. It was all his fault.

His words rang in my mind. Their echo hollow. This could be our last chance to be together. A bittersweet release, nothing more. Even if we both lived through the mission what kind of future was there for two ex-assassins? We'd never talked future. We didn't exactly trust each other. We had our own agendas.

None of it mattered. He'd crossed a sacred line and raised the notion of dying on a job. This job.

No one ever talked about it. Sure, we all thought it. Lying in wait, we'd contemplate worst-case scenarios. The What-If monster was a hit man's partner, but no one ever spoke the words. What if he was injured? What if he died?

I looked down at my watch. I'd wasted twenty-eight minutes scouting around. Thirty-two minutes left, give or take. I was going to make the most of it.

Gabe had removed all trace of our being in the lower level. There was an observation deck where the night auditor usually stayed. Rather like a small apartment that overlooked the lower bay where I was supposed to wait for Hartgay and his Mountie contact to arrive. It looked like Gabe had moved all my equipment, computer and tote.

Taking the stairs by twos, I made up for lost time. It would have to be quick. The corner of my mouth tugged into a grin. Sometimes quick was exactly what the doctor ordered. Out of breath and patience, I stepped into the small room.

Gabe looked up from the paperback he was reading. "What's up?"

I closed the distance between us in a heartbeat--I counted--spun his chair to face me and straddled his lap. I'd never really thought of need and desire as forces, but that was before I sat on Gabe's lap and looked into his eyes. Then they were not only driving forces but full-blown compulsions.

Sinking my fingers deep into the thick layers of his hair, I tugged his head back and planted the kiss to end all kisses on the man.

I needed him. I craved a closeness only he could offer and a bonding of like souls. There was no one else on earth at that moment. Peeking at my watch, I released my hold on him. "You've got twenty minutes, hero. Show me what you can do."

He was already pulling off my shirt. "I only need ten."

The shirt popped over my head and landed on the floor in a heap. I cupped his chin. "Take twenty."

"Twenty minutes or twenty years. It will never be enough for me to show you how much I want you."

Twenty years? That was a lifetime in our business. My heart stopped beating, then thundered into action. He was just worked up about the job too. He couldn't mean what he said. He didn't know what he said. Pressing my lips to his with unchecked hunger, I attempted to silence his declarations. I didn't want to talk about feelings. I didn't want to think. I wanted to touch and feel. I wanted release, so my mind could be on doing my job and living to talk about it later.

With a sharp tug, I untucked his tee. My hands had a mind of their own. Starved for affection and ravenous for the feel of his skin next to mine. "Talk later. Love now."

\* \* \* \* \*

*What people are saying about*

## For The Love Of...

*For The Love Of...* is a fast paced, action packed, humor biting wit rollercoaster ride... For her debut novel, Ms. Surbeck has an incomparable voice and she will stand out among her peers. I will be anxiously waiting her next book.

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