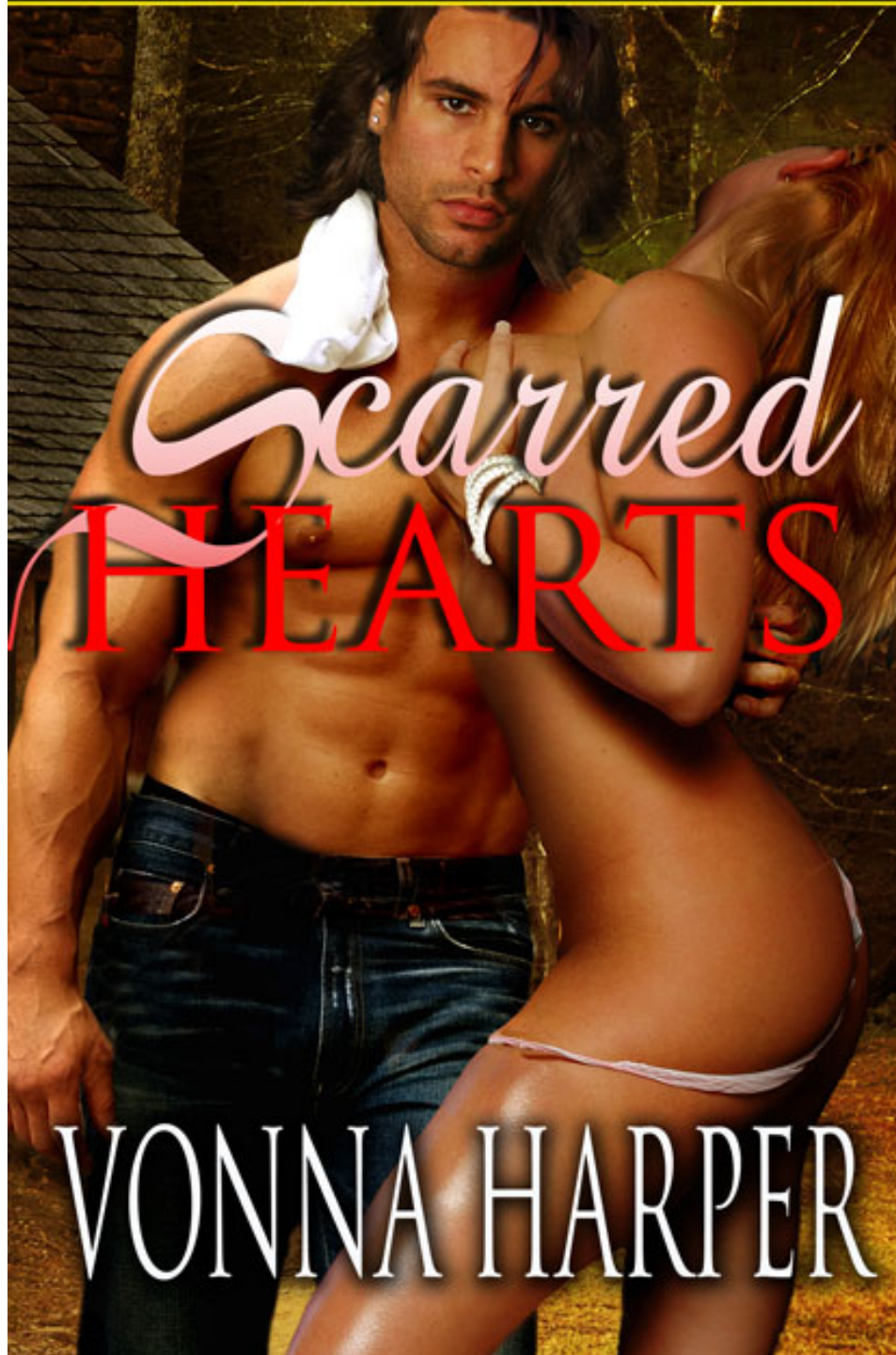


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



VONNA HARPER

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Scarred Hearts

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SCARRED HEARTS

Vonna Harper

Chapter One

The 800cc motorcycle growled under Charil Ross, causing her legs and cunt to vibrate. Breathing in exhaust fumes and dust, she gripped the handlebars with her leather gloves and stared up at the forty-five-degree hill. The manmade mountain of dirt had been rutted by the hill climbers who'd gone before her which meant keeping her cycle erect would take all her strength and skill.

But this was *her* four-hundred-foot-long challenge, and she knew the black and red beast under her as well as she did her own heartbeat.

To her left, a timer waited. Spectators and other competitors were everywhere, but only this man mattered. He and the one with the stopwatch at the top.

Smiling the smile of someone who knows what the hell she's doing, she kicked off. The cycle screamed and bellowed, wheels biting into the loose soil. As the slope steepened on its way to a seventy-five-degree angle, she leaned even further forward. Fought gravity. Fought the cycle that had turned into a raging stallion. This was about balance and sturdy boots and strong legs and arms, about not giving a damn about injury and practically fucking the machinery.

There. The top, the prize, challenge faced and conquered! Just beyond her reach.

Suddenly her rear wheel fishtailed, caught in a deep rut. Bellowing in determination, she clawed the ground with her boots and willed her cycle to keep going. Now the front end was threatening to flip backward, but she'd expected this. Like a bronc rider forcing a stallion's head down so it couldn't buck, she settled her weight over the handlebars.

"Take that, you damn stinking pile of dirt! Think you've got me? I'll show you! Show you!" *Live again.*

* * * * *

"Hey, no fair! How can we compete with you?"

Charil pulled off her helmet, freeing the mane of dark shoulder-length hair, and faced the lanky young man who'd just approached. "I didn't complete my registration which means my time doesn't count," she explained. "I'm just here for the exercise."

"Well, you sure as hell got that." The comment came from the lanky man's companion, who was yet another of the countless earnest racers she'd met over the years. "Fuck, I never thought a broad—"

"Not just any broad," the first speaker interrupted. "Charil Ross, holder of the woman's world record for sanctioned hill climbs."

Shaking her hands to settle the tingling brought on by gripping the handles, Charil breathed in the scent of her world. She'd been so consumed by emotional and legal matters over the past year that she'd only rarely had time to compete, but now the love, the joy, the danger came rushing back. It wasn't just the racers in their bright protective outfits or their made-to-go-like-hell dirt bikes, and it certainly wasn't exhaust fumes and yelling spectators. It was starting to return to life that had given her this high.

"The promoters and organizers here have put together a first-class event," she said. "The course is a killer." Her mind stumbled over the last word.

"Ain't it though. I've been following your career for years. Even with you being away from the circuit for a while, you're not going to have any trouble holding on to your record."

"I hope you're right." Her response was automatic because although she owed dedication and determination to her sponsors, she wasn't sure she still had the fire necessary to keep ahead of the pack of up-and-coming female racers. Even more serious, she wasn't sure she cared. Oh yes, racing was still a turn-on, but she wanted to ride against and with herself, to pit her strength and skill against impossibly steep and twisted tracks for the simple hell of it. Those challenges were for her, not the racing world she'd embraced for as long as she could remember – the world that had killed her brother and destroyed her family.

Fighting the weight of reality, she turned the conversation toward the two men she'd been talking to, and for the benefit of the crowd that had gathered around her. She asked how long they'd been competing, whether they'd gone to any of the established racing schools, what they thought of their bikes and maybe most important, how much they'd sacrificed for their sport.

As they and a number of others joked about how expensive maintaining their bikes, entry fees, and traveling to various races was, she acknowledged that not long ago her comments would have been the same. No doubt about it, motorcycle racing was an expensive addiction.

Unfortunately, his addiction had killed her brother.

No, she amended. A man, pure and simple, had snuffed out a fourteen-year-old life.

Blindsided by emotion, she scanned her surroundings for distraction. With the competition over, the track was being taken over by young kids on bicycles. Families were everywhere, the casual approach to crowd control obviously making them feel free to duck under the caution tape that lined the course.

God, how that took her back—back to when her family was a vital part of this scene!

Not good! Think of something else like how hot this damn long-sleeved shirt is, how you'd give a month's pay for a shower, how much your shoulders and legs are going to ache tomorrow.

She smiled as a girl who couldn't be more than a few weeks out of training wheels struggled to get her pink bicycle over a bump. Oh yes, there was Mom beaming and Dad walking over to lend a hand.

And there, standing alone on a rise, a big, hard man with too much black hair in a faded blue skintight T-shirt and even more faded jeans. He wore sunglasses, and that coupled with the distance between them prevented her from learning anything important about him. But there was no doubt—he was looking at her.

Fire licked her nerve endings. There wasn't enough air in her lungs.

No, not just looking at her. His intense gaze moving over her body, lingering at her throat and breasts, taking in her waist and hips, finally reaching her crotch and staying there. Saying everything and nothing.

Don't communicate with me like that! You think you know what I'm about, you arrogant bastard, but you don't! I'm stronger than you. Immune.

Unfortunately, the wet heat between her legs and melting belly muscles made a lie of her protest. And as his study of her continued, she acknowledged something else buried deep in his hard gaze. This was no chance meeting or come-on.

He knew things about her. Had things he wanted of her.

"Hey, where are you going?" someone asked when she started pushing her bike away from the crowd.

"Time to load this and get on the road."

"No way. You hafta stick around for the celebration."

"Please, Miss Ross. The press is going to be there. You talking to them'll go a long way toward keeping this race going. Make the sponsors more generous, you know."

"I'm not sporting any trophies."

"But you could if you'd bothered to acknowledge your first-place finish. Hell, you're big-time while the rest of us are mostly local yokels."

"And you're good-looking," a young woman said. "Hardly what outsiders expect to see when a hill climb competitor takes off her helmet."

Not quite ready to commit to another teeth-clenching session with the media, she looked around for inspiration or something. The man with the sprayed-on T-shirt was no longer standing watch over her, making it easier for her to see the truth of this tall hill beyond the city limits with the deeply rutted racetrack snaking down it like a Frankensteinian scar. These were real people, ordinary people, men, women and children drawn together by the love of competition and long summer weekends, the scream of motorcycles and dirt flying all around, an *I dare you* attitude in the air and athletes willing to accept that dare.

Hill climbs and other motorcycle events were more than blowing a wad of dough on a piece of two-wheeled machinery no sane person could justify buying. It was also families bonding over a shared experience, mostly blue-collar workers forgetting their

jobs and bills, hot dogs and soft drinks, laughter and cheers, wrecking and commiserating, bruises and burns and cheap trophies.

In other words, it was her world.

Or rather, it had been.

* * * * *

A large red and orange tent had been set up not far from the finish line, and it was now crammed with people looking to get away from the sun. An unpainted wooden box served as the awards platform. At the moment, no less than the mayor was handing out trophies and ribbons and reading from a script about what it had taken to put the race together. He asked everyone to thank a half dozen businesses and the local hospital for providing the ambulance which, thankfully, hadn't been needed.

How many times had she heard words like this? Had she once taken those images of fathers with their arms around their dirty, sweating sons for granted? What about the swaggering young bucks clutching beer cans as firmly as they had their bike handlebars and flirting with girls in short-shorts, halter-tops and too much makeup? How could she have forgotten that?

Feeling too alone for her sanity, she wished she hadn't agreed to stay. But she had, and not just because she wanted to do what she could to help the bottom line. A man was responsible—a man who hid behind reflective glasses but whose eyes nevertheless said things her too-long-alone body couldn't ignore.

She needed to fuck. That's all, plain and simple, a hot, hard, sweating roll in the hay and she'd be good for...for how long?

Was that why he'd been staring at her, because he'd sensed her sexual frustration and was willing to lend a hand, or rather his cock?

"Ladies and gentlemen," the hoarse-sounding mayor said. "I'm sure you all noticed that a certain young woman blew away the competition. She paid her admission fee but made it clear that she was racing for herself and not a share of the purse. From what I've been told, she doesn't need the few dollars we can offer here. She's one of the top moneymakers on the pro circuit, and the top woman rider."

I used to be, before fighting for justice came first.

"I'm proud to introduce our modest and unofficial champion, Charil Ross. Hop on up here, Charil."

Not bothering to see if her racing jersey was tucked in, she did as ordered. From her elevated position of maybe three feet above the crowd, she had a clear view of the upturned faces. The mayor, with frequent references to what someone had written out for him, clicked off a number of her accomplishments. She smiled and shrugged. All the time, she wrapped his words around her. Yes, she had done those things! Yes, she'd worked her ass off and risked her neck and every other bone in her body and had been damn proud of her guts and strength and skill.

A microphone was thrust at her. Taking it, she took a steadying breath. Racing hell-bent for leather was one thing, public speaking quite another. "I need to thank whoever dug up all that information about me," she started. "Damn. I was an overachiever, wasn't I?"

Laughter. Good.

"I'm not going to take up your time because it's too hot and there's beer and soft drinks waiting."

More laughter. On a roll now.

"What I do want to say is simple. Have a dream. Every one of you, have a dream and don't let go of it. It doesn't matter whether it's racing bikes or climbing a real or metaphorical mountain or getting all the laundry done, latch onto a goal and be as good at it as you possibly can. Share those dreams and goals with those you love—and listen when they tell you about theirs."

Oh god, there he was. Like her, alone in a sea of human beings. Glasses off now and revealing hell-dark eyes, thumbs hooked into his back pockets and hips thrust forward, shoulders too damn wide for any woman's libido, a *just try to ignore me* bulge, unruly hair. And his eyes—black. That's all she could tell from here. Deep. Probing. Piercing. Saying something to her.

Warning.

Chapter Two

Range had to hand it to her. Most women dropped their gazes as soon as they sensed the wolf in him, but she'd returned a hard message of danger with one of courage. Challenge meeting challenge. He hadn't expected that, but then he'd insisted his *client* not tell him anything about Charil Ross until he'd picked up everything he could on his own.

Now his curiosity was off the chart, but not just for the obvious reasons. Oh yeah, her body could make a man cry. She wasn't put together like some damn scrawny fashion model, but how could he ignore that strong and healthy frame? She made him think of an antelope or gazelle, slender but resilient on the inside, muscles made for survival.

He'd noted the reactions of the other men and had concluded there wasn't a one of them who wouldn't give their right hand to screw her. Hell, who wouldn't want a prime representative of the species opening her legs for them, especially one who was succeeding in a male-dominated world?

Some men might try to throw that success in her face either by treating her like a hothouse flower or accusing her of being butch, but not him, not when he could strip her down and explore her for what she was. Accept what genetics and life had made her.

Stick to the assignment. Make an assessment of the subject, formulate a plan. And throw up your defenses.

Feeling like the panther to which more than one woman had likened him, he slipped through the sweating bodies until he was just below the platform. He waited until she handed off the microphone. Then he looked up, locked eyes with her and issued his challenge. *Closer. Come close so you can feel my claws.*

Her shoulders squared and her head high, she accepted his hand. Then she made a lie of any pretending she needed help by jumping down beside him. He had no intention of releasing her long fingers, which she must have known, because she made no effort to free herself.

Damn. She wasn't as tall as he'd expected, and although he'd witnessed her strength, he sensed femininity, plain and simple. And eyes shadowed by grief.

Snagged by the need for answers, he let her fingers slip free. She could have turned and walked away and he sure as hell wouldn't have blamed her, but she didn't. Neither did she speak, which booted the ball into his court.

"Impressive. You did a hell of a job today."

"So I've just been told."

"No modesty?"

"I'm saying it like it is. What about you? Is this a come-on?"

What—or more to the point, *who*—had he gotten his hands on? Okay, so technically he didn't yet have his hands on her, but that would happen. Before, delivering her had been nothing more than another assignment in a *career* distinguished by a lack of rules. Now, for the first time in too long, he felt alive.

In lust.

"Do you want it to be a come-on?"

"Depends. Are you married?"

"No."

"In a serious relationship?"

There've only been one of those, and I'm not going there again. "No."

"On the make?"

"Depends on what you mean by *make*."

That elicited a laugh along with a wink of light in her too-somber gray eyes. "You know, I'm not sure what the word means."

"Why don't we play it by ear?"

"How?"

Shit, she wasn't backing down. Men were supposed to be the pursuers, women shy and sly while they pretended they weren't doing their own stalking, but she wasn't playing by those stupid rules. Maybe he wasn't the only one who didn't give a damn about rules, which would be worth finding out. "Let's get out of here before the other wolves close in."

"So you're a wolf? Shit. Forget I said that. I hate game-playing."

"So do I." Wondering if he was taking more of a chance than he could possibly know, he draped his arm over her surprisingly broad shoulders and ran interference.

More than one young buck issued a wordless challenge, but he let body language and eye contact let them know he was the alpha wolf. And for today at least, the alpha female belonged to him.

Shit. How hard was it to weave through the stereotypical mass of humanity? Why the hell was he so aware of the press of flesh and body heat?

Don't be an idiot! It's her you're feeling.

As a stupid kid of maybe eight or nine, he'd made the mistake of trying to crawl under an electric fence. Unfortunately, his back had made contact with the bottom wire just as his hands and knees were in mud. The resultant jolt had knocked him flat and muddied him from nose to toes. His clothes had been second- or third-hand, and no one would have given a damn if he'd made a mess of them anyway, but as he lay there trying to get his brain and nerves back, he'd wondered if he'd killed himself.

He wasn't close to doing the same thing today, but he'd have to be fourteen kinds of a fool not to know she was just as dangerous as that hot wire had been.

What about when I'm done with you? Will you still be dangerous?

Getting out from under the tent seemed to take forever, but now that he'd reached his first goal, what the hell was he supposed to do? She seemed to have the same thing in mind because she'd clasped her hands and was staring straight ahead.

"What made you decide to compete today?" he stupidly came up with. "As a pro in an amateur event, you wouldn't be able to accept any winnings, right?"

"Right. I was in town to pick up the bike I rode when I heard about today's event. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to give it a shakedown run."

I know what you came for. That's why the hell I'm standing here. "Did these weekend warriors give you enough of a challenge?"

"It's me and the time clock I'm competing against, not them." Her knuckles were turning white. Intrigued by what might be responsible for her tension, he started rubbing her shoulder. *Hell, watch the sparks!* Maybe she felt the same zing because she slid out from under him then whirled and faced him. Yes, definitely, sad eyes. Lonely eyes.

Why did Danny Tito hate her so much?

"Is that how you keep your edge?" he asked. "By kicking the local yokels' asses?"

"No. Of course not. Besides, what do you care?"

Because you're making me care, he came too close to admitting. Instead, he pasted on a wolfish grin. "Maybe I'm just trying to figure out how to get in your pants."

"At least you're honest."

If you believe that, you're a fool. And in more danger than you already are.

"I decided on the direct approach," he told her. "Let's turn that around. Do you want in my pants?"

"That's all there's going to be between us – fucking?"

How the hell was he supposed to answer that? What did she want to hear? "It's a start."

"Let's walk," she said and struck out.

Instead of immediately catching up, he held back so he could study the sway and grind of her ass muscles. Her racing pants were loose enough that too much was left to the imagination, but his imagination was working overtime. He'd find heat between her legs. And with the proper stimulation on his part, they'd add more than enough moisture to the mix. Since he was already in fantasy mode, why not get rid of the sports bra so her nipples stood at attention, soft, smooth mounds waiting for him.

His mouth as dry as it hadn't been since adolescence, he caught up. Although he wanted to, in spades, he didn't touch her. Slowing to match her pace, he willed himself

to stay in this one single moment. As for why that was important when she was nothing more than a future subject – who the hell knew?

“What are you doing here?” she asked as she headed toward the graveled parking lot crammed with trucks and trailers. “You don’t race.”

“No. I don’t. Like you, I happened to be in town and heard about the climb. Decided to check it out.”

She flicked him a *can I buy that* look. “You have business here?”

You’re my business. My assignment. “My employer asked me to check out some equipment he’s interested in acquiring.”

“You gave him your report? Is he going to buy?”

“Oh yes. Everything is as advertised.” *Stop playing word games.* “What’s up next for you?”

“I’m not sure.” Her voice sounded tired. “I have commitments to my sponsors. Making up for lost time. I’ll have to check my schedule to know where I’m due next.”

He knew, not that he was going to spill because the last thing he needed her considering was whether he was a stalker. Trying to appear casual and only slightly interested in her and only in the sex department wasn’t working as well as he wanted so he drew their attention to the parking area. He said something mildly stupid about wondering how much money people had spent on the motorized toys and whether gas prices were having an adverse effect on racing. She replied that she only added up the cost of being a professional racer at tax time and didn’t think anyone had stopped competing because of the prices at the pumps. By then they were standing by a three-quarter-ton, long-bed pickup. Hers, obviously.

“What do you do about sleeping when you’re on the road?” he asked. “You don’t have a trailer. Motels?”

“I’ve seen enough motels to last a lifetime. I have a tent.”

So that conversation went nowhere. “Do you ever want to settle down? What about buying a house and –”

“What makes you think I don’t have one?”

Careful. “Hell, I don’t know what made me say that. Maybe because you’re on the motorcycle racing circuit, or whatever it’s called, so much, and what’s the point of having a place you never see? So how about setting me straight.”

Interesting. What should have been a casual question had darkened her eyes and thinned her mouth.

“What do you care?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Look, there’ve been some changes in my family recently. Deaths. Home base doesn’t exist anymore.”

And it’s tearing you apart. Damn it, Tito. What didn’t you tell me?

And why the hell should you care? the cynical beast inside demanded.

"See? Aren't you sorry you asked?"

"I'm thinking the details aren't something you'd tell a stranger."

That earned him a frown and underlying that a vulnerability he didn't want to see but couldn't pretend wasn't there. "Maybe, maybe not. Sometimes talking to someone who doesn't have a stake in things helps. Strangers passing in the night or however that goes."

Shit, in his world, men and women sized each other up and if the pieces fell together, they fell on each other. He wanted to grab her hard and bend her back and swallow her body with his larger one. She'd cinch her arms around his neck to keep from landing on her ass, her pelvis pushing against his in a message only the brain-dead could miss. Clothes would fly away, female legs part, invitation accepted and acted on. Wham, bam, gotta go.

None of those things were happening, and he didn't know how to make them—or maybe the truth was, for some damn reason he couldn't get a handle on, getting inside the lady's head was taking precedence over her pants.

"As for your observation, it's the middle of the day, not the middle of the night," he came up with. "And we're not total strangers because I know your name, thanks to the announcer."

"Point taken. So, what's your name?" She'd gone back to linking her fingers together over her belly which took him back to when another woman had pressed her hands to her belly and told him his child had begun its life in there.

Had. Past tense. "Range. Range Seagan."

"Interesting name."

"That's what I've been told."

He thought she might ask about the name's origin and wondered if he could concoct something other than the truth which was he'd picked it out himself because he didn't like the one some social worker had given him, but she took him off the hook by patting the side of her truck. A clicking drew his attention to her hand and the simple ring on her baby finger. He indicated it. "Is that all the jewelry you wear?"

She nodded. "It was my brother's. He won it at a carnival, called it his good luck ring."

"So why are you wearing it? He had more than enough luck for one person and decided to pass it on?"

"My brother's dead. At fourteen."

Shit. Ah, shit.

For a man who gave himself no credit when it came to having or expressing empathy, pulling her into his arms came as easy as walking. To his surprise, she stayed there. She didn't start crying or doing anything else he wouldn't know how to handle, but tension flowed through her. She wasn't breathing. "Do you want to talk about it?"

“No.”

Thank god. “That must have been hell for the family.”

“Hell and then some.” Planting her hands on his chest, she pushed back but didn’t try to wriggle free. He should be measuring her strength against his for future reference but only those too big, too deep gray eyes mattered.

“You’re beautiful,” he muttered. “Shit.”

“Shit what?”

“That wasn’t what I meant to say.” And for a moment he didn’t know what to do either, but she solved that by parting her lips – slightly, just enough.

Soft. Warm. Moist. Like other parts of her anatomy.

His cock was already pointing out how long it had gone without getting any action, but sometimes that part of his anatomy had to show a little patience. This was one of those times.

Her mouth wasn’t the only soft and warm thing about her, just ask his ribs where her breasts pressed. From a distance, the sports bra had looked pretty formidable, but it had either evaporated or heat had melted it. This time she didn’t stop her hand movement at his chest, didn’t try to break the lip lock. Instead, her arms went around his neck. Held fast.

Oh yes, there was strength beneath the surface all right. But the surface, her lips parting even more, her tongue coming into play, her groin pushing against him and saying...saying what?

That she was hungry? That she needed to fuck? That she didn’t want to think.

He could accommodate.

And nothing else. For now.

Chapter Three

What a slut you are.

On the heels of her proclamation, Charil retorted that she wasn't officially a slut because she hadn't yet done the deed, but if the swirling fire running through her veins was any barometer, the deed was on the horizon and the horizon only a few feet away.

Not brave enough to answer why she was giving out no-nonsense messages to a man she didn't know from anything, she dove deep into sensation. The summer day had left its imprint on him, heating him and sharing the curious mix of lethargy and anticipation that comes from hours in the sun.

At least they had a love of the outdoors in common. Then, although that could have been a lie, she threw away the lock on her emotions, her sanity. She now existed, simply existed.

In a stranger's arms, her own arms clutching him as if she were afraid of drowning, melting inside, nipples so hard they hurt. She wasn't sure but thought she'd stopped answering his kiss so took up the battle again. Before she'd been so shocked by the rapid progress of what they were doing that she'd just stood there and accepted his lips against hers, but there was no longer any pretending she was some chaste maiden. Hardly. If she'd ever been chaste she didn't remember and she hadn't been or wanted to be a maiden for years.

Shut down. Be. Feel.

Something rippled through her. The sensation came and went so fast she couldn't be sure but maybe—maybe a mini orgasm. Shocked and excited, she went in search of it. She undulated, rolling toward him in waves starting with her breasts and moving down so by turn she pressed her midsection, belly, pelvis, thighs, even her knees at him. Her groin all but cried out, demanding more! Harder!

Mouth open and panting now, she arched back and drove into him. Thoughts snapped and shorted out, a question here, a cautionary cry there.

Do. Be. Feel. Nothing else. Only sex. Only fucking.

Ah, yes, his arm hard against her shoulder blades so she was locked in place, his pelvis and as a consequence the hot promise between his legs demanding entrance. He wanted her pussy. Insisted on it, no quarter asked or given.

Why not? At least you're alive, for the first time in too long, alive!

Emboldened by the overwhelming need to feel her heart beating again, she rocked from side to side. Friction licked at her breasts and added to the fire.

After a minute, he turned around so her back slid against his chest. One male arm closed over her breasts, the other boldly cupped her mons. In an act of ultimate

surrender, she lifted her arms and reached behind her for his neck, leaving the rest of her open and exposed.

A warrior, a warrior and a wolf clamping down on a breast until something nearing pain rocked her. Growling low in her throat, she tested her ability to break free. Not going to happen. His fingers locked around her mound and a nipple stabbed into his palm.

“God damn you!” he hissed with his mouth near her ear. “Fucking damn you.”

Power words, words forced out of a man with a throbbing cock. Taking them for what they were, she let them into her skin and from there to her nerves and veins. Yes, closing in on her cunt, adding fuel to the fire there.

“Damn you!”

Her outburst tore at her throat and served as a warning. Just because she hadn’t seen anyone out here didn’t mean they had the parking lot to themselves. She didn’t want to frighten children or embarrass their parents, didn’t want any of them to know what a whore she was beneath her racing clothes.

But damn it, this man with his hot hard hands had turned her on! Thanks to him, she was in heat. Sudden. Complete.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Damn me. Damn both of us.”

Ah, they were in this together, not just her but him as well without an idea in hell what was happening. Or why. “Fuck me,” she demanded. “Get it over with.”

What, now? Oh shit, his palm pressing against her mons, fingers reaching between her legs. Done in, she allowed him access. Her head rolling to the side, she pressed her lips together to keep from crying out.

He was everywhere. She felt him along her spine and down her legs, pulsing through her breasts, but mostly her cunt acknowledged the male invasion.

No reality. No questions about sanity. No existence beyond this.

“I have a rubber.”

“Do you?” *Great. Brilliant comment.*

“Either tell me to put it on or order me to get the hell away, now.”

Throwing the decision at her, was he? Demanding she be the voice of reason and responsibility. But he had a rubber so wasn’t that being responsible?

“Not here,” she managed. “Too public.”

He didn’t respond, at least not right away. Instead, he stroked her core through her pants. For a few manageable seconds, he kept his movements slow and gentle, not that her clit gave a damn about titillation because it wanted hard. Hot.

Then, oh holy shit, his fingers stroking her from front to back in long, graceful, inescapable slides. No longer able to keep her mouth closed, she let it drop open so she could pull more air into her lungs. The air was soured from exhaust fumes and hot briquettes. Surrendering to the weight of her arms, she lowered them to her sides. But

instead of resting there and helping her conserve her strength, they soon went in search of his hips. Yes, there they were. He tensed when she ground her fingertips into his flesh and bones but didn't try to shake her off. And he gave as good as he was getting by lengthening his strokes.

Not just longer. More insistent. Further fueling the fire in her pussy. Sending flames shooting throughout her until she was gasping like a fish out of water.

Don't let him win. Drive him as crazy as you're becoming.

Yes, she could do that, pushing her ass back at him and grinding against his trapped cock. Not letting up no matter what and slipping into his mind until she was certain she knew what he was feeling. Discomfort, yes, but pleasure and hard need and anticipation mixing in and keeping him going. Reminding him of his goal.

"Shit, shit, shit," he ground out.

"Not here. Privacy."

"Where, damn it? Where?"

So much responsibility. So many decisions to make. Through a ruby haze, she took note of her surroundings. To her right and maybe half a football field length away were a couple of older RVs with no one near them. Their bulk, surely that was enough of a curtain. She nodded.

Saying nothing, he tightened his hold on her boobs but let up on the pressure between her legs so she felt the pulse in his fingertips as they slid through her pants and into her pussy. How strange, how incredible to sense a man's heartbeat this way!

"You're sure?" he whispered.

Hell no. I don't know anything. "Are you?"

"I don't know. Yes, damn it, yes."

They ran together, stumbling really, fingers intertwined, not looking at each other or behind them. Having her cunt to herself again restored some of her sanity. If she put Herculean effort into it, she could have told him this was a major mistake and no way in hell was she going to bonk some man she didn't know. But she didn't because her body was having none of that.

The RV drivers had taken advantage of the shade provided by a number of scrub oak trees. Just beyond the trees was a sagging barbed wire fence followed by a whole lot of nothing which meant only those associated with the RVs would have any reason to come out here, right? Besides, if the same fever ran through him, this wouldn't take long.

Now that they had a measure of privacy, he released her and stepped back. Gathering the guts that made it possible for her to compete professionally around her, she looked at him. He had a hand on his cock or at least what he could get to with his jeans in the way. The other was in his hair pressing on his temple and further tangling the already wind-claimed mass. That's what a man's hair should look like, raw and shaggy, no products ironing it to his head. And that damnably sexy faded T-shirt! So

much of it had remained in the lint filter that the thin remnant relied on his frame for a semblance of structure. His jeans weren't much better, comfortable and casual wear that loved its owner and showed its affection by caressing muscles and bones and, most important, cock.

Halfway toward taking another look at his shoes, raging need seized her. This man wasn't just a hunk. He was life! A reason for her to celebrate being alive.

"Last chance to bail." His tone reminded her of a dog growling. "After that, I'm not stopping."

Take a breath. Try to find something to cool your lungs. Not working? All right, all right. "I'm not bailing. Where's that condom?"

So much for subtlety and civilization, she thought as he reached into his back pocket and came up with the equivalent of a green light. His hand shook as he worked on his zipper so she took the small envelope from him. By the time, the snap had relinquished its job, she'd torn the packaging off with her teeth.

Strange. Even though he was pulling his jeans down around his thighs with his ass out in the breeze so to speak, he hadn't lost his dignity. Maybe it was his eyes, dark and quiet. Her own fingers now less than steady, she returned the rubber to him. Instead of standing there like a voyeur while he put it on, she kicked out of her boots so she could dispense with the now hotter-than-hell racing pants and briefs. Naked from the waist down, she turned her attention to the family jewels.

There was no comparing his equipment with other cocks because she'd lost all objectivity, and in her befuddled state she didn't trust her eyes, let alone her reaction.

Just the same —

Big. Gulp-producing big as in long and broad and straight and armed. Thankfully his cock hadn't crossed the line from normal to holy shit, but it was definitely at the top of the scale. In its engorged state, the skin looked stretched to the bursting point, purpled veins visible through the thin skin. It scared her. No way around it, the thought of letting that penis into her made her clamp her thighs together. And yet, had she ever wanted anything more?

"You're staring."

About to apologize, she noticed that his attention was on the apex of her legs. She used to shave herself there but no longer because other things—like staying sane through the nights—had become much more important. She'd stopped bothering with an all-over tan and couldn't remember when she'd last taken a razor to her legs, but something told her he didn't give a damn. "So are you."

"Take off your top."

"What? If someone comes —"

"Please."

Yes, if you say it like that. Pulling the shirt over her head created so much static that strands of hair stood at attention, but now that only her practical bra stood between her

and nudity, her breasts became a lot more important than mussed hair. Licking her dry lips with a numb tongue, she cupped her mounds. Pressing did nothing to lessen the throbbing, and they were now two sizes too big for the bra.

“Off.”

Only a single word, but it was everything. One quick movement and the sports bra followed her top to the ground. Naked. Nude. Exposed. Too hot for a summer day and getting hotter, mind buzzing and pussy insistent. “Now,” she ground out.

“Yes, now.” With that, he pulled her against him. Only then did she ponder how they were going to do the deed. Not down on the dry grass with the bugs—that would kill the mood.

“You’re light,” he informed her although her feet were still on the ground. “What, a hundred and ten pounds?”

“Give or take.”

“Good.”

Before she could ask why that mattered, he guided her hand to his cock. If she hadn’t been a modern woman, she would have torn off the damn rubber and caution but she couldn’t go that far.

Feeling acutely alive and yet divorced from her body, she turned her attention to his balls. Oh yes, silken flesh, maybe the only soft thing about him! Cradling his scrotum in one hand, she hefted his weight and tried to wrap her mind around what she was doing. The words dangerous stranger kept coming to mind, but she threw them away because he wasn’t the danger, her reaction to him was.

Her heartbeat was caught between overdrive and nonexistent, sending blood to her temples and places south. Someone cranked up the distant sound system, and although she usually hated the frantic angry quality of much of today’s music, it fueled her reckless energy. Her fingers twitched.

“Shit! You want me to go off here and now?”

“What?” Dragging her gaze upward, she looked into the eyes of a man on fire. “No, not like this.”

“Inside you then?”

Question of the century. “Fuck me.”

His fingers digging into her hips, he lifted her off the ground. Knowing what he had in mind with every fiber of her being, she spread her legs and wrapped them around his hips, her crotch in line with the payoff. Her arms were around his neck, and because she trusted him—or was beyond anything except having to trust—to keep her from falling back, she leaned away. A shift of his hands from her hips to her buttocks allowed him to lift her higher. She helped by locking her legs over his waist.

His cock seemed to be everywhere at once, dragging over her belly or probing her mons, grinding along her pussy, seeking, always seeking. “I can’t—damn it, I can’t get in you.”

“Wait. Hold on!” Trusting her right arm to grip his neck, she caught his cock in her left and guided it to her entrance. Instead of pushing him in, she leaned back a little more and thrust her pelvis toward him at the moment he came at her. As he slid in, she returned her left hand to his neck.

In her. Filling her. Stretching the passage that hadn’t been stretched by living flesh in far too long. Heating her core and causing even more moisture to flow. Sucking in air that now smelled only of him, she closed her eyes and fucked him.

He gave as good as she did, even better because he was so much stronger. Grunting with each thrust, he ran his hard cock along the full length of her channel. Fast, powerful, no quarter asked or given, he skewered her over and over again until she rode on a burning current. She was being lifted beyond herself and yet down and tight inside her cunt at the same time, existing nowhere else, grunting her own naked grunts as she pounded back. Her back and belly and thigh muscles burned, and she gasped like a racehorse nearing the finish line. His sounds were just as frenzied, deeper and out of control.

Yes, racing toward something, powered by wet heat and screaming nerves, barely sane enough to lock her throat muscles against primal screams.

Coming! He was coming!

Cursing the damnable rubber that kept her from feeling the full heat of his semen, she threw herself into his release and found her own.

The muscle spasm that was her climax hit full and free and without warning. Teeth clenched and eyes shut against anything except this moment, she dove into it. Overload went on and on, lifting her out of herself, delivering everything that mattered in life—oblivion, release.

No control. Even when fear of the current they’d created intruded, she couldn’t find her way to the shore. Power rolled over her, taking her up and bringing her down only to repeat the process. Her skin was on fire and weeping at the same time. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t tell where she was or how she’d gotten there.

Then, when she had no more to give, the earthquake ended, not with a sudden stop but decreasing tremors. If not for her too-sensitive clit, she could have drifted like this forever.

A thin line of pain ran along her spine to bring her back to the world. Heeding the risk of a muscle cramp, she brought herself upright and pressed her naked sweating breasts against his T-shirt. Despite his ragged breathing, he held her as if she was a baby. They rocked with her body locked against his, and she didn’t want to speak, wanted only to feel him.

Finally though, gravity made its impact, and he let her down again. They were still touching, arms around each other and her head resting against his chest. There was suddenly something almost frightening about being naked while he still had on clothes and was thus capable of facing and interacting with the world.

Had he done that on purpose?

Not sure whether she was suspicious of him or simply needed back her personal space, she twisted free and reached for her clothes.

"Just like that?"

"What do you want, a repeat performance? Sorry but I'm not good for more than one of those a day." She was careful not to look at him.

"Are you afraid of me?"

What a damn stupid and insightful question to ask. "Let's just say I was feeling vulnerable and needy. You took advantage of that."

"The hell I did!"

Having her panties and pants back on gave her a certain confidence to say nothing of having covered her wet and swollen pussy. She lifted her head. "All right, you didn't seduce me."

"No more than you did me."

That stopped her. What the hell had happened today? "I have to go," she lied.

"I didn't take you for a coward."

"I'm not!" He hadn't bothered to pull up his jeans so here they were, a man with a used condom hanging from his spent cock and a woman with naked hard-as-sex nipples arguing over shit that didn't matter.

And yet mattered a great deal.

"I'm not a coward," she repeated. "Chalk it up to strangers passing in the night, temporary insanity, hormones, whatever you want to call it." The next words threatened to stick in her throat, but she forced them out anyway. "It's not going to happen again."

Chapter Four

Her father's room smelled of decay. Although she'd been in it enough times to know what to expect, she had to force herself to stay in the too-small space. His bed took up nearly a quarter of the three-hundred square feet, with a large blaring TV, recliner and a dresser claiming their share. Not until she stepped between the screen and him did he acknowledge her. Waiting to see if, not when, he'd recognize her, she thought of what the resident nurse had just told her. Not much change. No interest in physical therapy. Eats what he likes. Loves playing poker with some of the other men.

"It's a beautiful day, Dad." She forced the cheerfulness. "What if we go outside? I'd like to take you to dinner, pizza."

At the word *pizza*, the nearly dead eyes flashed. "The place with the sports TV?"

"If that's where you want to go." *Be glad he remembers that.* "So, what if I help you put on your shoes and dust off the wheelchair? I want to tell you what I've been doing, show you pictures of what's going to be Shap's track. Thanks to the volunteers, it's really coming along."

Blankness slid over her father's gray eyes, and he tried to look around her at the damnable idiot box. Willing herself to be patient, she turned it off and dug under his bed for the slippers that were the only things he wore anymore. From unwanted experience, she knew he'd perk up once he was no longer self-drugging himself with television and remember her project, her passion and his dead son's name. And although getting his crippled body in and out of her truck and the wheelchair would tax her emotional and physical strength, she'd do this because Walter was her father, the only other member of the family still alive.

Yakking insanely about everything from the weather to his beloved Yankees, she looked around at the space that was as much cell as home for him. She was responsible for the cheerful nature scenes on the walls, the trio of plants on the windowsill, the pictures of her, his wife and son on the nightstand.

No matter how many times she looked at those images from an innocent era, the loss always hurt. Just the same, she perched on the side of her father's bed and used a tissue to dust the surfaces. Her mother had been an unbelievably beautiful woman, and as a small child she'd believed that Mom was a movie star who cared for her children and did dishes between movies. As for Shap—even during the terrible twos, she'd loved him with a big sister's passion. She'd been there when he took his first steps and had taught him a word that had gotten both of them in trouble. She'd cried during his kindergarten graduation, helped with seventh grade math, coached him so he'd know what to say the first time he asked a girl if she wanted to go to a school dance with him.

And she'd been at the hospital the night he died.

"Let's blow this joint, Dad. Just you and me, kicking up our heels."

"Just you and me? What about..."

"About who?" Keeping him connected with the real world was vital.

"Your...your...husband."

Not Mom. Not Shap. "I don't have one of those." She hugged his heavy and yet frail body to her. "Maybe I was fixing a flat when they were giving out husbands."

"Then get one. I'm not always going to be around, you know."

You aren't here anyway, not really. "I'll see what I can do about it."

But as she closed the door behind them, she acknowledged that she didn't want or need a permanent man in her life, at least not now. Commitment meant exposing one's emotions to another human being and hers were still wounded. She was fine alone, safe alone. And when her itches begged to be scratched, she either reached for her toys or went in search of a man.

No, not just any man. The hunk who'd screwed her a week ago but would never see again had shown up in hot dreams every night since then.

* * * * *

"So you've met her. What did you think?"

Sitting across the small table in the hotel bar from Danny Tito, Range used the dim lighting to take his measure of the man. On the phone, Tito had come across as a confident businessman, but the impression had slipped a bit the first time he'd met him, and it was slipping more now. Not only had Tito already gulped down his drink but there was an unnatural stillness to him as if he was working to keep his emotions from showing. He'd seen more than enough men like Tito, drug runners and arms dealers, out-and-out outlaws and contract killers. Those men presented public faces totally without conscience or empathy to the ignorant, but he'd always been able to sense the truth behind the façade. Even if they were freaks of nature born without the capacity to care, they sensed that they were different and that difference made them uneasy.

Tito had once been an ordinary or nearly ordinary child so he couldn't say where or under what circumstances the man had taken a one-eighty turn, but even if he didn't know it, a part of Tito wanted to get back on the path he'd started on. All the rationalization and self-importance and power in the world couldn't completely erase a simple fact – altering someone else's life was wrong.

What the hell did he care? Tito was throwing damn good money at him to put her on ice for as long as it took for Tito to accomplish whatever he intended to accomplish.

"I've met her. She was where you said she'd be."

"And she competed, didn't she? Blew away the competition."

"They were amateurs, she's a pro."

“No shit. Bikes are in her blood. She needs the excitement and danger, the challenge.”

“What’s this about?” He took a sip of his whiskey. “Are we here to analyze her? I thought you wanted her parked somewhere. Hell, you’re not asking me to baby-sit her, are you? I don’t—”

“No, no.” When Tito scanned the room, Range nearly laughed. Did he really think anyone gave a damn what two conservatively dressed and appearing men were saying? “Your fee’s too high for that. I still just want an in-and-out from you, the delivery we talked about.”

“Go on.”

Tito signaled the bartender to bring him another drink. “You need yours freshened?”

“I’m good.” One drink was all he allowed himself when he was on a job, something he hadn’t had for nearly three months which meant his bank account was all but depleted and his skills in danger of turning rusty. “You know, I think I’m going to ask for more information. Where’s she going to be while she’s out of the mainstream and why are you doing this?”

“After what she’s put me through, she has this coming.”

The natural conclusion, that Charil and Tito had had a romantic relationship but it had gone bad, had to be dead wrong. Not only was Tito at least twenty years older than her with a body that had gone to hell, he’d never in a million years believe Charil would spread her legs for Tito. At least not willingly. “What does she owe you? Why are you going after payment the way you are?”

After a glance at the bartender, Tito leaned forward. “Don’t push me. No one gets away with that. Damn it, you’re getting paid damn well to do what I order, no questions asked. If you don’t like the rules, I’ll take my business elsewhere.”

How many times had he had that so-called threat thrown at him? At least a half dozen and always by men who knew as well as he did that their options were limited because not many human beings operated outside the law in order to fulfill the wishes of other human beings. As a card-carrying member of that underworld, he couldn’t think of more than four contract workers. One had just been sent to prison, another was on a job that had taken him out of the country, and the other two were on the East coast. Not bothering to throw Tito’s bullshit in his face, he sat back and watched the bartender set down the drink. “I was your first choice. Why?” he asked once the bartender had left.

“First, you don’t draw the line at what you’re willing to do, right? I was told—”

“I’m not going to kill or maim her. I made that clear the first time we talked.”

“No, no.” Tito took an unhealthy slug. “That’s not what I want at all. You, ah, you spent some time watching her. You talked to her?”

He nodded. His balls tightened.

“What did you think of her?”

“She’s one of the world’s beautiful women, but it doesn’t matter a damn to her. More important, either she’s outright courageous or she doesn’t give a damn whether she lives or dies.”

Tito’s lips tightened. “She cares. The woman’s capacity for what she believes is revenge—I want her. On her knees before me.”

Revulsion slammed into his gut. Knowing it would sit there for a long time, Range settled with shoving it to the side. Yeah, this could be pure bullshit on Tito’s part, but what if it wasn’t? “How are you going to make that happen?”

Another swallow on Tito’s part said a great deal. Slowly, reluctantly, the older man locked eyes with him. “I’m still working on the details.”

By the way Tito was staring at him, Range clearly understood how much his reaction and response meant to him. What would Tito say if he knew Charil had fucked him? Would he believe there’d been a compromise and go in search of the guy in some god-forsaken third-world country or the two on the East coast? Didn’t matter because he’d never say.

“You’d better have those details worked out by the time I have her. And they better not put her life at risk.”

“What the hell do you care once you get paid?”

“I’m not a killer. You knew that going into this.”

“Back off, man. I was just testing you. Besides, why would I want a piece like that dead? Hell, why can’t I dream of her spreading her legs for me? It could happen.”

“The things you’ve said, she hates your guts, right? And you feel the same way about her.”

“For good reason. I need her to disappear long enough for a certain heat to calm down, for the legal system to get it that what she’s been saying about me is a pile of crap and she’s unreliable.”

“What about when she shows up again?”

“If it’s done right, she’ll have had an attitude adjustment thanks to the keepers you’ll deliver her to.”

Keepers? This was getting sicker and sicker. He had done business in foreign cities where sexual slavery was condoned which could be why his thinking was going in that direction, but he’d never been and had no intention of ever joining that lucrative and deadly enterprise. Quite the opposite, he’d twice worked undercover to get a couple of kidnapped American women out of that hell, and although he’d hated having to leave others behind, at least he’d done some good.

Okay, so maybe a savage part of him fantasized about having a female wearing his collar and living to serve him, but that’s all it was—a prelude to jacking off. The same fantasy was probably pushing Tito’s bullshit words. “Who are these keepers?”

“What do you care? I know you, Range. There’s nothing you won’t do if the money’s right.”

Wrong. And yet— “I don’t sell anyone down the river.”

“Especially not her, right?” Up until now Tito had had that furtive look as if he wasn’t sure everything wouldn’t blow up in his face, but that changed. Leaning back, he fixed his hard gaze on Range. “How do you think I knew where you’d find her? I’ve been having her followed. And my man was there when the two of you met. He isn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he knows fucking when he sees it. She turned you on once. She’ll do it again. And this time you won’t have to hide behind an RV to ball her. Hell, look at it this way. How many times in a man’s life does he get paid to screw the broad who’s turned him on?”

She’s still turning me on. Can’t get her out of my mind, or my bed while I’m sleeping. My bed, not yours, you bastard. Studying Tito, something clicked inside him, a corner turned. “Let’s talk specifics.”

* * * * *

Stalking made him feel alive. Following another human being when that human didn’t know her every move was being tracked brought things down to basics. At times like this, Range existed in the ever-changing present. He had no past, thank god, no future to question a reason for. In essence, he was no longer himself but had heart and soul become his quarry.

Too much of the time, his quarry had no soul and just enough heart to keep the veins filled with blood which made following and watching and waiting for Charil so interesting.

Hell, more than interesting! The roll of her hips as she walked, the straight-up set of her head as if facing her own world took effort and control fascinated him. Equally fascinating but not necessarily to his brain was the way she filled out her clothes. Damn those long, strong legs which today were all but hidden under a loose, soft skirt that came to her knees. In deference to southern California’s heat, she wore a sleeveless shell or whatever they called those things, the neckline not exactly plunging but revealing too much for him to ignore. In some respects she reminded him of a wild cat, all grace and muscles, wary and solitary, determined and lonely—just like him.

Hell! Knock it the fuck off! He wasn’t here to psychoanalyze the target. And neither was he, contrary to what Tito believed, after her for the stated purpose of robbing her of her freedom. Even if Tito put a gun to his head, he wouldn’t have been able to say why he hadn’t turned his back on the assignment. Money factored in, but that was only a small part of the whole.

She’d gotten under his skin, all right! Nothing more complicated than that—and suspicions about Tito’s true agenda. Thanks to Tito and a lifetime of living in a shadowed world, he’d been given the perfect opportunity for exploring how she’d found a place under his skin and what he’d do about it.

At the moment, he wasn't matching his own long legs to her pace. Instead, he was cooling his heels under a tree trapped in concrete while she was doing who the hell knew what inside a shout-its-success L.A. high-rise. People did the clichéd flow past, ninety-nine percent of them unaware of his existence. A couple of young boys, remarkable because there weren't that many children in the financial district, had given him a child's honest once-over which he'd returned because, hell, because they were open and new. One secretary-type broad who couldn't have reached legal drinking age had stopped in mid-stride and done a double take. Sex had spun between them, but he figured he'd scared her because after a few seconds she'd all but run in her determination to put distance between them.

Funny. Charil hadn't been afraid of him.

* * * * *

Charil waited until she reached the street before allowing herself a smile and sigh of relief. Even if the cause was a good one, she hated asking people for money. At times like this, she felt like a whore for trading on her so-called fame and marketability in order to get businesses to open their checkbooks, but not only didn't she have the money to get the grass-roots program in her brother's memory up and running, spreading the news and excitement depended on having as many heavyweight names as possible behind it.

A major property developer was heavyweight. Not only had the CEO written a sizable check, he'd indicated he could pull some strings to entice the owner of some worthless desert land next to the acreage she'd already purchased to sell it for a fire sale price.

"I wish you were here, Shap," she muttered as she stepped to the corner to hail a cab. "With your gift of the gab, we would have nailed things down in half the time."

But her only brother was no longer anywhere thanks to the bastard who'd killed him in every way except the deed itself.

Pushing aside the reality that never failed to turn her feet to lead and her heart to tears, she climbed inside the taxi and told the driver what hotel she was staying at. One more meeting tomorrow morning and she could get out of the city, back where she could drive her truck instead of having to rely on public transportation, away from all these people and noise and smells.

Back to doing what she needed to, to put Tito behind bars.

* * * * *

Thanks to the impossible traffic, the ride had taken over half an hour. After shelling out for the fare, she stood in front of the too-expensive hotel. It was time for the commute home for most of the people working here which made her wonder if in another hour or so the commercial and convention area would be deserted. Maybe

another human flow came in at night, men without a single suit to their names and women who'd rather be shot than wear heels. If that was the case, she wanted to be out on the street then because no matter what they did and why they preferred the night, they were more her kind of people.

And anything was better than spending another night cooped up in her too-fancy room when her skin sang and ached. Feeling even more restless than she once had while hunched over her bike waiting for a race to start, she made the monumental decision to go to her room long enough to change into comfortable shoes and wash off the war paint she'd reluctantly put on as part of today's persona.

Walking through the lobby, she spied the hotel bar. A dark cave, it represented a world apart from reality where alcohol smoothed the edges and men and women sometimes hit on each other. Maybe she'd go in there and find a man to have sex with.

That's not you. Never has been and never will be.

Except for once.

Awash in now familiar memories of the mindless fucking of a little over a week ago, she opted for the stairs over the elevator. By the time she reached the fifth floor, she was sweating and her heart protested, and the memories had kept pace, damn them.

Entering her room, she locked the door behind her. Once she'd kicked off the uncomfortable shoes, she went into the bathroom where she scrubbed her face clean. After dabbing on moisturizer, she returned to the main room and paced to the window. Looking down, she saw what she'd seen for the past three days, the hotel service and employee parking area. There was a limo on one side, a linen supply van backed up to an open door, battered dumpsters.

Sudden and powerful restlessness slammed into her. Jamming her feet into her tennis shoes, she grabbed her room key and some money and more ran than walked out of her room. She again headed for the stairs.

What in the hell was she doing in this imprisoning box? She'd always craved space. Most of the time she'd been growing up, home had been a motor home because what did four gypsies need with concrete and wood? Life was to be lived on the move, racing or traveling, seeing the world and facing one racetrack challenge after another.

Now she ran from memories, tried to anyway.

At the end of the third floor, one had to turn left in order to reach the stairs to the second floor. As she pivoted, she noted that someone was already there. Nothing bad happened in upscale hotels, not even in the stairwells, at least that's what her rational mind said. But the man was big, not going somewhere but standing there. Waiting for her.

Him!

Impossible! reality insisted but there he was, arms at his side, stance wide, black eyes boring into hers.

“Wh—” she got out. His hand snaking out to capture her upper arm stopped her. She opened her mouth to scream but didn’t because...hell, because she’d fucked him. It wasn’t as if they were strangers.

“You’re coming with me,” he said. “Willingly or otherwise.”

“What?”

“What’s it going to be? Because you’re up for a repeat performance of what we did out in that parking lot, or because I’m stronger than you?”

Even without trying to jerk free, she knew she’d never be able to. Shit, but he was a powerful man, scary strong. And she was getting scared, maybe was already there. “What are you doing here?”

“No time for an explanation and I haven’t decided whether I’m going to give you one. Let’s go.” He hauled her against him.

The instant she slammed into him, something clicked, self-preservation most likely. Lifting her leg, she aimed for his groin. He beat her to the punch, dodging to the side and spinning her around so her back was to him. His palm closed down over her mouth at the same instant he locked his arm around both of hers and pinned them to her side.

Instinct had gotten her around a mass of closely bunched fellow racers when there’d been no escape route. That instinct sent determination to her thigh and calf as her rubber sole slammed down on his foot. She pressed with everything she had, and when he tried to kick out from under, she bit him. Grunting and cursing, he shoved her face first into the wall. The hand over her mouth disappeared, but before she could scream, his fingers dug into her shoulder next to her neck.

Lightning shot through her. And as he continued to bear down on the nerve there, she went limp.

Range kept her against the wall until he was certain she was unconscious. Then, although she’d drawn blood and his instep hurt like a son of a bitch, he gathered her in his arms and started up the stairs with her. When he reached her floor, he eased the door open a few inches and checked both directions to make sure no one was in the hall. Thanks to her slight weight, he could hold her and dig her key out of her pocket at the same time.

Her room was probably one of the smallest in the hotel, designed for sleeping and little else. He could only see one suitcase and the closet sported a single dress. A glance in the bathroom let him know that toiletries weren’t high on her must-have list. In fact, except for a well-worn briefcase on the small table, he’d hardly know she was here. Judging by the faded and scarred leather, he figured the briefcase had to be at least twenty years old and more like what a man would have bought. Sentimental value?

Depositing her limp body on the bed, he stepped back and took a calming breath. So many things could have gone wrong, someone using the stairs just then, her getting out a scream or using the elevator instead.

No, a woman who hoofed it up five floors wouldn’t use an elevator to get out of the joint.

He hadn't expected to see her again so soon and had resigned himself to a long wait, hopefully not so long that security would get suspicious. She hadn't changed her clothes and the tennis shoes didn't seem to go with the rest of the outfit but what the hell did he know? What he was more interested in was why she'd left her room so soon. If she'd been on her way to another meeting or casual get-together –

No. Not without her purse, right?

Pulling himself out of questions he currently couldn't get answers to, he turned his attention to her. The paralysis wouldn't last long, but even if she started coming to right now, he'd have time to immobilize her. In the meantime, he wanted to have a look at her before he ruined that sleek skin with ropes, before he rammed a gag in her kissable mouth.

In the process of landing on the bed, her skirt had hiked up but not more than a couple of inches, which was good as far as his sanity was concerned. Standing over her, he tried not to think of himself as a predator with a fresh kill. Tried and failed.

Damn but the woman did things to the animal in him! He wasn't in a position to psychoanalyze why she'd been stalking his nights since they'd gone after each other like creatures in heat, and what the hell did it matter? When it got down to it, the lady had crawled under his skin and showed no signs of going away.

Because he'd always tried to be truthful to himself if no one else, he admitted that having control over her was a major turn-on. For a man who'd brought down both men and women running from the law as well as those who were law-abiding but had gotten sideways of his employer of the moment, he was accustomed to being the possessor. Stripping someone else of their freedom and in essence holding their hearts in his hand should have become familiar.

Hell, it was. Except with her.

A twitch of movement on her part pulled him out of himself. Falling back on the skills of his trade, he pulled rope out of his pocket. He hated turning her onto her side because he wanted to read the messages in her eyes when she realized what he'd done, but he had a job to do.

Her slender wrists fit easily one over the other, making it simple for him to lash them together behind her. Curious, he drew her elbows together until they were touching. But despite the blatant eroticism of confining her so her breasts stood out, there was no point in further restraining her. At least not yet.

Once he was sure her arms would stay where he wanted them until he decided different, he dug through the dresser and found a pair of panties. Resisting the urge to finger them, he wadded them up and shoved them in her mouth. He finished the gagging by repeatedly winding electrical tape around her head to keep the panties in place.

She was now on her back again, her arms under her so her breasts were lifted. The gag robbed her of some of her personality, her uniqueness. Sitting on the side of the bed with his arms on either side of her, he waited.

The wait didn't take long. Her eyes didn't flutter so much as spring open. Her pupils were pinpoints of night, the irises crystal-white. Fear but not panic rode in her gaze. Nodding, he acknowledged her courage. And his belly clenched and his groin knotted.

Bury yourself in her. Send your cum deep inside and brand her. Make her yours.

Chapter Five

The side of Charil's neck burned. She'd had pinched nerves so knew what it felt like, but this had been no accident. Fully awake now, she had absolutely no doubt that the man she'd had sex with the other day had rendered her unconscious, and while she was helpless, he'd gagged her and tied her arms behind her. Granted, her legs were still free, but she'd have to be an absolute idiot to think she had an advantage in anything.

His weight was pulling her toward him, and although the survival manuals warned people to keep all possible distance from their abductors, she didn't try to move. The mattress felt as if it was wrapping itself around her, the spread slipping over her and turning her peaceful.

No, not peaceful, not with him so close. So controlling.

He could be a killer or a rapist, a robber, even some deranged fan hell-bent to get his fifteen minutes of fame at her expense, but she didn't think so. His gaze was a mix of calculation, alertness and lust. On one hand, he was a man who'd bagged his game or gotten his hands on his trophy and was feeling the pride of success, but it wasn't that simple because his eyes gave out that other message, the one that was all male, all stud.

As a teenager and even once she'd reached twenty-one, she'd fantasized about the knight in shining or otherwise armor who'd sweep her off her feet and carry her away to his kingdom. Once there, she'd be placed in a tower until her knight returned from wherever it was knights went to. He'd stalk into her room, tear off her flimsy clothes, and ravish her—whatever the hell ravish meant. Although the fantasy had been pure nonsense since knights were in short supply, and she hadn't wanted to spend her life in a tower, there'd been something about being at the mercy of a powerful and aggressive man that had fed flames she'd never told anyone about.

Only her captor had hardly ridden in on a stallion while decked in his finery with a lance clutched in his hand. The man had caught her.

What for?

Asking her arms to bear her weight was more than they could take so she risked his anger by rolling onto her side. She had to bend her knees to keep from winding up on her belly, an easy-to-accomplish task since her legs remained unrestrained.

Whatever he'd shoved in her mouth threatened to make her gag, and the tape nearly drove her crazy, but much as she loathed and feared being rendered mute, she had to admit he'd done an efficient job. No matter how much she stressed her vocal cords, he'd be the only one to hear, and of course he wasn't coming to her aid.

When he shifted position, his weight pulled her closer to him. Grunting into the gag, she wiggled away a good half foot. Instead of stopping her, he watched with an

expression that said he understood her need for distance. She again debated increasing said distance, but what good would that do? He, no doubt about it, would keep her where he wanted.

What is this about? she asked with her eyes. *What do you want from me?*

“I’m not going to kill you. Beyond that, I can’t say what’s going to happen.”

Did that make any kind of sense? In the movies and on TV and in suspense books, the villain was pure evil, but she didn’t sense that in him—not that she trusted her instincts around this man. She didn’t want to think about how the heroes in the various fictional scenarios always showed up in the nick of time, because as far as she knew, there was no hero in whatever the hell was happening here.

“This is an assignment for me, a job. Hard to believe, isn’t it, that I’m being paid to make you my prisoner, but you’ve entered a world most people don’t know exist. In this world, money makes the rules.”

He hadn’t said anything she could make sense of, and although an occasional wave of panic slid through her, the sensation didn’t stay. His voice, she suspected, was responsible. It made her think of the wind at midnight, both unnerving and seductive. With an ease that deeply shook her, he’d turned her world on end and stomped into the middle of it. This was beyond comprehension.

What she did understand was that this dark and amazing man had roped and gagged her.

“You aren’t terrified, are you?” he asked.

Although she didn’t want to give him anything, she shook her head.

“Why not? Never mind. I’ll ask again when you can talk.”

Later then? How long did he intend to keep her with him and what did he intend to do with her while she, in essence, belonged to him?

The unknown slammed into her. Either that or she was finally returning to full consciousness. Whatever the reason, she sat up with her feet on the floor. Her intention had been to stand up on the opposite side of the bed and take things from there, maybe getting him to chase her, screaming as best she could and slamming into walls in a desperate attempt to draw attention.

But she’d just gotten to her feet when he grabbed her around the waist and yanked her back onto the bed, using his weight to hold her down. Frantic, she writhed and twisted, but he leaned across her and pinned her to the coverlet. No matter how much she tried to wiggle out from under, it wasn’t happening. Giving up on trying to dislodge him, she turned her energy to kicking him, at least giving it her best shot.

“No, no. Give it up, Charil. It’s not going to happen.”

But the alternative—the alternative was helplessness, something she couldn’t accept or handle. She’d been so damn helpless when her brother and then her mother had died and when her father had had his stroke. No more!

Images of death, tears and grief closed down around her, and she fought as she'd never fought. Bucking and twisting at the same time, she attacked her captor in the only way she could. The damnable gag swallowed her cries and curses, and his greater weight and strength continued to pin her down, but although she knew it was hopeless, she didn't stop struggling until exhaustion stripped her muscles. At length, still tense but unable to move, she lay under him.

After the better part of a minute during which she sucked in air through her nostrils and her muscles twitched and burned, he rolled off her. Maybe she should have taken advantage of the relative freedom, but she'd learned her lesson. Staring at the ceiling, she waited.

"I don't know what that was about." His tone reminded her of her parents' calming words when her first attempts at mastering a motorcycle had resulted in scrapes and bruises. "But I hope you've gotten it out of your system. Get a grip on reality, Charil. You're under my control until I say different."

Ignoring him was her only weapon so she continued to stare at the impersonal white ceiling. Her fight, which had been more with herself than him, had stripped her down so she wasn't sure whether she could move a muscle.

"I'm not the bogeyman. At least not the kind of bogeyman you're probably thinking about. I'm not going to rape you, and I already told you I won't kill you. But neither will I let you go."

He was still using that seductive and reassuring tone, the syllables coming from deep in his chest and pushing easily past his lips, and she found herself feeding off it, feeling the man in him.

Maybe he knew what was happening and had decided to take advantage of it because he pulled her against him and started trailing his fingers over her throat. Knowing he could easily rob her of life-sustaining oxygen should have alarmed her. Instead, she sank into the touch. Let him take over.

"I don't want to tie your legs for several reasons, but I will if I think you're going to hurt yourself. What's it going to be, Charil? You make the call."

What the fuck did being able to stand matter? Hadn't he already demonstrated his mastery? Hating both of them, she nodded.

"Good. We'll be leaving but not until after dark because it's easier getting you out then. In the meantime, we wait."

Wait he did. He pulled a semi-comfortable chair near the bed and sprawled in it with his feet propped on the mattress. He'd turned the TV on to a sports talk program but only occasionally looked at it. He also occasionally looked around the room, but most of the time his attention was on her.

At first she thought she'd scream from being under such acute scrutiny and yet after a while she became accustomed to his strong and honest gaze. Instead of making furtive glances at her breasts and legs, he studied them openly. Sexual arousal oozed from him, and despite everything she was pleased that her body pleased him. That

insane afternoon when they'd gone after each other like animals in rut, she didn't think he'd done more than ascertain that she had two arms, two legs and one cunt. Now he was placing her in his memory bank.

And she was doing the same in return.

The man was still. He might sometimes move his arms or legs or drag his gaze over to the TV, but most of the time he seemed a permanent part of the chair. She might have believed he was a naturally patient man if not for the fire she sensed running through his veins. If asked, she wouldn't have been able to say how she knew about the fire except that it was in his eyes. He didn't want to be waiting for dark in this impersonal hotel room. Quite the opposite, his physically fit body needed to move, to do, to act.

To have sex with her.

Be afraid, girl, be very afraid.

But she wasn't because her body had already let his in, because she'd shared her heat with his and it had been good, damn good.

There were other reasons for her lack of concern about what he intended to do to her and how long he'd let her go on living that came down to one thing. She still hadn't gotten her mind around the reality of what was happening.

She'd had enough upheaval and tragedy in her life, had used up her quota of black clouds, and it was time for things to straighten out, at least as much as possible. Wasn't there some cosmic tally being taken and when max had been reached, the Grim Reaper or whoever it was moved on to another victim? Okay, so she could shoot a ton of holes in that theory, but she clung to it today, told herself that this was a dream and eventually things would get back on track.

Right now would be a great time for that to happen. Either the cavalry would charge in the door, or he'd yell April Fool, or she'd wake up or...or what?

Or he'd untie her and remove the gag and help her out of her clothes and dispense with his and join her here on the bed.

Her body would forgive his sick idea of a joke and –

When a cell phone started ringing, it took her a moment for her to realize it wasn't hers. By then he'd reached for the clip at his waist. Reading the number display, he frowned, then punched *send*.

"Yeah."

The barely audible voice on the other end told her little except that it belonged to a man.

"That's BS," Range retorted after listening for a minute. "You're supposed to have that covered. What? No, I'm not interested in excuses. Not my problem. Fuck, I knew you'd get around to that. All right, but only for two days. No, I'm not telling you where I'm taking her. That's the last thing I'd do. When you've got your act together, let me know. In the meantime, the bill's going up."

He hung up, put the phone away, and stared at her. She didn't know what to make of his expression, his clenched jaw and fisted fingers. Most of all, she couldn't comprehend this new energy. It was as if he'd suddenly found himself trapped and was on the brink of attacking the net closing around him.

"Change of plans although I'm guessing you've already figured that out. The client is having a logistical problem regarding where he wants me to deliver you, which means I'll be in the dark about certain things longer than I'd hoped. He says it'll all be taken care of shortly, but I'll believe it when I see it. In the meantime, I'm sitting on you, only not here."

Had she fallen into the rabbit hole? What had he meant by someone wanting her delivered somewhere, like she was a used car or dog someone was taking possession of? If it hadn't been so unnerving, she might have laughed – if she could have.

"The immediate timetable hasn't changed," he informed her. "We're still not leaving this room until dark. The new wrinkle is that I'm going to be warehousing you for several days." He ran his hand over his eyes. "Responsible for you longer than I wanted. Drawing out my decision."

An insane notion struck. If he'd let her talk, she could let him know he didn't want to try to make a reservation at any of the area motels and hotels because they were insanely expensive and at this short notice, there probably wasn't any vacancy.

But motels were for sleep and sex, not for warehousing a captive.

Getting up, he walked over to the window and pulled back the curtain so he could look out, prompting her to wonder if he found the so-called view as depressing as she had. Because she spent her days around athletes and near athletes, the majority of them young, she'd seen more than her share of hard asses and muscled thighs, so why were his so arresting? Yes, the fact that they contributed to her helplessness factored in, but her reaction went far beyond that.

That body didn't come courtesy of leg presses and dead lifts. True, he might log time in a gym, but she suspected physical labor was primarily responsible. What had he told her about what he did for a living? Not enough, not nearly enough for her to place him in his world. She knew elemental things like the weight of his balls and his cock's length and breadth when fully erect, but there was more to him than that, much more.

She couldn't say how long he'd stood there when he turned and erased the distance between them. "There's only one place I want to go." With that, he sat back down. Instead of looking at the TV again – a baseball game was on – he leaned forward and ran his fingers from her shoulder to her tethered wrists. "Temperature's good. You aren't losing feeling."

Thanks so for caring.

"A few more details. I drove my rig here, but it isn't parked near the hotel because I don't want anyone putting your disappearance and it together. That means I'm going to have to leave you here while I go after it."

For absolutely no good reason that she'd ever be able to explain, she nodded.

“He said two days max, but I’m not counting on that which is why I’m taking you to my turf. He wants you, he plays by my rules. Even if in the end he’s going to hate my rules.”

Makes perfect sense to me.

Without giving her so much as a blink of warning, he rolled her from one side to the other, positioning her so her back was to him. Alarmed because she couldn’t see what he was or might do, she struggled, but he easily kept her in place. “Not going to happen. Get used to it.”

Mumbling frantically, she thrashed, tangling the coverlet around her. Hands like iron gripped her arms as he forced her onto her stomach. Straddling the back of her legs, he pressed down on her shoulder blades. Maybe she should be grateful because she could at least turn her head to the side. “Throw a rope on some animals and they give up. Others fight. You’re a fighter.”

But it’s not going to do me any good.

Although his all-consuming weight threatened to push her into terror, she willed her muscles to relax. She just wished she had more control over her rapid-fire, tear-tainted breathing.

“Listen to me, damn it! I don’t know what you thought I was going to do, but all I wanted was to take the pressure off your down side. Pushed you into panic, didn’t it?”

Don’t let him know he’s right. Don’t give him the power.

“What I need to happen is going to happen, end of story. The sooner you accept that, the easier it’ll be.”

Much as she despised every word, he was right, at least in the here and now. But she could and would and had to dream of freedom, to plan for it, to...what?

Ah shit! How fast could one man move? One moment she was buried facedown in the mattress. The next he’d freed her wrists and spun her so she was on her back. Most disconcerting, he was lashing her right hand to the post above her head. Cursing the pretentious decorating that called for a four-poster queen-sized bed, she tried to jerk free.

“Not going to happen, Charil. Not going to happen.”

How right he was because when he released her hand, she discovered that he’d secured it. Another rope immediately materialized, and after straddling her hips, he easily caught her left arm in his armpit and knotted the rope around that wrist. She fought like a wild horse but should have saved her strength because he had absolutely no problem yanking that arm into place over her head.

Now she lay under him, held down by his strength with his cock scraping her midsection, her arms stretched out and above her head as if she were about to be tortured.

Or fucked.

Of all the times for a particular fantasy to rear its head, this had to be the worst, and yet there it was. In sharp contrast to the face she presented to the world, another side lurked inside her, a soft and feminine creature longing for a take-charge man to ravage her. The specifics of that ravaging depended on her imagination at any given time and the newness of the batteries in her vibrator, but it boiled down to one thing.

She'd be helpless and exposed. The man would and could do whatever he wanted to her. And they'd both get off on the act, or acts.

Before a well-worn image of herself with all four limbs spread, naked of course, could fully form, she threw it away. Damn it, this was no erotic dream designed to fill a lonely night!

For real she was on her way to being spread-eagled.

And this man didn't give a damn about rules.

"You're incredible-looking woman," he muttered as he lifted himself off her and she drew in a full breath. "Damn sexy. It seeps out of you."

He stared openly at her breasts. There was nothing furtive about what he was doing, nothing held back. And as insane as it was, his honest gaze infused her with pride in her body. She was a lot more inclined to label herself athletic than sexy, but underneath the bulky clothes that kept her from sacrificing her skin to pavement or dirt were curves and lines, breasts, dark labia and a quick-to-arouse clit. Even now the clit she lived in awe and sometimes fear of was awake and searching for stimulation. One touch and he'd have her.

Did he know that?

"I want to have sex with you. You need to know that." His hands curled into fists as he again sat beside her. "Female animals in heat give off a scent that draws in the males. That's what you're doing."

What you're smelling is fear.

And my arousal, she admitted, unable to take her eyes off his fists or thoughts off what they'd feel like around her breasts or between her legs. Instead of clamping her legs together, she relaxed. Inch by half inch, the distance between her limbs grew.

He watched, knucklebones sharply outlined, mouth parted, back straight and tense. "What are you doing, damn it?"

You're in charge; you're making me do this.

"If you think you're going to get me to release you that way, it isn't going to happen."

Did she want to be free? At this moment, did she want anything except him between her legs, in her?

Frightened and excited by her lack of control, she shook her head from side to side. Her breasts were fighting their covering, her legs wanting to be free of her skirt. Her toes longed to run over his thighs while her lips, oh god, her lips ached to be around his cock!

“What’s this about?” He clamped his hand over her jaw, stopping her head’s restless tossing.

I’m in heat because of you, she told him with her eyes. Maybe my fear is all twisted around, but I remember what we had that afternoon. It was good, more than good.

“Stop it!” He lightly slapped her cheek. Then, maybe apologizing, he folded himself over her and pressed his mouth against hers. Even with the wadding and layers, she felt his soft warmth and lifted her head trying to find more.

“What are you doing?”

I don’t know!

“Damn it, do you have any idea what you’re asking of me?” Still leaning over her, he planted his arms on either side of hers. His eyes raged with battle, a man fighting for control over himself. The battle lost, he brought his mouth to the vulnerable skin on her arm’s underside and ran his teeth and mouth over her there.

Ticklish! Tickled and sexually tortured at the same time!

Gasping, she struggled to escape, but of course she had nowhere to go. At least her frantic thrashing made it impossible for him to continue whatever in the hell he had in mind, but did she really want him off her? Confused, she lay still but couldn’t get a handle on her breathing which caused her breasts to do battle with the flimsy fabric.

“You’re so soft there.” He licked from just below her armpit to the inside of her elbow. “Soft and sweet.”

Electrical sparks accompanied his tongue to make her frantic all over again, but this time she didn’t try to fight. She needed this, needed to explore the incredible sensations and what they were doing to her. No matter that she was risking her sanity, her existence even, she needed to feel like a woman in the hands of a man who understood the vast range of the word.

Determined not to expose her emotions to his knowing gaze, she turned her head to the side. Breathing became a matter of desperately seeking enough oxygen to keep from passing out. She felt lightheaded, hot, wet, on fire.

Straightening, he studied her as if he’d never seen a woman before. Awareness of her body kicked up yet another notch. She’d been hit on more times than she could remember and had occasionally taken advantage of the attention, but for a long time now sex hadn’t mattered. Suddenly it was as if months of pent-up energy had surged to the surface and was about to erupt. Damn it! How could she possibly want her captor’s hands on her? Fucking her.

Because you remember what it was like the first time. Because your nervous system can’t tell the difference between arousal and fear. Because you’re insane.

“Shouldn’t have taken any part of this assignment,” he muttered. “Damn it, I knew it was—”

His voice! Oh god, that middle-of-a-stormy-night voice! Drawn to it, she rocked toward him. The arm restraints pulled her back, but she continued to strain toward him.

Bending the knee closest to him, she opened herself as best she could. Damn her panties! And damn the taut skirt fabric against her thighs!

A forceful tug from his large fingers put an end to that barrier. Her skirt was now up around her hips, making it possible for her to splay herself even more. A small part of her, maybe her conscience, maybe the instinct for survival hovered nearby, warning of countless dangers, but she was too hungry to heed the voices.

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing to me?” he demanded with a hand pressing against her belly.

She started to shake her head, then nodded. Finally she shut her eyes against his intensity and focused on the hand a single layer of fabric away from her flesh. His fingertips were both cruel and tantalizing, seeming to probe deeper and yet deeper until in her mind they reached her womb.

Her womb. The core of what made her a woman.

A dark red mist seemed to be closing around her. Alarmed and fascinated, she opened her eyes to discover that it had enveloped him as well and he was freeing her legs. They were in this thing together and drifting between reality and a world she would have given anything to embrace back when everything first started to fall apart. Maybe he’d been sent here by forces beyond her comprehension—by her mother’s and brother’s spirits perhaps—so she’d once again believe that life was worth living.

It was! Damn it, she wasn’t going to let Danny Tito destroy her.

Shutting her mind against the monster, she sank back into reality. Her captor’s eyes were saying things that didn’t need words, revealing emotions she had no doubt were playing out in hers.

No matter what had brought them together and what the future might bring, they had these minutes together when nothing except sex mattered. When animal instinct ruled.

Growling into her gag, she planted her feet on the bed and lifted her body as much as possible. Within seconds the strain caused her muscles to cramp and with another growl, she started to settle back down. Reaching around her hips, he ran his hands under her buttocks so they rested on him instead of the coverlet. His heat seeped through her panties and into her, unerringly finding her pussy and adding to her own heat there. Could he smell her fresh arousal? He had to since his face was scant inches from her belly.

Another tug, this one pulling her panties down and then off. Her skirt was wadded around her waist rendering her naked from her navel down. Rolling her head to the side, she took note of her pale belly, but he didn’t seem to care because after again sliding his hands under her ass and lifting her a little, he touched his unexpectedly soft lips to just above her mons.

Half wild, she spread her legs and rocked her upper body from side to side while struggling to remain still from the waist down. Damn this gag! She needed to scream, to...something!

Oh shit! His tongue! Damp. Warm. Exploring sensitized skin, playing with her pubic hair. Even more disconcerting, his hot breath chased over her and melted her down so she wasn't sure she still existed as a separate human being.

Tiny shock waves skimmed over her pussy walls. If he touched her there, she'd shatter, but damn how she needed him filling the weeping cave! Fighting and yet embracing her bonds, she writhed under him, whimpering when he pulled his hands out from under her and laid them along the insides of her thighs.

Shit! Oh, shit!

In a moment of semi-sanity, she noted that he was no longer tonguing her belly and below. Keeping his hands in place, he repositioned himself so his upper body was between her legs. And expelling his breath against her labia!

"No, no, yes, yes, yes!" she screamed into her gag. Now she fought in earnest, not to get away from the wet heat tearing at her too-sensitive flesh, but because the intimate gesture was making her crazy with need.

"Fuck, I want to do this! Fuck you. Fuck me." His every word was like a tiny volcanic eruption along her sex. His fingertips on her inner thighs weren't gentle and spoke of a man who gave no quarter.

Not enough air getting into her lungs! Nothing in her cunt. How did he expect—damn him, how did he expect—yes, back arched now and staring at the ceiling, fire burning between her legs, chest heaving.

"Damn you," he hissed.

No, damn you!

Chapter Six

Her skin was like velvet, baby-soft and yet alive with a woman's energy. The part of Range's brain that still functioned in a semi-rational manner acknowledged that he could do anything he wanted to with her. Although he'd always drawn a firm line regarding his treatment of women and would never cross over into anything approaching rape, experience had taught him that he possessed a certain animal magnetism. No matter how resistant a woman might be at the beginning, in the end she became the stereotypical putty in his hands. Being what more than one girlfriend had called a hunk had something to do with it, but he suspected there was another element.

Danger. Plain and simple he represented danger. And no matter how much they denied it, even to themselves, women got off on the beast in him.

He hadn't had to work at unleashing the beast. If anything, more often than he liked admitting, self-control shattered. When that happened, he gave up all pretense at being a civilized man and gave in to the dark creature.

That creature who cared about nothing except survival, that beast now pressed against his skin and chewed at his muscles. He half expected to grow fangs, but if he did, whatever it took, he wouldn't use them on her.

Surprised by the power of his vow, he rocked back on his haunches and stared, not just at her but at what he was doing. She was merchandise to be delivered, at least that's what Tito believed, not a woman he had a right and responsibility to seduce, and yet here he was crouching between her legs. A moment ago he'd been tonguing her and unless he stalked out of the room, he'd return to his task. His delight.

What was it about her? How could she grip not just his cock but his mind as well without so much as touching him? He'd learned to consider his *subjects* as little more than the means to a paycheck, not a threat to his tenuous grip on civilization.

Fuck it! He wasn't interested in analysis.

Surrendering to the beast, he ran his fingers over her thighs and hipbones. When she again twitched, he lightly raked a nail over her mons as if marking it as his territory. Twitches became shudders. Her head tossed from side to side, and her eyes were unfocused, but if she hated what he was doing, she could and probably would have kicked him. Instead, she clamped her legs against him and lifted her pelvis over and over again. Even with the gag, he caught her low, urgent moans. Did she have any idea how much her reaction fed his hunger?

This impersonal room in the middle of a city that would always be foreign to him was for the two of them, for exploring an impossible relationship. The baseball game playing out on the TV didn't matter, and neither did the lengthening shadows. Neither

did he give a damn about the assignment he'd maybe accepted or what would happen to her in a few days.

There was only this woman under his control and her fiery hold on his emotions.

As lost and helpless as she must feel, he reached for a slender ankle. Lifting her leg, he rested it on his shoulder. Even with hunger growling at him, he continued to hold her ankle so it remained in place. Her eyes opened, sleepy and slow, a woman trapped inside herself and wanting nothing more than this moment. This experience.

Feeling the same way, he stroked her calf. And when she relaxed, he stretched out a less than steady hand and touched her labia. Hissing through the gag, she slid her buttocks against the coverlet. Suddenly, it took everything he had not to rip the gag from her because he wanted to hear her voice, needed the sounds of an aroused woman filling the room, craved her whispering his name.

But they weren't lovers. He'd captured her, for money. He was expected to turn her over to strangers, for money.

Feeling too much like the lonely child he'd once been who'd stood outside a classmate's house on Christmas morning watching the family opening gifts, he lightly covered her sex with his palm. To his knowledge, his so-called parents had never given him a present. He couldn't remember their ever hugging him or telling him they loved him.

And because he understood the wanting and lonely need on a level that went deeper than any words, he knew what Charil needed from him—and what he longed for from her.

One thing, one dangerous and no turning back thing.

Knowing he was lost but not understanding how that had come about, he slid a finger into her hot, wet opening. His intention had been to paint her pussy and elsewhere with her offering. Instead, he lifted his now coated finger to his nostrils and breathed in her scent, imprinting himself with her. She watched as he sucked her juices off him and the heady taste slid down his throat.

Eyes narrowed and deep, she stared with an intensity he'd never seen from a woman. He tried to tell himself her comprehension didn't extend beyond her body's responses, but the truth lay in her underlying comprehension. She knew! Maybe she didn't know the specifics, but she'd found the holes in him. She heard his heart's lonely beating, eased past the barriers of a lifetime, and she cared. Cared.

Walk away. Get out of her life before she strips you bare.

But no one had ever seen his soul-deep vulnerability, and he was so very tired of locking that vulnerability inside. It was time to open the door a little, to let her glimpse the truth.

And then walk away.

Still not comprehending why this helpless woman was responsible for the change in him, he slid away from her but only long enough to position a pillow under her

buttocks. She could have dislodged it. Instead, she further displayed her cunt by bending her knees. His head roaring and his hands less than steady, he settled himself so his mouth was at her entrance. Even with the warnings threatening to short-circuit him, he lapped.

“Hmm, hmm.”

Another tongue probe all but lifted her off the bed. Her hips danced, compelling him to grip them and hold her in place. Sweat broke out on her belly and thighs and fed his sense of power. And yet with each invasion and breath, he sensed how close he was to his own cliff. Tonguing her wasn't about power after all. No matter that he could act on his instincts and impulses instead of waiting helplessly like her, he had scant control over those impulses. And when he dared acknowledge his knotted cock, he also had to admit her tight grip on his senses.

Forget danger and risk. Live between her legs. Listen to her whimper and hold her straining muscles in your hands and take her to the edge of her cliff. Push her over so she knows, so she knows...

Shock after shock slid through Charil, short-circuiting her mind and making her body sing to her captor's tune. When he'd exposed her sex, she'd wondered if her muscles would snap from the strain of waiting. He'd thrown her into a whirlpool and jumped into it after her and only the hot current mattered. Currents he'd created.

Driven by a primitive need to embrace him, she tugged on her wrist restraints. The effort momentarily distracted her. Too late she realized he'd pushed her cunt lips aside with his tongue and lips, thus giving him full access to her hungry cave.

Ah shit! Fire sparking through her, her legs trembling, head thrown back as if that would bring more air into her starving lungs.

He came after her, came again and again, his suddenly hard tongue tip exploring where no man's tongue had ever been. Not that she hadn't been fascinated by the possibilities, far from it! But the gesture was so intimate, so trusting! Even as she hissed and shook, she cursed herself for never feeling close enough to a man to allow him to bring her to climax this way.

And when he lifted her buttocks even higher and glided his tongue from her anus all the way into her pubic hair, she screamed, screamed again.

Back to tongue-fucking her, rapid-fire probes she couldn't begin to stay on top of and images of his face buried between her legs powering her. Nothing like this—nothing had...happened!

A rolling, heated wave deep inside gripped her. She felt nothing else, cared about nothing except riding the massive current. Going limp, she ceased to exist as anything except a woman racing toward a climax. More strength! Power and heat. Pussy muscles contracting and letting go, contracting again, breaking free.

“Ahh, ahh!”

Yes, oh yes! This was what the excitement was all about, her entire being lost in the wave, forgetting who'd brought her to it and her strangled cries. Out of control, a little frightened, overwhelmed, panting and fighting, fighting him!

Her climax kept coming, rolling on and on until her clit caught fire. Pleasure bled from her, not all the way but enough that she now felt pain.

"No more, please, no more." It didn't matter that he probably couldn't understand what she was saying, didn't matter that he was still attacking her exploding clit, she couldn't take any more. Had to fight, to scream and beg and shake.

Stop, stop, stop.

Had she blacked out? Maybe because now that she was beginning to think again, she was certain she'd lost a block of time. He was still between her legs, or rather a palm rested comfortably against her pussy while his other hand gently stroked her belly. Shit. Had she ever been so exhausted? Soon, oh yes, soon, she'd crave another eruption but not until she'd caught her breath and found her sanity.

A warning prickled down her spine. Blinking repeatedly, she focused on her captor. She might have the slack appearance of a woman who'd been royally and well fucked, but his shadowed features spoke of his sexual tension. He reminded her of a big cat stalking prey, a growling dog with its hackles raised, a savage.

Let go! Let the savage out.

But his doing so was a risk because he wasn't a man well controlled by convention. Given enough of a push, he'd step into a space where strength and opportunity ruled. Nothing else would matter except that he could do whatever he wanted to her and what he wanted was to fuck.

Rape?

Yes, the potential was there. And if she'd still been the woman she'd once been, she'd be terrified of what he represented, but she'd been thrust into a world without rules or right and wrong and yet understood that world. Had learned to accept it.

More than that, her own savage had been unleashed.

Still, she simply waited and watched as he slowly backed away and stood up. If she'd ever seen anyone more tense than he was, she couldn't remember. The battle between intellect and instinct was being played out not just in his eyes but his entire body. He wanted to roar and attack, to claim what his strength had made his. He needed to walk away while he still could.

What was she thinking? Surely she didn't want to be attacked.

But when he started around the side of the bed and she knew, absolutely knew that his civilized side had won the battle, she stretched out a leg and ran her toes along his thigh. Stopping with his hands fisted and his head back and high, he regarded her through dark lashes.

"Are you saying what I think you are?"

A nerve in her belly twitching, she nodded.

“You’re a witch, a witch.”

Not her. He was the one with magic in his fingers and tongue and cock. And if she didn’t give him what he’d given her, she’d regret it for the rest of her life.

Trusting her eyes to tell him what she needed him to believe, she continued stroking his thigh. She didn’t try to close her legs or dislodge the pillow, and although part of her hated being so exposed while he remained fully dressed, this evening was about sex. She’d concern herself with normalcy later. At least she’d try to remember what it was.

Looking as if he hated her, he leaned against the bed. Much as she wanted to continue speaking to him with a touch, she couldn’t maintain that position any longer so let her leg fall. Ignoring the strain in her arms, she rolled toward him.

“It’s nearly dark. Getting time to move you.”

Sensing that he was giving her one last chance to stop what was about to happen, she shook her head. Then she dragged her gaze to what she could see of her lower body. Still wearing a top and with her skirt around her waist wasn’t what she’d call a provocative position, but it was all she had, all she could offer.

And it was enough.

As he kicked off his shoes and dragged his jeans and briefs down, she started shaking all over again. Yes, they’d fuck but not with his clothes providing a barrier like before. Not until he opened the packaging did she note that he must have pulled a rubber out of his pocket before undressing. Had he expected this to happen? And if so, had he wanted or fought the intimacy?

Didn’t matter, not now with him taking hold of her ankles and lifting her legs above her head. Once he had her where he wanted her, he planted a knee near her buttocks and leaned into her. His cock head pressed against her opening, but although she readied herself for the wanted invasion, he held back.

“Last chance. You gonna tell me to get the hell away?”

Frantically shaking her head, she strained to get closer but without the use of her limbs, she existed as his receptacle. The renewed idea of being his possession fed the creature he’d brought to life, and she stared at him over and through the barrier of her legs, his in ways she’d never been part of another human being.

Touching and retreating, muscles trembling a little with the effort to remain in control, fingers gripping her ankles, touching again, staying longer and then pulling back. She hated when he deprived her of his cock and yet the contrast between contact and longing fed her. She wanted to open herself more so she make his entrance effortless, but he kept her legs together, directed everything, in control.

Or was he? A man with a sure grip on his emotions and body wouldn’t be panting, would he? And his jaws were clenched, the veins at the side of his neck standing out.

Come to me. Enter, please. Face the consequences later.

Her attempt at silent communication shattered. Confused, she struggled to bring herself back to reality, but only his cock pushing past her wet barriers mattered. Yes, no longer toying with her, no longer pushing her to the end of sanity. She dimly comprehended that he'd been making sure she was adequately lubricated. If only he'd trust her enough to let her speak!

Didn't matter. How could it when one inch of penetration became two and then three, maybe more. He seemed to be expanding within her, touching every part of her channel and heating it, teasing it into greater sensitivity.

I'm ready, she wanted to tell him. I'm there. Don't worry about me. Make this about what you need.

Unable to pump him the way she wanted to, she settled for moving up and down. At first he seemed to be resting inside her, although maybe he was simply becoming accustomed to the home she'd offered. But before long he began his own rhythm. With each thrust, he pushed her closer to the head of the bed. And when he drew back, she came with him, remaining part of him. Her clit started humming again. It couldn't take much.

Good. Slow was for lovers while fast, fast was for the horny strangers they were.

Yes, that was it! A quickie in the back of a car, in an alley or a darkened hall. Strangers heeding the primal cry and caring about nothing else.

They'd never see each other again and would forget each other's names, if they ever knew them. Years later she'd be hard put to remember there'd once been a man who'd buried his cock and nothing else in her.

But something would always remain, a restlessness that got her up in the middle of the night and kept her from giving herself completely to whatever man she decided to spend the rest of her life with.

What was this nonsense! Husbands didn't matter. Neither did future lovers or tomorrow or the next hour. There was just him and his cock and sweat and his body commanding hers. He led the savage dance and set the pace, but she pulled untapped strength around her and kept up. Screamed when he cried out. And when he drove himself to his hilt into her and ejaculated, she came again.

* * * * *

It was dark when Range tied Charil's legs to the bed and left to get his truck. He'd explained that he was immobilizing her because he didn't want to risk her drawing attention to herself while he was gone. Back when he'd been making plans, fully restraining her had made perfect sense. After all, this wasn't the first time he'd spirited a subject out of a public place—he'd perfected the process. But it had never felt like this before, and he'd never had to force himself to look into a subject's eyes. Still, he'd done so because of what they'd been to each other.

What had they been? he asked himself as he parked among the employees' vehicles in the gravel lot behind the hotel. Charil wasn't the first woman he'd had as a subject but the only one he'd had sex with, the only one he'd so much as contemplated fucking. If he'd thought she didn't want it, he wouldn't have touched her, but she'd needed sex as much as he had.

Slipping in through the employee entrance and making sure he had the stairs to himself required his full attention. It wasn't until he was inserting the key card in the door that he came face-to-face with what he was doing.

Yeah, no two ways about it, he was a bastard.

Not that that was something he didn't already know. Not caring about his subjects beyond assuring that they weren't going to be killed or injured made it possible for him to do his job. He'd been cursed and promised many times what his clients were paying him and everything in between by subjects. He hadn't accepted any of those bribes because he had his standards, such as they were. Once he took on an assignment, he'd always seen it through to the end, never changing the scenario more than absolutely necessary.

Until now.

Both tense and relieved to be back with her, he stepped into the room. She hadn't moved of course. He might be reading something that wasn't there into her expression, but he'd swear she felt the same push and pull of emotions.

Putting off getting close to her, he went through her belongings. After putting her clothes and toiletries in her suitcase, he placed the briefcase on the table and opened it. There was something intimate about a briefcase, like a woman's purse. He didn't feel good about going through it, but he needed to – or so he told himself – so he could learn everything possible about her.

Tito had assured him that she hadn't come to L.A. to see friends or relatives, that everything was business-related. But even if people who cared about her weren't going to immediately start looking for her, it behooved him to understand more about this business of hers. Motorcycle races didn't take place in the middle of the city, but maybe she'd been seeing sponsors or working on raising money for some race she was backing or – hell, he didn't have a clue what she did when she wasn't wearing a helmet. And he wanted to.

She'd covered several pages of yellow legal paper with notes, but he could only make out about one word in five. There were names and phone numbers and a tally of something, maybe money she had or hoped to raise. A stack of brochures about some youth racetracks on the East coast needed no deciphering but he couldn't figure out what they had to do with anyone here in California. A series of photographs showed bare land with survey markers on it that appeared to be of an oval track.

Giving up, he picked up her purse. A glance in her direction told him that she was watching. He hadn't bothered to cover her up, and the sight of her naked stomach and

crotch took him back to what it felt like to be buried and lost in her. Incredible! Terrifying!

You aren't afraid of anything, he tried to tell himself. How can you be if you don't care whether you live or die?

The answer pushed through his attempt at denial. Truth was, she'd found and touched parts of him no one ever had. Not only didn't he know how she'd managed that, he wasn't sure he could stop it from happening again.

Turning his back on her, he reminded himself that he had decisions to make regarding her and that those decisions were complicated by bills to pay. The idea of paying those bills at her expense was making him sick and that was something else that had never happened before.

Hating the inner turmoil, he opened the small purse. A checkbook, two credit cards, lipstick, an address book, her cell phone, keys, an ink pen, driver's license, about one hundred dollars in cash. Although she couldn't stop him, he didn't look at her checkbook. Her address book showed multiple addresses for a number of people, which made him think she knew a lot of people who didn't stay in one place. The contrast between her richness of friends, acquaintances and probably relatives and his lack of a need for anything approaching an address book struck him as pathetic, or it would if he wasn't accustomed to his lone wolf existence. He debated checking her contacts in her cell phone, but he didn't need any more reminders of how different they were.

Like it mattered.

After closing her purse, he walked over to her. If it were him on the receiving end of things, he'd be thinking his captor had left his fingerprints everywhere. He had, all right, not that it would help the cops because he'd never been fingerprinted, one of the benefits of deliberately distancing himself from anything to do with government, military or the legal system.

"It's time to go. First I'll take out your belongings. Then I'll return for you."

Looking as wary as a cornered animal, she nodded. Hell, he'd seen that look and worse and shouldn't care that a subject hated him, but finding it in her eyes made a lie of their earlier intimacy. *Fucking has nothing to do with what's happening between us, she was silently telling him. All I care about is staying alive.*

Good point, one he'd never argue with although from his experience, life was overrated.

* * * * *

Thankfully he hadn't bumped into anyone during his first trip to his rig because he would have had trouble explaining what he was doing with a woman's purse, but not only did he want it to look as if she'd checked out a day earlier than she'd intended, eventually she'd need her possessions.

Wasting no movement or emotion, he freed her hands but only so he could again secure them behind her. Only then did he untie her legs. "I'm letting you go to the bathroom before we leave. It's not going to be under the conditions you want, but it's the best you're getting. I'll wait outside, keep the door open."

He waited for her to give him an *I want you dead* look, but it didn't come. Instead, she inched off the bed and stood on legs that trembled a little. After a moment, she walked into the small room. He imagined her looking at where her toiletries and cosmetics had been and thinking how they'd represented order in a no longer orderly world and wished to hell he could turn and walk away.

But he couldn't.

Head high and with her skirt now back where it was designed to be, she rejoined him. Even with her hands tied, she struck him as a formidable opponent, someone ready, willing, and able to fight him to the death. He respected her fierce pride. Even more, it took every bit of self-control he had not to fill her sweet opening with the only thing he really had to give a woman.

Shaking off the admission that wasn't going to get him anywhere, he ordered her to sit on the bed again. Once she'd obeyed, he wrapped rope around her ankles. The message was simple—she wasn't getting out of there under her own steam. Hauling her to her feet, he threw her over his shoulder. If she fought him, he'd have to render her unconscious again, but she must have understood her options because she didn't move as he opened the door and peeked out.

The corridor was empty, the only sound coming from the air-conditioning. After awkwardly tugging the door closed, he hurried toward the stair door with his burden. As he started down, he questioned his sanity. Who in the hell made their living doing things like this?

At the same time, he felt a curious exhilaration that went beyond the familiar mix of danger and almost-there success. Not only was he getting away with his subject, before morning he'd be home. And she'd be there with him.

Chapter Seven

What kind of fool didn't try to escape?

Obviously she was that kind of fool, Charil acknowledged as her captor started the engine. Granted, realizing he was so strong he had no trouble carrying her down several flights of stairs had distracted her. She'd looked around as best she could once they were outside and had learned that they had this unlit parking area to themselves. Damn but he'd chosen well. Not only hadn't she seen any sign of security cameras, but his dusty crew-cab pickup blended in with the other vehicles. He'd deposited her on the seat as if she was a sack of something he'd picked up at the store, put the seat belt around her, and then gotten behind the wheel.

Now they were leaving, going god knows where.

Because she'd slouched down a bit so she wouldn't be leaning on her hands, her view of where they were going wasn't the best, but what did it matter? By turn she fought panic and let his presence seep over her. Yes, he was taking her away from the world she'd chosen to spend several days in. Yes, he could kill her and dump her along the side of the road if he wanted. But even when those moments of fear intruded, she didn't believe he'd do that. After all, they'd been lovers.

Lovers? Would anyone call what had taken place between them the actions of two people determined to explore each other's bodies that? Insane was more like it. And yet here they were traveling together through the night with a soft instrumental playing on the radio. The city streets that had overwhelmed her earlier were much less crowded now, and he was a good driver. He seemed to anticipate what others were going to do and effortlessly changed lanes, slowed or sped up as conditions warranted. The large pickup felt like a luxury automobile although maybe post-sex lethargy had relaxed her.

She was hungry and somewhat uncomfortable and in need of a shower, shoes and underwear, but the man beside her would take care of those things. After all, he'd been in charge from the moment their lives came together.

She hadn't wanted to be in the city anyway, and if she had her directions right, they were heading north out of town. There weren't any mountains for hundred of miles, but she could imagine that that was his destination probably because summers in valleys had a way of sucking energy out of her while mountains brought her back to life. He had a full tank of gas so could drive most of the night. By morning—where would they be by morning?

And what did he intend to do with her?

The vital question pulled her out of the cloud she'd wrapped around herself. Straightening her legs, she looked over at him. He had to feel her eyes on him, but he continued to concentrate on driving, maybe because he didn't want to connect with her.

But they had. Damn it, they'd had sex – twice. And if he removed her bonds, she'd be hard put to keep her hands off him.

What was it about him? Yes, he had the kind of body any woman would love to jump. Add in the mystery of who and what he was and you had a lethal combination, but she wasn't stupid! This was hardly a romantic interlude, whatever that was. They weren't about to ride off into the sunset together. Her life was at risk, damn it!

They'd reached a freeway and were playing chase the taillights of the cars ahead of them, the greater speed and fewer lane changes putting her in mind of a racetrack. When another driver cut in front of them, Range didn't slam on the brakes so much as compel his rig to respond to his sudden command. The crisis over, she glanced over to find him looking at her. Together they rolled their eyes and shook their heads at the other driver's stupidity. The shared moment carried her for maybe ten miles.

Then he started slowing, drawing her attention to a deserted truck weigh station to the right. In contrast to the flowing traffic, the weedy unlit area struck her as lonely and unneeded. When he stopped and shifted into park, she watched and waited because she had no choice. Damn but he was beautiful in shadow! Maybe deadly but an incredible male just the same.

Reaching into a rear pocket, he pulled out something she couldn't see. A faint click reminded her of the pocketknife her father had carried. A moment later he'd cut away her gag and tossed the tape in the back. "No one can hear you now," he said unnecessarily.

She worked her mouth. "No, they can't."

"We'll get something to eat in a little while. Hamburgers all right?"

"Anything."

He made a sound she interpreted as a chuckle. "It's going to be a long drive, probably all night if I can stay awake."

Just like in her fantasy. "I don't suppose you'll tell me where we're going."

"Where I feel safe."

Just safe, she pondered as the vehicle started moving again. Something about his tone made her wonder if their destination represented more than just a base of operations to him. There had to be untold places where he could keep her until his services were no longer needed or whatever this was about, so why had he chosen one that required him to drive through the night? Because it mattered to him?

"You won't answer any of my questions, will you?" she asked.

"No."

Silence, heavy and alive. "I remember your name. Range."

"Good memory."

"I like it."

"Hmm."

She waited until he was up to freeway speed again. "I'm trying to decide whether I should thank you for taking me from something I didn't want to be doing."

"Huh?"

"Fund-raising, asking for donations, giving the same pitch over and over again. Only you don't give a damn about my agenda, do you?"

"It's no longer your agenda."

No it isn't because you've robbed me of what I've managed to patch together in the way of a life. "It was important. At least I thought it was. Why are you doing this? I know, damn it, you don't have to tell me anything, but this doesn't make sense!" Teeth clenched, she waited out a wave of fury. This man brought out so many extreme emotions in her, sexual hunger at the top of the list. "I don't know if you know this or give a damn, but I'm responsible for my father. He's in a nursing home as the result of a devastating stroke. I pay his bills and make sure he's all right—as right as he can be."

Nothing. And yet she sensed a tension that hadn't been in him earlier. No, she concluded, he hadn't known that. If she told him everything she'd been through in the past year would he take pity on her and let her go?

Was that what she wanted?

Being shut up in her thoughts had given her the time to think about why she'd been kidnapped, and who was behind it. The who wasn't hard to determine since as far as she knew only one man on earth hated her. Yes, some of her competitors wished she'd break her back or neck or both, but their grumblings were simply their way of acknowledging her skill. She couldn't imagine a fellow racer launching a plot to get rid of her.

But Danny Tito was another matter, evil in ways she hadn't known existed until their lives had collided.

The fear she'd naïvely believed she'd put behind her slammed into her and stole her breath. Damn him! Damn him! If she could kill the bastard, she would.

"What?" Range demanded.

So he's sensed my emotion, has he? "I know who's paying you to do this."

"Do you?"

The fear that had blindsided her wasn't backing off so much as it now shared space with another emotion. She'd slipped into a fantasy world, hadn't she? Otherwise, she would have ridiculed any stupid notion that she wanted to play animals rutting with this man. Shit, being barefoot with her hands bound behind her and incapable of taking a step was the real world, not escape from said world.

And in the real world, monsters like Danny Tito paid conscienceless men like Range whoever he was to do horrid things to those who tried to make the monsters accountable for their actions.

"No pickles on my burger," she managed. "I hate the damn things."

"You don't care about pickles. Go on, who do you think hired me?"

“Danny Tito.”

He shot her another dark glance then returned his attention to driving. The man was indeed beautiful, not in a pretty way, but in the complexity of his body and mind. All raw elements with no pasted-on veneer, what you saw was what you got—if you could get through the protective layers.

Back in high school she, along with an entire city, had lived for the moments when Eric Singlar ran onto the basketball court. Out of uniform, Eric resembled any still-growing eighteen-year-old, goofy and loose-jointed, but when he held the ball, when he twisted and turned and ran and stopped as if he’d never met gravity, he became magical. He’d gone to college on a full-ride basketball scholarship and now played professionally, and she’d never forget screaming with everyone else when he dunked or shot from half court, when he epitomized what it was to be beautiful.

Was that what had drawn her to Range? He was a hired gun or something close to it with the power of life or death over her, but sitting in the confining space next to him, once again she couldn’t think about that. She’d been attracted to the danger he represented and yet that was a simplistic explanation. Equally simplistic was the appeal of his all-male body. Oh yes, there was a great deal of the stallion about him, but a stallion wasn’t interested in anything beyond sex, food and water, was it? On the other hand, Range—

What? she threw at herself. Something, some element of the man remained just beyond her understanding, and once she knew what that was, she’d know why she’d never be able to emotionally walk away from him.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

“Nowhere.”

What a strange thing for him to say, and revealing. “Because it’s none of my damn business or because you’re a vagabond, a gypsy?”

“What does it matter?”

She’d thought she’d reconciled herself to not having use of her arms, but she was wrong because with every fiber in her she wanted to stroke his cheek and tell him that who and what he’d been before he’d stormed into her life mattered to her. Undoubtedly he deliberately drew a line between his professional and personal existence. Maybe that was why he’d thrown up a barrier around her question, but she couldn’t believe it was that simple.

“You know so much about me, at least a hell of a lot more than I do about you. It isn’t fair.”

“What is?”

About to throw his wise-ass question back at him, she instead took his tone deep inside her. There was something resigned about it, almost like a child accepting that his parents had been lying to him about Santa Claus. “You’re right. Life isn’t fair. But at least I’m trying to make Tito accountable for his actions. Maybe you don’t give a damn

about how the roll of the dice comes out, but I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try to do something about it."

She hadn't expected him to say anything, but damn it, she wished she knew what he was thinking. Quite possibly he had no idea why Tito hated her and didn't care. If that was the case, then this insane sexual whatever she felt for Range was destined to die as abruptly as it had begun.

"What is it?" she demanded. "You do the job you're paid for. Nothing else matters?"

His continued silence shook her, deeply. She still wanted to stroke his cheek while she encouraged him to open up about what had made him who he was, but now she was afraid of what she'd learn. Some people lived their lives incapable of comprehending that others had emotions, needs, dreams. If he was one of those incomplete humans, she felt sorry for him.

And a man without empathy or compassion could kill without thinking twice.

* * * * *

Range stopped at a hamburger stand on the outskirts of town. Leaving her in his rig, which he'd parked at the far end of the lot away from the lights, he went in for food. Returning, he untied her hands and they ate in silence. He didn't want to retie her but he did, damn it. He wanted them to be able to travel together, commenting companionably about their fellow travelers, other places they'd been to, what last week had been like for each of them and what they planned to do with tomorrow. Most of all, he wanted this woman to be looking forward to where he was taking her, and to understand why it meant so much to him.

And he wanted their conversation to carry the undercurrent of the sex they intended to have once they'd reached their destination.

Once they were back on the freeway, he hunted up an all-news station. A couple of politicians were discussing the pros and cons of a piece of legislation one of them was sponsoring, but although he'd long been interested in how government functioned, the two male voices were simply that, background hums to his thoughts.

He wondered if she was paying attention to the discussion, but the unlit interior hid her features. Although he was aware of the potential for problems, he'd secured her hands in front of her. They rested on her lap as if she was at peace, but he sensed her tension. She might have invited him into her body, but she didn't trust him any further than she could throw him—just as he'd learned not to trust anyone.

When his cell phone rang, he cursed himself for not having turned it off, but staying in touch with his clients was vital. He punched *send*. "Yeah?"

"Can you get her to Chicago?"

"What?"

"You heard me. I said, can—"

“Yeah, I heard you. Chicago’s a hell of a long way from here.”

“Like I don’t know. But I have connections there. That far away, it’d be harder to trace her disappearance to me. Flying’s out but you can drive—”

“Are you crazy? Chicago’s two thousand miles away. Whatever this is about, there has to be someplace closer.”

“I know about the one out there. You—”

One what? “Did you hear me? I don’t walk or drive into anything until I know everything about it.”

“Fuck. What do you want?”

The truth about your plans for her. “Tonight, nothing.”

“Shit! That’s it, isn’t it? You want her for yourself.”

“Not the way you do. One thing you should know, she’s sitting next to me. She can hear everything we’re saying.”

“Fuck, fuck. Look, I’ll call in the morning around ten. Be by yourself.”

Not bothering to agree or tell Tito to go screw himself, he ended the call.

“What’s in Chicago?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“But you have an idea, don’t you?”

I hope I’m wrong. “It isn’t my business. My job was to deliver you—”

“I can’t believe this!” Leaning over, she slammed her bound hands against his thigh. “What kind of human being does the kind of things you do? If he wanted you to slit my throat, would you?”

“No.” His thigh throbbed. If she hit him again, he might accidentally punch down on the gas pedal.

“No? Because of your goddamn code of ethics? You’ll shoot out someone’s kneecaps but not pump a bullet into his belly?”

“Don’t go there.”

Sighing, she leaned her head against the backrest. “You’re right. I don’t want to go there. We’d have to take your vehicle, wouldn’t we? Like Tito said, you couldn’t risk getting me on a plane. I’ve been to Chicago. I don’t want to go there again.”

He came within a breath of asking what had taken her to that part of the country, but that was the sort of thing one friend asked another, and they sure as hell weren’t that. Tito would call with an alternative tomorrow and if he wanted to get the rest of his payment for services rendered, he’d agree to Tito’s plans. He’d done essentially that any number of times in the past, had focused on his job and not asked questions so he knew how to play the game, but this wasn’t a game, was it?

It was Charil’s life.

Chapter Eight

About an hour after they'd eaten, Range had pulled in behind a gas station with a down-at-the-heels unisex bathroom. He'd untied her ankles and put on her tennis shoes, gone into the stall with her, not quite averting his eyes as she peed. Then he'd urinated and they'd stepped out. No one had been gassing up when they arrived, but now a woman was filling the tank of her battered car while a couple of small children hung out the rear window. No, even if she were desperate to escape, she wouldn't endanger those children.

Endanger? On TV and in the movies, the bad guys fired away indiscriminately, mowing down innocent bystanders, but, please, he wasn't one of them. He was – what?

The tired but necessary question stayed with her as they continued north and got between other questions such as what insanity had prompted Tito to have her kidnapped and what he intended to do with her. Then as the news-talk station faded away to be replaced by a sports wrap-up, she gave in to exhaustion.

Night turned into gray, a cooling coastal fog. She drifted over the shore, water droplets in her hair and on her face. Unlike the seemingly always occupied southern California coast, she was alone except for some birds and – and – no, not alone after all.

A man, looking out at the surf, his head high as if he too wanted the spray on his lashes and in his hair. She glided toward him as if being drawn by – by – maybe he was reeling her in.

Interesting. She had no hook in her mouth, no taut fishing line stretched between them. His arms were by his side and he looked utterly at peace.

Now she stood beside him with her hand shielding her eyes even though the moon and not the sun was overhead. They didn't speak, didn't acknowledge each other, and yet she'd never been more aware of a human being. In a matter of seconds she'd become part of him, in tune with his thoughts, even the way the sand felt between his toes. Thinking he needed to know that and to ask if he felt the same about her, she turned toward him. Just then he dropped to a crouch and came back up holding a large seashell which he handed to her, but when she reached out, he grabbed her wrist and spun her until she was facing him with the surf behind her.

The moon felt warm on her back but not as warm as the heat coming from him. The seashell dangled from her fingers. Before she could lift it to her ear to listen to the surf trapped inside it, the ocean called out. Pivoting, she threw the shell into it as far as she could, laughing because it arced high instead of going straight. When she looked up at the stranger who wasn't one, her laughter died to be replaced by a low sigh.

How she wanted him. Needed him.

"I'm alone," she told him.

"So am I."

"I'm sorry, so sorry."

He started to shake his head, then stopped. It might have been a trick of the moon, but she thought she saw tears glittering in his midnight eyes so stood on her toes and kissed them away. She wanted to embrace him, oh how she wanted, but he might consider the contact an invasion of his space.

Thinking to take them past strangers' hesitancy, she pulled off her top and tossed it into the water after the seashell. The material bobbed and floated for a short while before sinking beneath the surface.

"You can't get it back."

"I don't want it."

He didn't say anything and because she couldn't speak for the knot in her throat, they simply looked at each other as foam ran over their feet. Then, slow and hesitant, he removed his shirt and wadded it up before throwing it far into the night.

It was her turn to tell him he couldn't retrieve his garment. His response was a long, slow shrug. "Where did you come from?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know, don't care. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"Thank you," she managed around another lump. "I needed to be found."

Enough awareness slid through her that she knew her response was both nonsensical and wise. Thinking something, maybe, she knelt, timing a wave so she could scoop up a double handful of sand and foam. Standing, she started to let it dribble through her fingers. Then laughing as she couldn't remember ever laughing, she slapped the glob onto his chest and began rubbing it all around. He laughed back, the sound rich and delighted.

His arms snaked under her knees and across her back as he lifted her effortlessly. Electric sparks snapped between them, prompting her to nestle against him. Protected, warm and wanted, muscles twitching in anticipation, laughing at the way the fast-drying sand flaked off his chest and onto her.

He was walking, each step sure and masterful. Even with her vision blurred, she knew they were heading toward the moon.

"What are we going to do there?"

"Have sex."

Ah, of course. "How many times?"

"Until we can't any more."

Still walking, a fine mist falling around them, moon-heat on her temples, throat, and breasts. Awareness of her breasts grew so she turned into him and lightly rubbed her mounds over his firm chest. With each touch her nipples hardened even more, causing her breath to snag and her cunt to swell.

“How far to the moon?” Her mouth was close to his throat so he’d feel her breath.

“We’re not going there after all.”

What? No moon, no having sex on it? Frustrated, she leaned back so she could pound her fists against his strength, but before the first blow landed, he threw her out, out, arcing high and long.

She landed rump first in the ocean, sank beneath the surface, found the bottom and shoved up, splashing water in his direction. Even with her hair streaming in her eyes, she knew she’d scored a hit.

“I win! Ha, I win!”

“Says who?”

Throwing himself at her, he planted his head in her midsection and knocked her back. They went under together in a tangle of limbs. Barely remembering not to laugh, she fisted her fingers in his hair and wrapped her legs around his middle. With him firmly in her grip, at least for this half second, she rolled them so she was on top and tried to push him to the bottom. But he must have landed on his knees because he suddenly pushed off and brought them back to the surface.

His arms went strong and true around her, sealing her against him. She started to nuzzle again, then stopped. His jeans or shorts or whatever he’d been wearing were gone as were what had remained of the clothes she’d had on. Two naked bodies, wet sand and foam and seawater clinging to them, seaweed sliding over her shoulder, salt in her mouth, a glossy stingray drifting past.

“Will it sting us?”

“No, not in this dream.”

Dream? No, she wanted reality not some libido-driven fantasy.

Then he ran a hand between her legs and she didn’t give a damn. The water was around their waists with the waves just strong enough that they rocked in time with the sea. He kept his legs spread for balance, kept her floating on her back and holding on to his waist, hips, arms, whatever she could get a grip on.

Another shift, time and place sliding away a little and then floating back. The ocean still caressed his waist and she was still stretched out on the surface, but now the moon was high overhead and the stars – had there ever been so many?

“Look. It’s incredible.”

“You’re incredible.”

On the brink of thanking him, awareness of her body pushed the words away. Her legs were on either side of his hips, her pussy close to the dusky shape between his legs. They were holding hands with him providing just enough leverage that she didn’t have

to worry about slipping beneath the surface. Smiling up at him, she bent her knees and pressed her heels against his buttocks.

"I don't let women get this close."

"Why not?"

"Safer that way."

"But I'm not just any woman, I'm me."

"I know."

What was that tone, amused or somber or somewhere in between? Wondering if she had it in her to ask the question, body awareness again took over. A small shift placed his cock along her mons so she locked her legs even tighter against him, keeping them together. Foreplay? Was that what this was called?

Who the hell cared?

Drifting, waves rocking her up and down, his cock sometimes pressing against her and sometimes the contact down to nearly nothing but always, always there.

He brought her hands together so he could grip both with a single paw. His mouth easy and his eyes without their earlier shadows, he pushed her away a little and slid his free fingers against her labia. She softened there, smoothed out. Content, so content, and yet ready for the next step.

"You're wet."

"I-I'm in the ocean."

"No, not that. There's too much warmth."

Of course. How wise he was, and knowledgeable. She could entrust herself to him, turn her body over to him and he'd guide her to a slow, long, hot climax. Then another and another. And when it was over?

No, no future. Only this moment.

"You belong to me," he said as he ran his baby finger in her opening. "This is my dream and I brought you into it."

No, she wanted to say. It's my dream. But maybe he was right and what did it matter because he was inside her, a small part of him in the home she'd provided for him. She thought of his shadows, his lack of a past, the way he drew night around him and nearly cried because he was so alone. Then she shifted so his finger pressed against her front vaginal wall and she was happy for both of them because although they were surrounded by a lonely ocean, they were together.

"What does this feel like?" He crooked his finger and drew his nail over hot satin tissue.

"Oh shit. Like – as if I'm being born."

"A hard birth or an easy one?"

"Both," she told him although she'd never given birth. "Alive and aware, wanting more."

“This more?”

Increased pressure made her cunt muscles clench. In contrast to the delicious tension there, the rest of her felt boneless. Thank goodness for the water’s buoyancy because otherwise – what?

What was it about his fingers in her cunt that made concentrating on anything else so difficult? The damp tissues were such a small part of her, hidden, quiet and patient for long periods only to turn savage and demanding.

Demanding now.

Using her thighs against his as leverage, she pushed away. His fingers were still in her but close to her entrance and making it easy for her to twist to the side, free. Digging her toes into him, she leveraged herself so she was nearly out of the water. He could have stopped her at any time, but now he held her hands, standing strong and firm.

Back a little more, muscles like lava and nerves running together, then drifting toward him, finding him. She stopped when his cock tip just touched her core, looked at the moon and stars and let the ocean absorb her. Her clit was a hungry thing, savage, but she commanded it to be patient.

I’ve been waiting a lifetime for this.

Why?

I don’t know. Then before he could send her another message, she arched her spine and came at him, opened herself, took him in. He met her move for move, under control and yet with a wild current of his own humming. What was it she’d just told her clit, to be patient? The same warning now ran throughout her but holding on to restraint was becoming more difficult. She had, after all, waited a lifetime to fuck this man.

No questions. No searching for answers. Only taking him full and strong and deep, eyes hot and heart tripping over every beat.

One. They’d become one.

Pulling her toward him, he guided her arms around his neck. Even before the kiss of nipple against chest, she lifted her head and went in search of his mouth. There it was, waiting for her, giving as much as hers was.

Unions, union of cunt and cock, of breasts against sea-stained chest, of hungry mouths.

The ocean rose around them, lapped higher and higher until only their heads were out of the water. He started floating as if dancing to the waves’ rhythm and showing her how to do the same. Robbed of something to leverage himself against, his attempts to pump into her turned gentle and slow-motion. This wasn’t fucking. It was making love, holding on while the ocean caressed them and bore them toward its depths.

Chapter Nine

Dawn was hinting when Range passed the small airport at the southern end of Lake Tahoe. By the time he'd reached the lake itself, sunlight had found it and was beginning to wake the trees. Despite his gritty eyes and weary muscles, he felt more alive than he had in hours. Reaching the Tahoe National Forest was always like this for him even with the tens of thousands of outdoor recreation lovers who clogged the narrow road. Fortunately, this early the two of them all but had Highway 89 to themselves. One thing about living on the California side, there were no casinos with their screaming lights. And now that he'd turned onto the long tree-choked drive leading to his cabin, he was away from the tourists.

Charil had been sleeping for several hours which hadn't helped when it came to staying awake himself, but as he'd slowed for yet another construction zone a few minutes ago, she'd straightened. If she was surprised to find her hands tied in front, she'd given no indication. Instead, she'd studied her surroundings.

"Where are we?"

"Tahoe."

"Oh. Why?"

"Because that's where I live."

His admission turned her toward him.

"You look surprised."

"I am. You live—how can whoever you work for get in touch with you all the way up here?"

"Cell phone. It's not like I'd ever bring a client here."

"You're bringing me."

Nodding slowly, he took note of the occasional tree-surrounded cabin on both sides of the weather-beaten road. Vehicles were parked around most of the cabins, proof that his neighbors were taking advantage of the summer weather to enjoy their vacation homes.

Because he'd made it a point to talk to as many of them as possible, he knew that only two other cabins served as primary residences. Except for workmen, he'd never had anyone at his place and wasn't sure how he'd feel having Charil in there. Neither had he fully come to grips with his decision. He thought she might ask questions, but she was looking all around.

"The potholes have potholes," she observed after a particularly rough jolt. "A combination of snow and ice complicated by removal equipment, I guess. Any word on whether they're going to do more than patch?"

"We're not high on the priority list, but I don't mind."

Even without looking at her, he knew she was now studying him. "I can't figure you out. I never expected this, never."

Neither did I.

Spotting the entrance to his place, he slowed even more. No matter how many times he'd done this since buying the fifty-year-old fixer-upper, the impact of having a home of his own hit him in the gut and heart. He loved the smells of the surrounding evergreens, the thick log walls, the sound of pine cones hitting the new metal roof, and now that he'd replaced the rotting back deck, he even enjoyed sweeping needles and other debris off it. As he turned into the gravel drive, he wondered what she'd think. A far cry from a travel trailer or RV.

Parking at the left of the cabin, he turned off the engine. Silence embraced him and brought home the reality of how tired he was. Much as he was looking forward to reconnecting with the place, it wouldn't happen until he'd had some sleep.

She sat looking up at the stone chimney until he came around and opened her door so he could undo her seat belt. After she swung her legs around, he crouched and untied her ankles. Then, not acknowledging her bound hands, he stepped back so he could study her. He'd cut down two dead trees that had been leaning toward the cabin but except for cleaning up the underbrush to decrease fire danger, he'd left the other vegetation in place. Because he'd chosen brown-colored roofing material and had left the exterior walls natural, as far as he was concerned, the cabin was part of its surroundings.

"Beautiful," she breathed.

"You think so?"

"Yes. I honestly do."

Even in the shadowed lighting, he was certain her eyes were glittering. Was she about to cry? She might be terrified of the idea of being locked up here with him but would she have called his home beautiful if that was the case? Maybe, just maybe, it was having the same impact on her that it had on him. The thought shook him, knocked him off balance.

"What made you buy it? I can tell there's been a lot of recent work. The roof's new, isn't it?"

"And windows and the wiring and some of the plumbing." That was the easy part of the explanation. The question of why he'd bought it was something else entirely, and although he didn't need to tell her that, or anything, he leaned against the side of his rig. After standing, she did the same thing, her body language leaving no doubt that she truly wanted to hear the explanation. It was getting lighter by the moment, daylight filtering in through the trees to dance in her sleep-tangled hair. He didn't know what to do with his hands or his growing erection.

"I was here on business," he started. "On the Nevada side looking for someone. I learned he'd taken off for Vegas, but I didn't want to leave." Hopefully she wouldn't

question his admission because he still wasn't sure he fully understood his reluctance to take up the chase. "I decided to look around. That's when I spotted a 'for sale' sign and pulled into this driveway."

"What time of year was it?"

"What?"

"I'm trying to imagine what you saw."

That was important to her? Fighting an insane and dangerous impulse to pull her against him and kiss her until he lost the distinction between them, he shoved his hands in his back pockets.

"Fall. The deciduous trees were changing colors. A lot of the summer people were gone, not many people out on the lake so I had a fair idea of what it looked like when the pioneers discovered it."

"I've been to Squaw Valley. What's that, about fifty miles from here? They hold motocross races there during the summer. I wanted to explore the area, but there was never time. What about winter? Do you have a snowmobile?"

"One came with the place, but it needed a lot of work so I bought a new one."

"I'd love to see it."

Laughter bubbled up from deep inside him, and it took everything he had not to let it free. Of course she'd want to see something that reminded her of the way she earned her living. If there were snow on the ground would he let her take it for a spin? Could he stop her?

"What?" she asked. "You're staring at me."

Because I can't make sense of where you fit in my world. "It's time to go inside." He hadn't intended to sound angry, but damn it, how else was he going to keep his defenses up?

"I don't think I can navigate that gravel without shoes."

Wondering if she'd deliberately thrown a challenge at him, he nevertheless scooped her up and carried her to the front door. Putting her down, he pulled out his key. They were standing under a steeply pitched extension to the roof designed to protect the entrance from snow, and although the space wasn't completely enclosed, he felt cut off from the rest of the world, alone in this special place with her.

Opening the door and stepping aside so she could go in took more courage than he liked to think about. Not only did he want to gauge her reaction to the only place where he'd ever put down roots, but once inside they'd be even more isolated, more together.

She said nothing, didn't move once she was in and had made room for him. Stepping past her, he turned on the closest lamp. Darkness fled, revealing a chocolate leather chair and ottoman, a couch with a multicolored throw, wooden floors with area rugs, several nature paintings he'd bought at a local art show, the massive fireplace with the stove insert he'd put in to keep the heat from going up the chimney, the small

TV, the state-of-the-art stereo system. He'd intended to study her reaction without being obvious about it but with his first glance at her, he gave up that pretense.

Mouth slightly parted, eyes glittering again, she slowly rotated. The place had come furnished, and although he intended to eventually replace everything, structural work had come first and only the leather chair, insert, stereo and paintings were new. He'd installed the large thermopane window that faced the road, not bothering with curtains because he wanted to bring in as much light as possible. Although he was taking a security risk, he left a couple of small windows cracked open when he left so he wouldn't return to a musty smell, and this morning his home smelled of the woods.

Her lower lip trembled, prompting her to chew on it.

"What?" he demanded, caught between his insistent cock and exhaustion.

"I love it."

"Hmm."

"When...when I raced here we stayed in our RV. I had no idea there were places like this, anything except motels and condos and—the view through your window is incredible."

"That's why I don't park in front."

Her feet silent, she walked over to the rich brown leather so she could run her hands over it and then did the same with the Navajo-style couch throw. He noted little except for her brother's ring on her little finger. "The different textures...and the smells—they're calming."

He was anything except calm. Anything except dealing with her impact on him.

Damn the woman, what right did she have to storm into his world! This was his space, the place he came to when he wanted to be left alone! He could play his music and read his books, study the paintings, feed chipmunks and photograph deer and raccoons. If he didn't want to answer his cell phone, he didn't. And he sure as hell didn't have to entertain a visitor.

Except that bringing her here had been his damn fool idea.

"I sense you everywhere. Whoever you bought it from, they didn't leave anything of themselves behind. You've claimed it and made it yours."

She wasn't supposed to be that perceptive. Most of all, what the hell was she trying to do by standing barefoot in his space with her hair tangled, her clothes mussed, her body humming and making his do the same?

"I need to sleep. After I eat."

"Is that where the kitchen is?" She jerked her head at a partly closed door.

"Yeah. The bedroom's upstairs."

"You have something I can cook?"

She was offering to fix a meal for him? Even with what he'd done to her, she wanted to do that—the way one lover would for another? "Yeah."

"Then untie me."

That rocked him back on his heels.

"I'm not going to try to escape. I need you to believe that."

"Why should I?"

"Because I don't lie."

The simple words swirled around him, broke him down a bit and filled him at the same time. He couldn't say how long he'd wanted to change their relationship from what he'd forced it to be at the beginning, and now she was the one to bring things out in the open. He stepped toward her, surrendering his personal space, his protective armor. Strong and weak at the same time, he tugged at the knots. When she was free, she glanced at the marks on her wrists but didn't rub them so he did it for her.

Her wrists were bony but with an underlying strength that came from her lifestyle. He doubted she'd ever envied a model's pampered flesh and wondered if she owned a single bracelet. If he bought her one, would she wear it? Slender silver links, loose so they slid over her skin, simple and clean.

Without knowing he was going to, he brought her hand to his mouth and kissed the veins there. "I believe you."

* * * * *

The kitchen wasn't much to look at, definitely built for only one person to be in it. The refrigerator wasn't very large and in desperate need of being stocked, but fortunately the freezer compartment was full, and the cupboards were filled with canned and packaged goods, including pancake mix and syrup.

Looking about to collapse, Range leaned against the doorjamb watching her mix powdered milk into water in preparation for adding to the pancake mix. She'd found some frozen bacon that was now frying on the serviceable electric stove. Butter was thawing. Even occupied with dodging splattering grease, she still felt his lips on her inner wrist. The reverberation from that simple and not simple contact had spread throughout her.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd fixed a meal for a man, but that wasn't what made the most impact. Most of the men she'd dated had been part of her world, and as a result, like her, they called travel trailers or small RVs home. The impersonality of those places ran together in her mind along with the men themselves, but she'd never forget this morning in Range's mountain home.

"I'm going to have to demonstrate the fine art of pancake making," she said because his steady gaze was making her nervous although that wasn't the right word. "Buttermilk's key. And eggs."

"I'm not picky."

"You aren't a gourmet?"

"Are you?"

Was the switch from him to her deliberate? Maybe he didn't care about her favorite foods, but she wasn't going to let this opportunity for them to get to know more about each other pass without trying to grab hold of it. Even as tired as he was, his strength was still there. His awareness of his surroundings, his wariness, was instinctive, and yet she sensed a reaching out she didn't believe came naturally to him. He wasn't just curious about her, he had to learn as much as possible.

"I'm not complex, Range. At least I never thought I was until my family was torn apart. Since then I've learned I have a capacity for revenge. I want to see justice done and won't stop until it happens. Is that what you need to know about me?"

"Yeah, I think I do."

"Tell me something about yourself then, why you need this place, why you do what you do for a living, your family."

"No family. You want me to get the bacon?"

Dodging again, protecting himself. After grabbing a paper towel, she used a fork to place the bacon strips on it to absorb the grease. Then she poured most of the grease into a container and dropped spoonfuls of pancake mix onto the pan. "Where do you want to sit?" She indicated an empty space perfect for a small table and a couple of chairs.

"In my chair."

His chair had to be the leather one and much as she wanted to see how he fit in it, she thought she understood why he was still standing. He didn't trust himself not to fall asleep.

And he wanted to watch her.

She turned the cakes over and pulled a plate out of the cupboard. If this were her place, she'd paint the kitchen walls white to make it look larger. The sad linoleum would have to go, replaced by blond wood. To add a spot of color, she'd buy a red toaster and coffeepot, maybe red curtains for the small window. Was there room to enlarge the window?

When she gave Range his plate, he added butter and syrup and stood there looking awkward. "You don't have to wait on me. If you want to start eating—"

"I'm fine."

He might be, but she certainly wasn't, at least when it came to the cool and collected department because her ocean dream flitted on the edge of her consciousness. Everything between her and Range had an intensity to it, nearly violent sex and life-and-death issues. In contrast, the surf had brought out a carefree quality, a gentleness. Was he capable of that? Could or had he ever spent a night with a woman while they leisurely explored each other, shared backgrounds and secrets and hopes and dreams? Given what little she knew about him, she didn't think so but prayed the capacity lay hidden in his depths.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, indicating the griddle.

“Yikes!” Slipping the spatula under a cake, she just saved it from being burned. After placing it and two others on her plate, she gave him her full attention. “About you. About us.”

“I can’t do that yet, not until I’ve made some calls – and gotten some sleep.”

Was he intending to call Danny Tito? No matter how much she needed the answer, it would have to wait until they’d eaten. Leading the way into the main room, he collapsed more than sat in his chair, leaving her to curl up on the couch. Despite the artificial taste, she had no trouble wolfing down her breakfast, and he more than kept pace.

At her questions, he explained about the local volunteer fire department, property taxes and mail delivery. His answers were automatic with little elaboration but obviously he’d educated himself about the area. Even as he touched on the need for underground utilities because of frequent service interruptions in winter, she heard commitment in his voice. Despite the problems related to harsh winters and an aging structure and services, this was where he wanted to be.

Good. Good, but he shouldn’t live here alone.

“I want to add on.” He yawned. “But I’m going slow until I see how much I’ll be assessed for road improvement, when and if that happens.”

“You have plenty of room for enlarging this given the size of the lot. What did you have in mind?”

“A real kitchen. Another bedroom, maybe a den.” Another yawn. “I’m not going to make it much longer.”

Getting up, she walked over and retrieved his empty plate, then stood looking down at him. “No, you aren’t.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You know.”

“Say it, Range. I want to hear the words.” She was shaking, alive, hungry for and protective of him at the same time.

“Will you still be here when I wake up?”

“Yes,” she simply said although nothing was simple.

“Why?”

“Because we need to talk.” *And because my body hears yours.*

Chapter Ten

Range lay stretched out on his bed with a blanket up to his waist, but although he appeared asleep, she didn't come into the room. Their short conversation had hung in the air when he climbed the stairs. Once at the top, he'd stood looking down at her, and in his gaze she'd read a mix of trust and disbelief along with vulnerability.

Now as she went through the suitcase he'd brought in just before going into the bedroom, she wondered if she understood his complex emotions. For reasons she didn't understand, he wasn't a man accustomed to trusting anyone. It had never occurred to him that a captive or subject or object or whatever he called his assignments might step into his private space. That's where his vulnerability had come from. After all, what was to prevent her from taking off in his truck or bringing the cops while he was asleep? She had no idea what kind of sentence he'd receive for the crime of kidnapping, certainly a lot more than a slap on the wrist.

Why was she doing this, siding with the enemy? The simple explanation was that he was a fantastic lay, but although that was true in spades, the reasons went far beyond sexual stimulation.

Too complex! How could anyone think when there was a shower waiting and teeth in desperate need of being brushed?

Because he'd turned on the hot water heater shortly after they'd arrived, she treated herself to long, mindless minutes in the small stall. After towel drying her hair, she dressed in a T-shirt and shorts and opened her briefcase. Sorting through her papers, she tried to convince herself that she could tend to business, but she'd made the mistake of sitting where a breeze from the open window could caress her. Dropping the list of confirmed donors she needed to send thank-you cards to, she wandered over to Range's bookcase.

His taste centered around nonfiction, particularly local history and wilderness adventure. She'd read several of the adventure/survival stories but not the regional material. After thumbing through books on California's gold discovery, she selected one about the Donner party because she was intrigued by the harrowing winter the pioneers had spent trapped in snow in the mountains.

Two hours later she was deep in the combination of narrative and diaries that brought the experience to life. Although Range's chair had called to her, she wasn't sure she could concentrate on anything while sitting in something that spoke clearly of him. Besides, the outdoors had seduced her, prompting her to set up a lawn chair on the newly constructed back deck. After all this time, the Donners' life-and-death reality remained chilling, and knowing she wasn't that far from the mountain where half of the party had died added to the intensity of what she was reading.

At the same time, she was more relaxed than she'd been since her brother's death. Being in the woods meant living in the moment, being in touch with nature, away from the rest of the world and responsibilities, memories and tears, anger even. So what if she was here because of Danny Tito? The bastard couldn't reach her.

Only Range could.

A creaking board turned her toward the cabin. Range stood in the doorway with his shorts low on his hips, his shirt missing, his hair mussed. He looked both wide awake and sleepy, wary and as relaxed as she felt.

Holding her breath and waiting for him to say something wasn't getting her anywhere. Besides, if things went on like this much longer, she'd demand to know what the hell he meant by showing up with his belly exposed and his broad tanned chest waiting for her hands. "I didn't think you'd wake up so soon." *Brilliant.*

"I wasn't sure I'd find you here."

"I said I would be. Don't you believe me?"

Shrugging, he picked up a lawn chair propped against the side of the house. As he set it up, she debated telling him that he was placing it too close to her for the sake of her sanity but maybe distance would be worse. What was so sexy about a man's bare feet? And mussed hair.

"Believing someone's word isn't something that comes up often for me," he said as he sat down. "I'm still alive because I distrust."

"Then I feel sorry for you. Range, most people are honest. You —"

"Not the ones I deal with."

He was looking out at the trees, but she sensed his awareness of her. The air between them seemed to be breathing, waiting, expecting. Surprisingly, even with her reawakened nerve endings making their impact, she still felt at peace. Right.

Wrapping the sensations around her, she indicated her book. "I hope you don't mind my borrowing it. There's a monument to the Donners around here, isn't there? Have you seen it?"

"Yes and yes. It makes an impact, same as the book."

Someone who didn't know him wouldn't think much of his comment, but he wasn't a man given to revealing his reactions and emotions. Did she have the courage to reach for his hand? Maybe, but what if he rejected her offering? *Ah shit. You're driving me crazy.*

"They turned to cannibalism," he continued.

"Yes."

"A lot's been made of that, but they did what they had to in order to survive."

"We all do what it takes to survive."

Turning toward her, he slowly ran his gaze over her. Along with acknowledgment of her physical body, she sensed something else, something deeper and more intimate. "Is that how you feel? In survival mode?"

Hard question. Impossible question. "Should I be?"

"I'm not going to hurt you."

Much as she wanted to believe she was safe with him, she still knew almost nothing about this man she wanted to fuck as she had never wanted to fuck before. "I don't understand our relationship, why you sought me out."

"I did more than that. I kidnapped you."

"I don't feel kidnapped. Should I?"

"Not anymore."

Oh yes, layers upon layers now. When she stood, her legs warned her not to expect too much of them, but that was all right because all she wanted to do was stand next to him. He'd positioned his chair so he could rest his feet on the railing and as a consequence, his legs were within easy reach. The sun highlighted the hairs on his thighs and revealed several thin scars on his knees. She indicated them.

"Compliments of my reckless youth. Nothing that didn't heal on its own. I take it your scars are the result of crashes."

"Not all of mine show."

She was still asking herself why she'd revealed so much when he took her hand and drew her close so her hip pressed against his flank where the sun had warmed it. A single move and her fingers would be on his leg learning what the dark hairs felt like and recording the powerful muscles just beneath the surface. Her own legs tingled. Her breasts pushed against her bra. "I want to hear about those inner scars," he said.

"Only if you do the same."

"What makes you think—"

"Don't!" Angry, she thumped his chest with her free fist. "I don't know why you've closed yourself off the way you have, why you present yourself like some stone-cold machine, but I'm not buying the façade."

"What do you see?"

"Not damn enough but I'll get there."

"Why bother?"

Was he goading her? Maybe this was his way of testing her resolve, but whatever he had in mind, she wouldn't give up until she'd gotten as close as she could. She had no choice.

"I'm bothering. Don't you get it, Range? I care about you."

She'd seen him blink any number of times but the gesture had never carried so much meaning. Once she'd come across a large mixed breed dog guarding a parts shop. The owner had ordered the mutt to let her into its personal space, but the whole time

she'd been there, she'd sensed its wariness. It wasn't that the animal hadn't trusted or liked her. Rather, it hadn't known what to make of this young human female in a world dominated by rough men. She'd wondered if given enough time and patience she could have won the mutt over, shown it that a human hand could be gentle. In many respects Range was the same.

Determined to see how he'd handle being touched by her instead of the other way around for a change, she planted her hands on his shoulders and bent over him. With her lips inches from his, she said, "We can't just walk away from each other, you know we can't. What are we going to do about it?"

His hands slipped around her waist, fingers sliding under her top and heading for her ribs. "Explore."

Accepting, no, inviting his boldness, she leaned closer. "Have sex, you mean."

"If that's what you want."

"Want has nothing to do with it, damn it! You turn me on."

Settling his hands over her sides, he held her in place. "Are you sure you want to admit that?"

Confused, she struggled to take the conversation back to defining their relationship but his fingers, lordy, his fingers! "Did you think I'd deny that I want to have sex? We'd both know I was lying if I did."

He was silent a moment. "Why are we at this point? That's what I don't understand."

Neither do I. "I can't think, all right. Not now."

Sensation akin to butterflies drawing their wings from her crotch to her breasts stole her breath, and she barely heard his response, something about their needing to think, and talk, later.

"Yes, yes," she agreed. "Anything."

Already regretting her promise to be open and honest with him, she dug into his shoulders and pulled him upright. Before she could decide how to get him to his feet, he did so which left her with no choice but to acknowledge his greater height and bulk. With her hands sliding over his naked chest, she made a vow. For every piece of personal information she gave him, she'd receive the same in return. Somehow.

Later.

"My bed?"

"Your bed."

A smile lifted a corner of his mouth. Fascinated by the change in his usually guarded expression, she was slow to track his hands' movement. By the time she caught up, he'd gripped her buttocks and was forcing her against him—against his aroused cock. "When?"

"Now, damn it, now."

On the tail of another brief smile, he slid a hand between her legs from the rear. "Just like that?"

Oh shit, yes! "Don't make fun of me, you bastard!"

"Probably."

Ashamed of herself for throwing the word at him, she wrapped her arms around his neck, wrapped her body as best she could around him. "I didn't mean—it just slipped out."

"Don't let it bother you. It's not like I haven't learned to deal with it. You smell wonderful. You got a shower, didn't you?"

"Hmm. I'm glad you noticed."

The hand between her legs pressed, backed off, pressed again. "Sorry I'm not in the same condition. If you want me to—"

"Later."

"In, like, you can't wait?"

Oh shit! If he kept bombarding her pussy that way, she might climax here and now. "Figure it out for yourself! It's not like you haven't sampled the wares."

"A sample's never going to be enough."

Forcefully reminding herself that he might have thrown out the comment just to keep the conversation going, she stood on her toes and lightly raked her teeth over the bridge of his nose. He responded by sliding his arm between her legs and bending his elbow, nearly lifting her off her feet. "Oh, shit," she muttered. "Shit. Bed. Now."

"Yeah, now. Charil, I turned off my cell. No one can reach us."

"Oh."

Before she could decide what to do, he lifted her off her feet and placed her, belly down, over his shoulder. Laughing and hoping to heck he was strong enough for this, she hung there like some rag doll except there was nothing rag-dollish about the way she felt. Of course having one arm wrapped around her waist to keep her in place and the other planted firmly over her buttocks might have something to do with her reaction, especially when his forefinger found its way to her anus. Thank heavens for clothing. Thank heavens his bed was only a few feet away—and up a narrow staircase!

"Put me down," she insisted as he planted his bare foot on the first step. "You can't—you might—"

Another step. Leaning forward and his left hand gripping the railing. Determined to do everything she could to prevent an accident, she remained absolutely still. He took the stairs, not as if she weighed nothing, but certainly not like he was barely up to the task.

"What was that?" she asked when he reached the top.

"I like challenges."

With an exaggerated grunt, he bent over and dropped her onto the bed. She bounced several times then settled into it. A strange weakness had slipped up on her while she wasn't paying attention, and she stretched out her arms and legs and lay there waiting for him, watching.

"Just about perfect," he said with his arms folded conqueror-like over his too-damn-broad chest. "A few ropes and I'd have you spread-eagled and waiting for me."

"No ropes, not anymore." How had her lips become so numb and why was it so hard to keep her attention on his face? After all, it wasn't as if she hadn't seen the rest of him.

"Maybe."

Was he drawing out his every move, turning things into a slow-motion dance? It didn't matter since it all fascinated her and although it was hard to see the whole for each muscle play, the pattern was there. Bit by nerve-shredding bit he unfolded his arms and reached for her shorts' button. She felt more than saw the unfastening followed by the smooth retreat of zipper. With her help, he dragged the fabric down over her hips but left them around her ankles in a kind of teasing restraint.

Her top came next, the material being worked up to her armpits, sitting with help, lifting her arms so he could pull it over her head, sagging forward while he dispensed with the bra fastening, then falling back as he captured the straps. She was still bouncing on the mattress when he sat beside her.

"What's happening?" he demanded. "Damn it, what are we doing?"

"I don't know. Please, I don't know!"

"I've never done—damn it, I know how to do a job. This isn't it."

"Maybe..." Electricity hummed through her, but she forced her mind and energy off the sensation so she could concentrate on him. On his questions and need. "Maybe we know each other better than we think we do. Some kind of connection."

"Yeah, there is. It's called fucking."

"Not just that." *Don't touch me. Thinking's only possible this way.* "I'm thinking you don't have family and I've lost mine. Maybe it's as simple as that."

"You're law-abiding. I do what I do and damn the law."

"I know."

Confusion swam in his eyes, at least that's how she interpreted what she saw. Desperate to ease his mind, she slid her hands over his chest until his nipples pressed against her palms. "Maybe—I'm not sure why you've made that decision, but maybe it's because of the way you were raised."

"I wasn't raised. I happened."

I happened. On the brink of telling him how sorry she was, she didn't because why revisit a past he couldn't change? Her eyes were hot, tears threatening.

His heart pulsed just beneath her fingers. Absorbing the sensation, she acknowledged how long it had been since she'd concerned herself with anyone except

herself. Was she selfish? No, surely she had every right to mourn her losses, but grief and anger and the drive for justice had locked her in a cage of her own making. It was time to break down the bars.

"You're the most complex man I've ever known. I'm not sure I'll ever fully understand you, but I want to try."

"Why?"

"Maybe because we have the same reading tastes."

His eyes told her he wasn't buying her attempt to sidestep his question, but did she have any choice? His gaze, his heartbeat, his something had reached the humming electricity in her veins.

"I'm complex?" he threw back. "What about you?"

Scooting away a few inches, she sat up and linked her arms around his neck for support. Eager, she lapped first one nipple and then the other. As she did, he pressed the heel of his hands into the small of her back. Was her pussy opening, expanding even though he hadn't yet touched her there?

Needing him to be as emotionally off balance as she was, she caught a nub between her teeth and leaned away slightly. Catching his breath, he worked both hands down to and into her crack.

"Ah, shit," she whimpered without letting go. "Shit."

"You're heating up. Your skin, I feel the heat."

No arguing that just as there was no resisting when he pushed her back down again. He wouldn't have done that if he'd thought she'd hold on to his nub. Maybe his self-confidence, his knowledge of her should have bothered her, but he made her feel so damn weak and desirable. "What do you want?" she managed when he planted his hands on either side of her shoulders and loomed over her.

"You need to ask?"

"No. I—" Her pussy clenched, muscles suddenly drawn taut. "You're scaring me."

Lids drooping, he shook his head. "Don't say that, ever. I won't hurt you, ever."

Can you keep that promise?

Slow, slow and steady, he leaned even closer until skin met skin. Her nipples pebbled under the pressure created by his chest. Sensing the strain in his arms as he worked to remain suspended over her, maybe she should have panicked. Instead, she let him blanket her. Her cunt oozed, warmth sliding down to dampen the sheet under her.

Big. So damn big. And strong. Bringing heat of his own and milking even more from her.

"Are you still afraid?" he asked.

"No. But something. Make today about discovering that something, please," she said and brought his head down so she could press her lips against his. The pressure

sizzled through her, lifted her up and forced out a small cry. Exhausted and strong, she kept after him with mouth and tongue and teeth, tasting and touching, learning his inner textures. He met her search for search until, frantic, she toed off her shorts and lifted her hips from the bed. At that, he straightened.

He was still over and around her, but he'd robbed her of his mouth, and his chest no longer flattened her breasts. Confused, she raked his collarbone.

"Damn you." He lightly slapped her right breast. "Damn you."

He'd cursed her before, hadn't he? Or had she uttered the words that were more emotion than profanity? "Are we fighting?"

"Ourselves maybe."

How wise he was! "I don't want to, not now."

Standing, he all but ripped off the rest of his clothes. After kicking them away, he turned his attention back to her, his gaze raking over every inch of her much as her nails had furrowed his collarbone. The hot and intense stare flamed her until she was forced to claw the sheet in a battle to retain self-control.

"Don't look at me like that." The words were more whimper than command. "You're making me crazy."

"I can't get enough of you. Shit, how clichéd that sounds, how adolescent."

He couldn't get enough of looking at her. How beautiful the words! Panting but struggling not to let him know, she aimed her foot at his hip. She thought he might back-step when she lightly ran her toes over his smooth, taut flesh, but although the muscle underneath twitched, he remained in place. Seeing his clenched fingers further emboldened her, and she shifted so her big toe brushed the side of his scrotum. His twitch became a jerk.

"Don't back away," she challenged. "Don't protect yourself from me."

"If not you, who?"

Giving and receiving messages via her toes was a lot more interesting and easier than trying to think how to respond. She discovered that poking his erect cock caused it to dance away only to spring back, and she might have continued her exploration if she hadn't been concerned she'd render it incapable of performing its assigned task. Besides, her toenail was sadly lacking in nerve endings. Going on impulse, she ran her foot between his legs so the underside of his balls slipped over her instep. "Nice."

"For you maybe. For me, it's distracting."

"From what?"

For a moment she thought he hadn't heard or wasn't paying attention, but then he widened his stance so her leg slid even further. Before she could begin to get used to the new sensations, he clamped his legs together and back-stepped until she wondered if he intended to pull her off the bed. No problem as long as she didn't land on her ass.

Moving faster than she could keep up with, he knelt on the bed and shoved her to the middle of it. Friction from the sheet burned her back. By the time the burning faded,

he'd lifted her right leg. Holding it high, he straddled her other leg. Resting her suspended limb on his shoulder, he wrapped an arm around it to keep it in place. Sighing, she ran her fingers over his thigh. "You've got me."

"I'm just beginning to have you."

Promises, promises, she nearly teased him with, but things were getting intense, heavy, intimate. Weakness spread through her to relax her muscles. Whatever he wanted to do to her, she wanted it too. Wanted it now.

Now? Oh yes, lifting her leg a little more and sliding closer, touching the head of his cock to her moist and softened opening, staying there but rocking back and forth a little. "Oh god, oh god," she chanted.

"Not until you're ready. I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm ready. Ready!"

Look at him, something commanded. Watch his expression and share what you're feeling with him. But doing those things called for more concentration than she was capable of. She wanted to feel, to experience, to be.

Eyes closed and her head to the side, one hand resting on the sheet while the other lay along his thigh, she focused on her sex. Felt.

There. Pushing, breaching her walls, slipping in. He remained just inside her with his bulk stretching her and her labia closing around his offering. His fingers trailed over first one breast and then the other, and sweat broke out from her throat all the way to her pussy. His fingers were light, tender, reverent maybe and yet they carried their own raw message. Leaving her breasts, he ran his fingers between them and gathered up her sweat to deposit on her nipples. In gratitude, she clenched her pussy muscles around him.

"Shit," he hissed. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"No. No." She tightened again, held on.

"The hell you don't."

Still gripping her lifted leg, he leaned back and worked his sweat-stained fingers between their joined bodies until he found room for a single finger next to his swollen cock. About to explode from the twin invasions, she willed her muscles to relax. His finger slipped deeper, rotated, retreated, probed.

"Shit. Oh, shit." She tried to lift her buttocks off the bed but couldn't because of his weight. During a flicker of consciousness, she pondered how and if she'd ever be able to free herself. But she didn't want to.

"Uncomfortable?" he asked.

"No. But my legs, going numb."

"Going but not there yet?"

Before she could respond, he withdrew his finger and began thrusting into her, rocking both of them and the bed, pushing her away and then pulling her back, pressing down on her breasts. Wonderfully trapped under him, she contracted and

relaxed her inner muscles and met his driving strength as best she could. Her head whipped from side to side, tangling the sheet and her hair. Opening her eyes, she blinked until she found him above her.

He was watching, his cheeks inflamed and the muscles in his neck tight and hard. Pushing, retreating, pushing. Breathing hard through his open mouth.

Oh god, this man, her captor fucking her!

Her, taking everything he had to give and craving more.

She was burning, flames nipping everywhere but mostly in her pussy. She dimly wondered if she'd drown in her own sweat then realized that much of the wet heat came from him. Fucking. Oh yes, they were fucking.

And her legs were going numb.

"Range, Range, please."

Sudden stillness. Lost in the middle of it, she heeded her body's messages. Yes, there were pins and needles in her thighs and calves, but they were nothing compared to the softened heat of her cunt, nothing compared to the wanting that only a climax would quiet.

"Off me, please. I have—I want to try something."

Despite her plea, she whimpered and tried to grab his cock when he withdrew, but it was too wet and slipped out of her fingers. Scooting back until her head threatened to dangle over the top of the bed, she waited as he lowered her leg to the sheet. Lifting herself up on her elbow, regarded him. He still knelt, still waited with the gift between his legs. Back in her. That's all that mattered, getting his cock back inside her.

Not caring that she must look ridiculous, she wiggled on her ass toward him. She spread her legs but shook her head when he reached for her cunt. A few more inches and her hungry flesh found his tip. Smiling in supreme satisfaction, she wrapped her legs around his waist. "There."

"That's what you want?"

"What I want is you."

Amusement fled his eyes to be replaced by that curious vulnerability she'd spotted before. Intrigued and unsettled by it, she grabbed his arms and pulled him toward her.

He supported his upper body by planting his hands on the bed on either side of her, but she continued holding on to him. Damn it, his taut muscles fascinated her, gave her something other than his expression to concentrate on. His cock had taken up its exploration of her, but he seemed in no hurry to go deeper. Was he teasing her, testing her? No matter, she knew what she needed.

Using her legs for leverage, she lifted her buttocks off the bed. "Please, now."

Silent, he buried himself in her. This time there was nothing gentle, nothing searching about the invasion. He simply plunged deep.

Chapter Eleven

“Ah, ah.”

If he heard, he gave no indication, not that she cared. Like before, his cock caressed her core, heating and kissing it as only his erection could. Determined to keep him in her, she tried to concentrate on keeping her legs wrapped around him, but it was so damn hard, nearly impossible to think of anything except the sweet friction.

Grunting with each thrust, he drove into her. Every time he pulled back, she fought to keep him trapped, but he was so much stronger, so determined to flame the fires.

Plunging, backing up, plunging again. Sucking her into sensation. Impaling her and showing her there'd be no freedom until he was done with her.

What she wanted!

“Do me, do me!” Moisture filled her mouth, and she swallowed. Her breasts ached and burned, but although she arched deep enough to make her back throb, she couldn't find his chest, couldn't press her lonely breasts against him.

Concentrate on what you have.

The command settled over her as her fingers bit into his arms. Although a small part of her knew she was hurting him, she couldn't let go, couldn't. He kept coming at her, driving into and nearly through her, his pace awesome and accompanied by harsh grunts. Matching him, she sent fresh strength to her inner muscles and held on as she'd never held before. For a moment she thought she'd securely gripped him and he could no longer thrust, but he broke free, pulled away until she was afraid she'd lose him.

Coming again. Hammering home.

“Fuck me! Fuck me!”

“I – am!”

“Now! Oh god, now!”

What was that? His body suddenly silent.

Despite her gripping legs and punishing fingers, he left her. Crying out, she tried to sit up, but he ground a hand into her belly. “Condom. I forgot the damn condom.”

Almost before the words sank in, he gripped his cock and aimed it at her. Yes! Damn it, yes. Growling like some frenzied animal, he ejaculated on her mons, wet and slick heat slipping through the fine hairs and coating her hot skin. He was still coming when she plunged a finger in his cum and thrust it into her mouth. She sucked, tasted, tried to ignore another hunger. More cum, grunting and his body taut. His eyes closed, head back, lost in his body's power. Then his eyes opening and his muscles relaxing.

“I'm sorry.”

"No, don't say that," she managed to get out. "You're being responsible. More than I was."

"But you need..."

No argument there. Still, she wanted these moments to be for him so stared into his eyes as, wild and uncivilized, she bathed her breasts with his offering. He returned her gaze with eyes so dark she wasn't sure they were real. When nothing remained in him, she rolled over onto her side and took hold of his shrinking cock. Even going slack, it continued to promise. "So damn responsible. Are you always so considerate?"

"I'll never again be responsible for a child no one wants."

Ah, such depth in a few words, and when she could think, she'd find a way through his protective layers to the man who'd said them. But not now, not while she was starving.

He pulled free, slow and gentle as any man concerned with the well-being of his most important possession would. A heartbeat of anger seized her at the notion that he no longer had any need for her, but then he dropped to his knees on the side of the bed, took hold of her ankles and drew her toward him. "No. Don't sit up. Lie back. Trust."

Trust? Given the way he'd stormed into her life, that should have been impossible, but need played by its own rules. Doing as he'd ordered, she waited while he positioned her so her feet were on the floor with her buttocks on the edge of the bed. Then he knelt between her splayed knees.

Looking up at him, she reached for his forearms, but before she could, he grabbed her wrists. Shaking his head, he positioned her hands over her head. "Stay there. Don't move."

"What—"

"Trust."

"I want to."

He didn't respond, and although his hands were now on her knees, they quieted, making her wonder if her simple words had seized his attention. Then his fingers began moving, telescoping her thoughts so nothing except her body mattered.

With her head flat, she had difficulty seeing him so looked up at the ceiling. An old water stain spoke to one reason for the new roof. Where was getting rid of the stain on his have-to list?

Oh, what? Damn, her knees were sensitive enough but her thighs — "That tickles."

He continued trailing his nails over the outside of her thighs from her hipbones nearly to her knees and then back up again. "Just tickle?"

He wanted something from her, right? Some response or observation or some damn thing, but sinking into the mattress while he played with her oh-so willing body was much easier.

Swirling in a mix of pleasure and anticipation, she tracked his every movement. He kept the contact light and yet firm, so strictly speaking she wasn't being tickled. Driven

maybe. Sensated, definitely although she wasn't sure that was a real word. His nails, fingerpads, palms, the sides of his thumbs, everything, roamed over her. Explored. Everything was fair game – breasts, ribs, the backs of her knees, even her chin. The taps on her chin made her laugh while light caresses over her ears gave life to small shivers. He didn't stay in one place long enough for her to become accustomed to anything, but did she really want his manipulation to become routine?

Wasn't going to happen.

Ah, sliding his hands under her ass and lifting her a little so she could plant her feet more securely under her. When he was satisfied that she could keep the slight realignment going on her own, she sensed him settling down so his ass rested on his heels and he – oh, so he could blow his hot breath over her open-to-him sex.

"Shit! Shit."

"Quiet, woman." He ran a fingertip over her creases, stopped, repeated.

"I can't, oh, shit."

Another expelled breath served as his response followed by several more light strokes that sent her to oozing again. Whimpering despite her attempt to obey his command for silence, she tossed her head about. Then he spread his hands over her hips, and she shook from thinking what he intended to do next.

Nothing. Only more of the stillness that had captured him earlier. *What?* she wanted to ask. *What are you thinking, about to do?*

He answered with his tongue.

Wet, warm, both soft and stiff, it slid past her inadequate barriers and into her. Like butter! She was turning into melted butter.

As something approaching consciousness returned, she determined that a tongue indeed felt different from a cock and yet her body responded in much the same way. Loose and free and caught by need at the same time, she rocked toward him, thigh and calf muscles tense. He remained in her, his tongue moving up and down almost as if he was waving at her core.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck."

No! No, how dare he withdraw?

"You swear a lot."

"I can't help it!"

"Don't." He slapped her belly, the contact so light that it was little more than an attention getter. "I want you quiet."

What he wanted and what he was going to get were two different things, she admitted as he went back to lapping, stroking, exploring. She managed, just managed, to keep the curses buried by pinching her hard-as-hell nipples. The self-inflicted pain distracted her a little from what he was doing.

Stopping again. Puffing one breath after another over tissues that were already on fire. Teeth clenched, she continued to pinch. "What is it?" he asked. "Pleasure or pain?"

“Both. Oh, sh—both.”

“Good.” Grabbing her wrists, he pulled her fingers off her swollen nipples. Holding her firmly, he pressed her palms against his cheeks and she stroked him, spoke to him in the only way she could.

Then he again positioned her arms over her head and she turned her head to the side. He remained low to the ground so she saw little more than his longish dark hair. He’d been pleased that he was giving her both pleasure and pain? After a moment of confusion and concern, she relaxed. Intense emotions were what sex was about, and she was getting that in overload.

Halfway through trying to decide how to share her wisdom with him, she wound up gripping her hair and tugging because suddenly his thumbs were pushing into the base of her belly while his fingers flickered through her pubic hair. Shit, shit, shit.

“Sensation. That’s what this is about, giving you sensation.”

Yes, good! But she had no say in what he was doing or her body’s reactions. She’d become his puppet, a balloon tied at the end of a string, a prisoner.

Prisoner. The word caught and held even as she continued to try to tear her hair out while she strained to bring her pussy closer to him. There were no longer any ropes on her, but she was still tied to him and the incredible tension filling her. He’d planted the tension in her, was holding her suspended over release and relief.

And when he walked his fingers from her belly and mons to between her legs, she had no choice but to surrender to her captor, her master.

Back at her cunt again. No longer using his tongue to invade and tease and please but his fingers and breath.

He played with her, robbed her of strength only to pump her full of energy in the next breath. When he slid his nails along the crease between hips and legs, she shuddered and jumped and hissed and nearly drowned. And when he turned his attention and incredible fingers to her labia, she arched and forgot how to breathe, panted and sobbed.

By turn he stroked her outer and inner lips, teased at her entrance, whispered over her clit. Every time he touched her climactic trigger, she shuddered and sweated and wordlessly begged him to stay there, but he did so only infrequently and briefly, holding her on the brink. Most of his attention was directed elsewhere but always between her legs, always on hot and wet flesh.

“Oh god, god.”

“Did I give you permission to speak?”

“I can’t help—damn it, I can’t!”

He laughed with a forefinger buried deep and drenched. Still chuckling, he pressed until he’d fully skewered her and she was dancing on his probe. “Sure you don’t want to take a break? Maybe have a bite of lunch?”

“Damn you, Range!”

“Already been done.”

Another finger, sliding in slow, filling her even more as it joined the first invasion. And as his nail, knuckles and rough pad slid over her inner tissues, her head filled. “Ah, ah.”

“Are you singing for me, Charil?”

“Don’t – know.”

He slid deeper, retreated, searched again. Each stroke came faster and harder than the last. The wet friction made her jump and squirm but even as the pace accelerated, she still had no thought of trying to escape. He was finger-fucking her, finishing what they’d begun, getting her off.

“Shit, shit.”

“Take it. Take everything I give you.”

She could do that, did it because she had no choice, because she was deep inside herself. Pleasure rippled through her like laughter on a spring morning, like summer’s heat. Thinking, maybe, to capture her climax and hold it close, she curved toward him and gripped his hair.

He plowed into her, jerked back, plowed again. “Got you, do I?”

“Oh, god! Ah.”

“Hold on, hold on. Ride it. Ride it!”

Racing, thundering, the world opening up and shutting down at the same time. Caught in a hot current, hauling on his hair and digging her toes into the rug, sobbing.

“Let it go. Let it happen.”

“Coming! Ah, coming!”

Her climax didn’t so much as catch her as she collided with it. Primitive muscles contracted repeatedly, closing down around his fingers. He fought the hold, plowed, plowed again. Even when her inner tissues begged for relief and her clit screamed, he worked her.

“Don’t ever forget this, Charil. Not ever.”

Chapter Twelve

"Unsalted peanuts."

Rousing himself, Range looked over at Charil. "What?"

"You need to get peanuts for the chipmunks and squirrels but not salted ones."

"Good point. Do you want more water?"

"Not yet, thanks."

They'd been sitting on the back deck, sipping ice water and trying to entice the local wildlife to come closer. Maybe it was the warm afternoon that made him contemplate never moving again, but more likely the combination of mind-shattering sex followed by a lengthy shower was responsible. The shower stall was barely large enough to accommodate one, which had been good since he hadn't trusted his whipped body to remain whipped if she was standing naked next to him.

His prisoner.

What a fuckin' joke that had turned out to be.

"What about hungry?" He nearly chuckled at the idea that he'd turned into a considerate host.

"I'm getting there, but you really need to go to the grocery store."

No matter that her tone was casual, her observation wasn't. Somewhere, somehow, they'd crossed the line into a relationship far different from the one he'd originally expected. This new connection between them was disconcerting and right at the same time. The unspoken question was whether he'd want her to go to the store with him or whether he'd tie her up while he ran errands.

He couldn't put ropes on her again. Not after what they'd been to each other.

"When?" she asked.

"When what?"

"Are we going to the store?"

Another glance reinforced what he'd suspected. She was staring at him, waiting for the vital answer. "Soon."

"All right." Eyes soft, she nodded. "How is this going to play out? With Tito, I mean?"

"He's still my employer."

"Your what? How can you —"

"He paid me to accomplish something for him. But things have changed. Because of us."

“So what are you going to do, send his retainer back and tell him the deal’s off? For us all to pretend nothing happened?”

With her question, the remnants of his lethargy died to be replaced by the familiar instinct for survival. He might have fucked this woman and entrusted more than just his cum to her, but that didn’t mean she was anywhere near understanding him. Hell, he barely did himself. “What are you getting at?”

“He broke the law by having me kidnapped.”

“Yeah.”

“He needs to be punished, brought to be justice.”

The animal in him shook awake and was instantly alert. “It wouldn’t have happened without me. Do you want me punished too?”

“No. Damn it, no.”

“Why not? Think about what I did to you. The way I treated you.”

“Stop it!” She jumped to her feet, knocking the folding chair over as she did. Birds squawked. “You and Tito aren’t the same person. He—I—I didn’t have sex with him. I’d never willingly—shit, that’s what he was going to do, force himself on me, wasn’t he?” Setting her glass on the railing, she wrapped her arms around her middle. “You didn’t ask that animal why he wanted me?”

“It didn’t matter, not then.” *Why the hell not, you bastard?*

“How can you say that?” she whispered. “Some man offers to pay you to grab a stranger and deliver her someplace and you don’t ask a single question? What if he wanted me dead, maimed? It was none of your concern as long as you got your damn money?”

This moment might be easier if he read nothing but hatred in her too-big eyes, but it wasn’t that simple, not with the remnants of sexual contentment still deep and glittering in them. Not with hints of what couldn’t possibly be caring on her part.

“I do things only a handful of people do. I’m good at it. I take pride in my ability to remain under the legal radar. It took a long time to get to this point, and—”

“You’re proud because you can make a living breaking the law?”

It wasn’t like that! It wasn’t. Damn it, she didn’t understand.

Believing she’d become as much a wild animal as he was, he got up and stepped toward her. She leaned away but stood her ground. He stopped when he was close enough to grab her, his arms at his sides. “I told you something earlier about not being raised, about simply happening. Do you remember?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“That shaped me, all right. Made me into what I am.”

“Because you didn’t get the usual dose of nurturing, you think that excuses your behavior?”

Stop throwing your words at me! “What the hell do you know about me? You with your father and—”

“My father?” Her mouth trembled, making him hate himself, killing him because she didn’t want him touching her. “I told you. He’s in a nursing home. Barely able to dress himself, asking for his wife and son. Sometimes angry at me because I can’t answer his questions or take away the body he hates.”

Keep her talking. Find a way out of this. “What questions?”

She was still gripping herself. “About what happened to them.”

If he could have taken them back in time to before he’d jumped her, he would have. “You said Tito had something to do with your brother’s death.”

Maybe his calm but not collected tone had reached her because she picked up her chair and sat back down, albeit on the opposite side of the deck from him. “Something doesn’t begin to explain what happened.”

“Go on.”

“I intend to. Tito’s a race promoter, do you know that?”

He shrugged, waited.

“He made his money in auto races, not Nascar but all over southern California. He’s rich, but it wasn’t enough for him. He had some extra land near one of his tracks and decided to rake in even more money.”

Except for her fiery eyes and pale cheeks, the casual listener probably wouldn’t catch the emotional undercurrents as she detailed how Danny Tito had developed a motorcycle raceway and opened it to a variety of events. Some were speed races that attracted mostly those in their late teens and early twenties while others were designed for those just getting into the sport. Her brother had competed in and won three of the beginner races, and Tito had encouraged him to step up a notch. Knowing their parents wouldn’t have approved him pitting his adolescent body against men, he hadn’t told them what he was up to.

“You’d think Shap would have had to have his guardian’s signature, wouldn’t you?” she said bitterly. “But Tito never said a word, just took his money. Then he set him out on a track that hadn’t been cleaned from earlier races, one with grease and oil on some of the turns. Without enough cornerworkers.”

“Cornerworkers?”

“Flaggers, communicators, handlers, first aid responders. Those, mostly volunteers, whose job it is to respond to spills and crashes. There was none of that on the turn where my brother wrecked while trying to get out of the way of a much more experienced racer. Later—later I learned that Tito’s track wasn’t sanctioned. That the county officials were debating whether to investigate him. They’re still debating.”

“Still? Why haven’t they acted?”

“My guess is money. Tito’s damn money in certain pockets.”

She looked like death, as if she might shatter. But much as he hated her having to go through this, she was right. He had to know.

"What happened when your brother wrecked? He was going fast enough to kill himself?"

Staring at him, nails biting deep into her palms, she spoke. "His wheels went out from under him because of an oil slick. He hit tires that had been set up as a barrier. Some of those tires still had the rims in them. How fucking stupid and irresponsible is that? One caught the side of his neck."

"Oh shit."

"Sliced open an artery. Because no one was on that turn, it took them awhile to get to him and by then..."

"By then it was too late."

She wasn't crying, but he didn't need to see tears for her agony to reach him. Although she might not want it, he walked over to her, slow, easy, as if he was approaching a trapped animal. He held out his arms, and although she shook her head and pressed her hands against his chest, after a moment, she collapsed against him. Deep, ragged breaths spoke volumes about her battle to keep grief under wraps. "Don't be afraid of crying," he muttered. "Tears help."

"I...there aren't any left in me. They didn't change anything."

What could he possibly say to help? The reality of how little he knew about dealing with human emotion shook him, but this wasn't about him. "Let's walk," he said.

* * * * *

On foot, the narrow road looked even more weathered than it had from inside Range's truck. There wasn't a shoulder, but the occasional drivers didn't seem to mind that two people were strolling hand in hand along the side. When he'd suggested they go for a walk, she'd nearly told him that moving from shade to sun and then shade again with the resultant change in temperature was the last thing she wanted, but now she realized he'd known what he was doing.

There was something distracting or healing, or something about expending energy in putting one foot after another, and the setting couldn't have been better. Hot as it was in the sun, it was hard to realize that in the middle of winter, the cabins might be all but buried in snow.

Obviously the owners were well aware of that because so many were out working on their places. Range nodded at a number of them, even stopped and told an elderly couple that he'd bring his chainsaw over and cut up a large fallen tree for them. The couple and others were obviously interested in her, maybe because this was the first time they'd seen their neighbor with a woman.

What they couldn't have possibly guessed was the circumstances that had brought her here.

Twenty-four hours ago she would have fought to get free of Range so she could run toward them screaming for help, wouldn't she? Twenty-four hours ago she'd wanted nothing to do with her captor and would have liked nothing more than to see him behind bars, right?

So much had changed.

"I understand," she told him after they left the older couple, "why you want to live here."

"Do you?"

Not really but I'd like to. I think I need to. "Thank you," she said after a short silence. "This is what I need. Grief and this—" she waved her free hand at the great curtain of trees all around, "aren't compatible."

"I'm glad it helped."

Their linked hands had distracted her from deep thoughts. By now she should be accustomed to his warmth and strength, shouldn't she? But there was no denying the almost magical aspect of what they were doing. Thrown together by unbelievable circumstances, they'd found their way past Tito's incomprehensible plans for her to what her heart needed.

Her heart?

Not ready to admit that she'd given herself emotionally to Range, she insisted she was still caught in the upheaval that had begun at the moment of her brother's accident. Range was part of that upheaval. Of course the mind- and body-bending sex had a great deal to do with her splintered emotions, and if he told her he wanted to return to the small bedroom—

The cell phone clipped to Range's waist sounded. He looked at the readout but didn't connect with whoever was calling.

"It's him, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"I don't know."

That wasn't right. Up until now he'd been in charge. He was the masterful one, the professional in the business of—of what? "This has never happened to you, has it?"

No answer. He'd slowed so she tugged, letting him know she wanted to pick up the pace. "We can't go back to what we were. Captor and captive."

Because she expected him to agree, his continued silence caused a cool prickle to run down her back. Then the sensation reached the base of her spine and turned into something else. Despite the sex session to end all sex sessions, she really was ready for another round?

Range glanced at his phone again. "He's left a message."

Take a deep breath. Hold it. Good. Steady now. "I want to hear it."

"No, you don't."

"All right. I need to hear."

This time Range did more than slow, he stopped. They were in tree shade but that wasn't what was making her shiver. When he released her hand, she came too close to bolting and running, but the male presence a few inches away made that impossible. He switched to speaker mode and punched in his password.

"You're there, damn it. I know you are. She'd better still be with you. You haven't done anything stupid, have you? Like let her get loose or shit—you're balling her, aren't you? That's why the phone was off earlier. Look, you bastard, it's more than you and me now. I've got men, powerful men, ready and eager to have her turned over to them. That's right. All the details have been worked out. You won't like it if they don't get what they're anticipating. You ever hear of a place called Pleasures?"

With that, Tito had hung up. She actually heard him slam the receiver. He'd presented a defiant front from the first time she'd accused him of killing her brother, and much as she loathed him, she also secretly feared him.

"Pleasures? What's that?"

Range stared at nothing, said nothing. She could hear him breathing.

"What does he mean about turning me over to men?"

"Nothing. He's blowing smoke."

"The hell he is!" Not giving a damn who might see, she yanked him around so he was forced to face her. True, the confrontation wouldn't have happened if he hadn't allowed it to. "What he said about powerful men wanting me and this Pleasures business doesn't make sense. This is between Tito and me. Besides, Tito wants me under his damn control, doesn't he? The way he hates and fears me, I can't imagine him turning his back on me."

"Not turning. Delaying."

"Delaying what, Range?"

He didn't want to tell her, she'd have to be dead not to understand that. "Fuck. He's made plans to have you prepared for a certain existence."

"Prepared? For what existence? Range, don't make me drag it out of you. After everything I've gone through, you don't think I can handle it?"

"Can you?" Taking her hand again, he drew her further into the shadows where a weathered bench listed under a tree that marked the boundary between two cabins. Guessing she'd need all her strength to get through the next few minutes, she sat down, gingerly in case the bench gave way. He did the same thing, no longer touching her, watching her.

"His wanting me to take you to Chicago and now Pleasures. Fuck—I should have known."

"Known what?"

“Charil, there are places and men working there who are experts at transforming women into something new.”

“What...something?”

Midnight entered his eyes. “Sex slaves.”

No way had she expected that! No way could she have anticipated – “Tito wanted me to be his – damn, I can’t even say the words!”

Watching her closely, he began tracing a raised knot in the bench with his thumbnail.

“All right. All right.” She was speaking more to herself than him. “Tito had this sick idea that he could break me down, humiliate me, make me so terrified that I’d – that I’d do everything he ordered me to? He is sick. And evil.”

“Not just terrified, Charil. The BDSM lifestyle is about a mutual –”

“Mutual? Like me wanting to grovel on my knees in front of him? Not going to happen. Ever!”

“It happens. Just because you’ve never experienced or seen anything like that, doesn’t mean the culture doesn’t exist. There are means, methods, behavior modification brought about by a combination of sensory experiences.”

“Like what?”

“Pain. And when the pain has made its impact, pleasure.”

Too much! Too damn much to take in. On the verge of telling him that, a horrifying thought struck. “You knew?” She sprang to her feet. “When you jumped me in that hotel, you knew what Tito wanted to do to me?”

He reached for her, but she backpedaled. If he got to his feet, she’d – what? “What was it? You remembered what a slut I was when we met and I jumped your bones? You decided I had it in me to be Tito’s whore given the right motivation? And even if it turned out you were wrong, what did it matter as long as you got paid?”

“No.”

What was that he’d just said? A single word, hardly enough to show her the way out of this nightmare. “Then you figured out you liked fucking me. You decided you weren’t going to let Tito have me after all? That’s when and why you defied him?”

“No, Charil. No.”

This time the words sank in, or maybe she needed to hear him say them. “Why should I believe you?”

He started to stand but settled down again when she shook her head.

“No reason except that it’s the truth.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t expect you to. When Tito approached me –”

“Wait a minute. How did he know how to get in touch with you?”

"There's a community, a subculture, a segment of society that most people don't know exists. I'm part of it."

"Like what? The secret service?"

She meant the comment to be sarcastic so when he nodded, it took her aback. "Yeah, like the secret service, only without federal funding and regulations or sanction. I don't know how Tito learned of my existence. I don't ask my clients those questions just as it's none of their business where I live or who I really am."

This conversation was sinking into insanity, and yet she struggled to take his explanation for what it was, an introduction to his shadowy world. "All right. I guess. You were saying something about when he got in touch with you."

Watching her, he planted his legs under him. Although she still wanted to bolt, her earlier irrational fear of him was fading.

"Let's start back. I won't touch you, and you don't have to come inside if you don't want to."

When he headed for his cabin, she kept pace, careful to keep her distance, not because he'd become the boogieman but because she didn't trust her reaction if their bodies touched.

"I want to give you some background," he said without looking at her. "I'll understand if you don't care, and I don't want to make it sound like a cop-out but maybe it is."

"Go on."

"Earlier this year I was involved in something that took me to North Korea. I completed my assignment. It was successful because a political hostage no longer was, but I didn't get out of it unscathed."

"You were shot?"

"No, but there was a fight. I wound up with several broken ribs and couldn't do anything about it until I got back in the States. In the meantime, some internal damage was done."

A horrid image of a bone barb cutting and tearing vital organs made her shudder. Her reaction didn't lessen as he explained that by the time he'd dragged himself to the one doctor he dared go to, he had a perforated lung, among other things. The doctor wanted to admit him to a hospital, but he'd refused because he'd be asked questions he couldn't answer without risking blowing his cover. Instead, he'd holed up in his cabin and waited for his body to heal itself. He hadn't been able to work for three months. His cash flow had stopped flowing, and his bank account was all but empty because of the earlier repair work, property taxes were around the corner. Yes, he had money invested, but he'd vowed to never touch what would have to see him through his later years.

"In other words, I needed money when Tito got in touch with me."

"Oh." He'd turned her world on end and been willing to place her in the hands of a monster so he could pay his bills? But much as the reality shook her, there was another

reality. Not only had Range just been honest with her, he'd touched her as she'd never been touched.

And she believed the same thing had happened to him.

"Say something." He ran his fingers over the back of her hand but didn't try to take it.

"I don't know what to say." They were nearly back to his cabin, and although his nearly bare refrigerator still needed to be addressed, all she could think about was that private back deck—and the even more private bedroom. Having sex meant not having to think. Hopefully. Maybe. "No, that's not right. I appreciate your honesty. I'm just trying—I need to understand the mindset of someone who doesn't care how his actions impact others."

"Are you talking about Tito or me?"

"I'm not sure."

Chapter Thirteen

You're a bastard, a total bastard.

They were back on the deck, sitting some four feet apart, shoes propped on the railing and chairs tilted while they watched birds squabbling over rights to the bird feeder. Going to the grocery store would have given him something normal to do, but although pondering what must be going through her mind made him want to run as he'd run from so many foster homes, that was the past.

He didn't need to look at her. Her image was embedded in him, something that had never happened before. Yes, sex was a strong part of the image and not just because fucking her had been much more than a tension releaser. She could melt him down and build him up at the same time, make him ask himself questions he never had and never thought he would, such as was he capable of spending his life with one woman—her.

Just knowing the questions were there scared the hell out of him, and yet as more ice water cooled his throat, he realized he'd been waiting to ask himself them without knowing it.

She was beautiful, not flawless like some model or actress but in all the ways that counted. Life had handed her reasons to cry and laugh, to learn, regret and anticipate. The depth and complexity of her life had infused her with the beauty that came from not just living in the real world but facing it head-on. Depth, that's what it all came down to, depth and courage.

The bird feeder was less than half full. Fortunately, he had more seed in a metal container the local rodents couldn't gnaw through, and if he remembered right, he still had enough seed to get the entertaining if ungrateful birds through about three days. However, it wouldn't hurt to pick up more.

The thought of wandering down the produce aisle with Charil boggled his mind. True, he'd ventured into grocery stores with other women, but most of those trips had been to purchase enough food and booze to get through a single night of sex. This time he wanted to buy what it would take to see the two of them through the rest of summer and into fall, winter even.

Had he gone insane?

"You don't want to talk about it, do you?" she asked, breaking a silence that was both comfortable and alive with possibilities and pitfalls. "About why you do what you do and how you've separated yourself emotionally from your job."

"I'm not a robot if that's what you think. I went to North Korea for a hell of a lot more than a paycheck. A decent man's life was at stake. He'd been caught in the middle of a political situation he had no control over because he had a family to support."

Surprised by his openness, he turned toward her, but if he hoped to find a simple answer there, it didn't come. Yes, her big vulnerable eyes, long dark hair and inviting as hell body cast their own spells but something inside him was equally responsible. Maybe more of that insanity.

"That man, you really got him out alive?"

"Yes, but I don't know if I could do it again."

"Because of the danger?"

"That's part of it. There's also political and military complexities, our country's tenuous relationship with them." His eyes closed. Trapped deep inside himself, he tried to test the wisdom of what wanted to be said, but she was still breaking down his walls, or maybe she was simply here at the right time, and he was the one taking a sledge to those walls. "I've never put much value on my life, but the instinct for survival's pretty powerful."

"I can't imagine risking my life, especially in such a hostile environment, for someone I don't know. You didn't know him, did you?"

"No."

"What about who hired you? Did you—"

"I'm not going to tell you anything about my employer that time. I can't." Still, he wondered if she might conclude that the U.S. government itself had been behind his assignment.

"All right. Range, I can't imagine that money, not even a million dollars, would have been enough of a motivation. What was it? The challenge? You wanted to see if you could do what no one else could, go somewhere dangerous because of some adrenaline rush?"

Still locked behind his closed lids, he acknowledged that she knew more about him than most people did, even the few he considered friends. But although part of him wanted to take her on a journey into his world, he didn't have an idea in hell how to begin. It was his world, a place for a loner who attached little value to his life. "Maybe I'm like a four-year-old, thinking I'm Superman."

"No, you're not."

Snagged by the sadness in her voice, he opened his eyes. Although she was sitting in shadows, he had no trouble reading her somber expression. Hooking into what other people were thinking, feeling and planning had a major impact on why he was still alive, but she wasn't part of the dangerous and often shadowy existence he moved in. They were simply two people enjoying the local birds.

The hell they were.

She sighed. "My mother used to say that what drove her crazy about her husband and son was that they wouldn't talk about the kinds of things women did, mostly emotions. When Shap died, my mother and I talked for hours. We cried, raged, prayed, but not my father. He bottled up everything inside, just like you're doing."

Not sure what, if anything, he was expected to say, he lifted his glass and drank. Along with her humming-to-him female body was something else, and as before, that something scared the hell out of him.

"I think that's why my father had his stroke. Everything built up until it exploded."

"I haven't lost a son, Charil. I'm not going to have a stroke."

When she stood up, it took everything he had not to head for the forest where she couldn't reach him. "Do you want a son?"

Thrown off balance, he gripped the glass so tight his fingers threatened to cramp.

"What about children, Range? Do they show up on your radar scope?"

He'd once rescued two preschoolers from their non-custodial mother who'd taken them to a remote location where she'd been living with members of an outlaw motorcycle gang. Sneaking into the heavily guarded compound and getting out with the boy and girl he'd had to drug to ensure their silence had taken every bit of concentration in him, but he'd never forget the look on their father's face when he placed the children in his arms. A rough and rugged man who made his living felling timber had broken down and sobbed.

And he'd cried his own unshed tears as the children clutched their father in return. "Children deserve a better life than I can give them. They deserve a full-time father."

"That's not what I asked. Do you *want* children?"

Be naked before her, give her what she deserves. "I thought I was going to have one. The woman—hardly out of her teens—we talked about our getting married, but she had an abortion, and then told me."

"Oh—were you relieved?"

"No! Damn it, no. So, in answer to your question, yes, I wanted that baby."

"Range, I'm sorry. Did—did you love her?"

"I thought I did. After she told me, I walked away from her."

"Because it hurt too much."

A blow slammed into his belly and chest, reaching all the way to his heart. Looking up at her, he saw her for what she was when all complexity and civilization was stripped away, a woman. With a body designed for giving birth.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, resting a hand on his knee. "I had no right saying that."

His mind swirled with possible responses but nothing except the truth came through, and he wasn't about to tell her that he'd written a letter to his no longer unborn child in which he'd told him or her of his shattered dreams. One factor in his still being alive was his ability to distract the enemy. Charil presented no danger to anything except his heart, but he had to change the subject, somehow, now.

But not by bringing up Tito's plans for her and the role he was expected to play.

Putting down his glass, he ran his fingers around her slender wrist and worked her hand up his thigh. Fighting his cock's response to the touch, he studied her expression. Although she didn't fight him, neither did he sense sexual arousal on her part.

Closer, closer to his crotch, pausing with her fingers an easy stretch from his jewels. She stopped with him, her fingers easy but hot on his inner thigh. His shorts weren't protection enough—he swore he could feel her heartbeat in her fingertips. For one of the few times in his life, he kept a woman's hand off his cock.

"What do you want, Range? To have sex? Maybe you want me to jack you off or suck you."

"Whatever rings your bells."

"This isn't about me." Her voice carried a sharpness he didn't know what to do with. "If you want my pussy or mouth, I'll give them to you, but what about after we've fucked? What happens between us then? Do you keep the doors to the real you closed?"

"What makes you think they aren't open?"

"Don't give me that. I don't know anything about you."

"You know where I live. Not many people do."

"True. But I've told you so much while all you've given me is that that you weren't raised, you happened. What can I do with that?"

Shit. Shit. Back in dangerous territory.

He was alive because he could sniff out and avoid dangerous territory in the world beyond his plot of land, but she wasn't the enemy. He cared for her, a lot. Wanted to trust. Needed to trust. "Not much."

"You're right. Not much. But at least you're admitting that." She punctuated her comment by patting his leg.

Fighting the distraction, he shrugged.

"Don't do this, Range. Please."

"Don't do what?"

"Damn it! You remind me of a lost dog I spotted out on a highway. The poor thing was limping and panting, and I could tell it was terrified. I tried to get close enough so I could get it in my car, but it kept backing away and probably would have run if not for the injury to its rear leg."

"I'm a lost and injured dog?"

Another pat tunneled his concentration to the one part of his anatomy he didn't have full control over. "What I'm saying is, like that animal, you want things to be different from what they are, but you aren't sure you can trust me."

Hadn't he spent his life standing strong and independent? What did she want him to be, her lapdog? No. She'd never want that. "Trust doesn't come easy to me."

Dropping to her knees in front of him, she clasped her hands and rested them on her thighs. He should be relieved now that she wasn't testing his resolve not to jump

her bones, but he longed for the intimate and personal touch. For the danger. "Range, I can't pretend to comprehend what you've been through, but I've been through my own crises, three of them actually not counting you kidnapping me."

"Three. I know about your brother and father. What about your mother?"

She seemed to shrink a little, settling down around herself as if protecting herself. "My mother committed suicide."

"Oh god. I'm sorry."

"She couldn't take the loss of her son. I thought—we talked and cried, and talked and cried some more and I thought it was helping her, that she was being honest about her grief and guilt for encouraging him to be competitive. But I guess it was more than she could handle. More than I could get to."

Did you find her? Is that the rest of the story?

"Before or after your father's stroke?"

"Before." She turned anguished eyes on him. "I was consumed with assuring justice was going to be done. Maybe...maybe that's how I dealt with my grief, by pouring all my energy into gathering evidence against Tito. I left my parents alone too much and they...they were hardly talking to each other because every time they did, they cried. I wasn't there when my parents needed me the most."

Her mouth trembled and her eyes swam, but she was keeping so much bottled inside, too much.

"You aren't responsible for the decision your mother made."

"That's what my friends told me, not that I was listening." A smile he didn't expect started, then died. "Damn it, this was supposed to be about you, not me."

"This is about whatever you need it to be." Hearing his words, he wondered if he'd ever told anyone that.

When she shifted her weight, he took her elbows and helped her stand. Wrapping his arms around her, he settled her on his lap. She rested her head on his shoulder then straightened.

"Did you know your mother, Range?"

The question blindsided him. Recoiling and trying not to let it show, he looked around her at the bird feeder. Along with mostly silent robins and noisy jays, he spotted something tiny with a brilliant yellow head, making him wish he knew more about the area's birds.

"Range?"

"I heard you."

"Are you going to answer?"

No. Maybe no. "I have no memories of her. From what I've been able to piece together, I was taken from her about the time I learned to walk. And so you don't have to ask, I have no idea in hell who my father was."

"Do you know why she lost custody?"

"Moot point."

"No, not moot point. Look, obviously and understandably this isn't easy for you to talk about. I'm trying to respect your privacy, but you wouldn't have said what you did if you weren't willing to share."

"You asked. I answered."

Leaning away but with her arms around his neck, she stared until he felt compelled to return her probing gaze. "You could have told me to go to hell."

Could he? He couldn't imagine driving that wedge between them.

"We're fucked up," she muttered. "Me because I've lost everyone I held dear, you because you never had that. Do you think there's any hope for us?"

Aware that she was deliberately trying to lighten things, he worked up what he hoped was the semblance of a smile. "Maybe we can get group rates with a shrink."

"Did you ever try to get in touch with your mother or learn who your father was?"

Back to being serious, are you? "No to both questions." That wasn't strictly true because not a day went by when he didn't wonder whether either parent gave a damn about their accident.

"That's where we're different, at least one of the places," she said, her hands trailing from his neck to his collarbone. "My curiosity or need for closure or something would have demanded answers."

"Some doors are better left closed."

"But what if a person doesn't know how to do that, like me?"

Despite the dark mist swirling through him, he heard the desperation in her question. "Obsession can be a bitch. Do you ever want to put the past behind you, to let the system deal with Tito so you can move forward?"

"Sometimes," she whispered, now looking down as if avoiding his gaze.

"Only it's too late because he wants what he wants, which is you. He won't let go."

"Oh shit. Shit."

The sudden loss of her weight caught him unprepared. By the time he'd made sense of what had happened, she was standing with her back to him, hands on the railing, staring out at his piece of wilderness. If she was crying, maybe he should leave her alone, but her shoulders weren't shaking and she wasn't swiping at her eyes.

Besides, leaving her wasn't an option right now. "What's shit?"

"He's stalking me, isn't he? He's a predator and I'm some animal he's determined to bring down by turning me into his sex slave."

Close enough.

"What makes someone like that?" she demanded. "To believe you have a right to destroy someone else? And that others will help in that destruction if you pay them enough money?"

If she were an animal, she'd be an antelope or gazelle, a creature of grace and speed and gentleness. She might not have claws or teeth for weapons, but her long, strong legs and instinct for survival would make the battle more equal.

"You won't answer that, will you?"

Not yet, not until – "I don't know what you want me to say."

"Nothing, damn it, nothing."

Chapter Fourteen

Charil had calmed down considerably since her outburst on the porch. Going to the small nearby grocery store had provided a needed distraction, but now the groceries had been put away and they'd eaten their sandwiches, and the rest of the day stretched out in front of them.

One thing. Sooner or later he'd have to respond to the sick and all but incomprehensible message on his cell, the one she couldn't force herself to bring up.

At the moment he was dealing with a leaky kitchen faucet while she tried to pretend she was interested in his CD collection. She'd like to know whether their tastes in music were similar, but that wasn't going to happen as long as his body kept whispering to hers.

What was it about Range? Did the man possess some kind of sexual radar, a force field maybe? Surely she wasn't the only woman who couldn't look at him without wanting to have sex with him.

Like that would solve anything.

"How long are we going to stay here?" she made herself ask from her perch on the couch arm.

Tension ran through him, she could actually see the ripple. "That's not a question I'm in a position to answer right now."

"Why not? You have to call Tito back first?"

He didn't look any less formidable than he had before she'd asked her damn dangerous but necessary question, and yet he now seemed, what, trapped? Then as he returned her stare, she reminded herself that she might be reading something into him that wasn't there. Just because she needed him to change his black hat for a white one didn't mean it was going to happen—or that his hat really was black.

"Tito is only part of the equation. There are other factors, decisions I have to make."

"You? What about me? There wouldn't be a situation without me."

Putting down his wrench, he wiped his hands on a paper towel. Then he turned on the faucet, nodding in satisfaction. "It's more complex than you could possibly realize."

"Oh, I know how complex this is. Everything has changed for me. I can't go back to what I was doing, not as long as Tito is free and bent on revenge. I'd always have to look over my shoulder, hire bodyguards. Do you want the job?"

His expression said he wasn't buying her poor attempt at a joke, but then neither did she. "I want to charge him with having me kidnapped. Damn, I'd like nothing better than to have him thrown in jail over this, but I can't."

He came into the living room area but remained at a distance. His sweat-dampened cotton shirt stuck to him, forcing her to face how little it took to ramp up her awareness of his sexuality. "Why not?"

"If I went to the police, you'd be part of the story. There's no way I could keep you out of it."

"I can take care of myself. Always have."

How? By not caring about anyone else? No, she couldn't go there! "Why did we have to meet this way? Why couldn't things be simple between us?"

"I don't do simple."

"No, you don't." Propelled by bombarding emotions, she stood and closed most of the distance between them, but much as she wanted to touch him, fear stopped her. "What made you the way you are? Was it not having a family, being rootless? You've never connected with anyone else?"

"Is that what you think?"

"I don't know what I think, damn it! I'm trying to figure you out. I don't have a choice if I'm going to go on living."

"You believe our lives have become intertwined?"

Me? What about you? "Yes."

He hadn't said a word about helping her stay out of Tito's clutches and that alarmed her. When he started outside, she nearly let him go, but the sight of his strong, broad back made that impossible.

"How do you feel about that?" she asked, placing a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Getting mixed up with me? It's not something you're used to, is it?" Under her fingers, his muscles became like iron. "Answer me, please. You don't know how to handle having me in your life, do you?"

If anything, he became even more tense, and she expected him to break free of her tentative hold. But although his fingers folded into fists, he didn't. "No."

"Things didn't turn out the way you expected when you took on this assignment, did they? All you wanted was to make enough money to make up for what you lost when you were hurt. You neglected to consider the ramifications of dealing with a living, breathing woman." She hated throwing the words at him, but he had to face them. They both did.

"Tito's the enemy, not me."

"Is he? I hate Tito, plain and simple. What I feel for you is far from simple."

When he turned toward her, sudden fear dropped her hand from his shoulder, and it took all her courage not to back away. "This isn't simple for me either," he said with his dark and deep eyes back to digging into her.

"Why not?"

"I'm not used to caring."

Hadn't he already told her something like that? Behind and around him, the cabin appeared to be caressing him. Not quite his mother's arms, it nevertheless served a vital purpose.

Shaken anew by how much she was learning about Range, she ached for him. All he wanted out of life was a roof over his head. His career, when the layers were stripped away, was simply a means to that end.

Now, maybe, he'd met someone who was showing him there was more to life than walls and a roof, her. But if that tenuous connection weren't enough, what would happen to her?

Range, you haven't said anything about Tito's plans to turn me into his pet. What —

"You didn't bond while you were growing up," she whispered. Tears clogged her throat but didn't stop her from running her fingers over his chest, from feeling his heat. "I bonded so deeply that losing my family nearly killed me. And now we're together."

Wondering what it would take for her to shatter, she waited for him to respond, but he remained in his dark silence. Even more disconcerting, he hadn't touched her. If she valued her sanity, she'd keep her mouth shut, but the thought of never being able to push past his barriers frightened her even more.

"Am I right?" she demanded. "Looking back at your childhood, you never felt loved?"

"What does it matter?"

"Don't, damn it! Stop closing up. I deserve — something. With everything you know about me, I deserve — something."

"Do you?"

Suddenly furious at him, she pulled back her hand in preparation for a slap, but he didn't give her a chance. Grabbing her wrist, he spun her around and pulled her arm up against her back. His other arm went around her throat preventing her from moving. "What is this about?" she demanded, fear licking at her. "You're going to choke me so I can't speak?"

"No." The hissed word made her wonder if he had to wrench it loose. "No."

"Then what?"

As quickly as he'd imprisoned her, he turned her in another half circle. Now his hands were on her shoulders. "I don't want to go into my childhood. I want that chapter finished."

"But it isn't." So close, heat kissing heat, awareness flaming through her. Longing strong and reckless. "It followed you. It'll never let you go."

Accustomed to his silence, she let it play out for several seconds before speaking again. "You've worked so hard to make yourself into a man who stands on his own two feet, alone, who takes pride in living by his own rules, but it's come at an incredible cost." If her tear-thick voice bothered him, so be it. "I understand why you're the man you are. If I hadn't had loving parents, I'm not sure I'd still be alive. They encouraged

my reckless nature and never said I couldn't race, but they were always there to temper my reckless side with their loving responsibility."

Even concentrating on what she believed she had to tell him, she sensed a certain stirring to life in him. Her pussy absorbed the vital piece of information and held it close and alive.

"I wish I could thank them for the way I turned out, but I can't. The only thing I can do is honor their memory."

"How?"

His whispered question spun through her, and her body answered by lifting her heavy arms and running her fingers over his middle. She hooked her thumbs in his waistband. "That's what I was doing when you grabbed me, raising money to finance a school for young racers. It was—it's going to focus on safety and responsibility, conditioning and quality equipment. I'm naming it after my parents and brother."

He went long and deep for a breath, held it, expelled it slowly. Why did he need to bring so much oxygen into his lungs?

Almost before she could finish the question, she found the answer. At least she thought she had. He was comparing what she'd had and lost with what he'd never known was possible.

"There must have been someone while you were growing up."

"Let it go."

"I can't."

His hands on her shoulders were becoming heavy, but she didn't believe he was trying to hurt her because his arousal was growing, speaking to that part of her that didn't care about words.

"Two of my foster mothers, Angie Brooks and Meg Lansky, cared."

She wanted to ask how long he'd lived with them and how they'd demonstrated their love, if what they gave a homeless boy could be considered love, but she was slipping into him, feeling his body more than his words and emotions, responding to the sensual call. "I'm glad" was the best she could manage.

"They were good women. But I didn't know how to handle what they wanted to give me. I'd already created barriers around myself and wasn't about to let those barriers down."

Heartened by how much he'd just revealed, she stood on her toes so she could touch her lips to his chin. The instant she connected with his stubble, electricity zinged through her. Man, oh yes, all man. How had he lost his virginity? she now wanted to know. Had it been in the arms and body of a girl his age or had an older woman sensed the budding man in a lonely boy? Did he even remember that first time and how many women had he fucked since then? Did he have a favorite position, a preferred body type? What meant most to him, climaxing or the journey to that point? What about the mother of his never-to-be-born child? What had sex been like with her?

You'll never know.

Pain tore through her. She fought it by running her tongue over his chin, absorbed the rough sensations, let them become her everything. They had today, now. There might be nothing else.

"I need to shave."

"No you don't."

"Why are you doing this? You shouldn't want to do anything with me."

That's what you're accustomed to, isn't it. "Range, you are one sexy man. Don't you realize that?"

Leaning back, he gazed down at her.

"Of course you do. You'd have to be blind not to compare yourself to other men and I'm sure lots of women have told you—damn, I have to shut up before I make a fool of myself."

His look said it was already too late for that so she arched toward him. Oh yes, he was hard. And she was soft, soft and ready, just like that.

"Damn it!" She forced herself to back away from his cock, but although safety lay in putting half a continent between them, she'd never do that. "Why does everything between us wind up being about sex?"

"How do you want it to be?"

If she was absolutely truthful with both of them, she'd admit that being near his sexual force field turned her into a puddle of need. "Getting to know you." She nearly added that part of her response included learning all she could about Tito's influence over him but that was too dangerous. "Don't you?"

"Do you?"

Confusion clouded his sexy as hell eyes. Then he shook it away and pulled mystery over him. "What's the matter, Range?" she challenged. "Can't you answer me?"

"Won't."

Another of his brief but telling responses, another jolt of response from her hungry body. Reality flickered and retreated. In its place she saw the boy he'd once been standing before a new and imposing school. His pockets were empty, and he carried no backpack, no lunch, no parent's encouraging hug. Alone, he walked up the steps and pushed open the heavy door. Alone, he started down the wide hall while judgmental eyes followed him. His heart was racing, his legs like butter, but he forced one leg after the other. Not looking around at the strangers, he squared his shoulders and stepped into yet another new situation.

Alone.

"I wish we could start over. Be other than what we are, without baggage."

"We can't."

"No. We can't. All we have is this." She indicated the cabin. "And this." She nodded at his cock.

"You can ignore it."

Yeah, right. "Do you want me to?"

"Do you want to?"

Just in time, she stopped herself from punching him. No matter how much his verbal dances angered her, she wasn't going to let them distract her from why he felt they were necessary.

"When I was a child," she said, "I was fascinated by big cats, cheetahs and panthers. I didn't like seeing them in zoos but my need to study them was stronger. I'd stand outside their compounds wondering what was going through their heads, if they thought of anything except hunting and killing. They're so perfectly designed for what they do, killing machines."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you remind me of them."

He jerked back. "I'm not a killing machine."

"No, no, I didn't mean it that way. But you're put together the way they are, all rangy muscles, confident in your abilities, afraid of nothing, aware that other people are or can be made to be afraid of you."

"Are you?"

More than you'll ever know but not because of your claws and teeth. "It isn't that simple because my – because I'm attracted to you, sexually attracted."

Releasing her shoulders, he ran the back of his hand along her chin as if pointing out the difference between his rough skin and her softness. Softness of another kind stole through her. Granted, her nipples had hardened, but the rest of her was weak and compliant. Anticipation. That's what it was all about, looking forward to the slide of his cock along her inner walls. As he continued to stroke her jaw and throat, she slipped deeper into fantasy.

In her mind, they were naked, their sweaty bodies being caressed by the pine-scented breeze coming in the open windows. Her focus was so narrow that she wasn't sure whether they were in the bedroom or still in the living room. She smelled warm pitch and male sweat, slide into herself where electricity beat. He was touching her, stroking her sides and breasts, pressing his mouth against her belly and his tongue into her navel. She was –

Reality shifted back. What had happened to his shirt? Oh yes, she'd pulled the garment over his head. Now her fingertips followed his deep breathing to send the sensations clear through her. There it was, his heartbeat being played out inside her core.

"Oh god, god." Although her mouth remained open, nothing else came out.

"You want this? You really want this?"

“I need.”

Her fingers were numb, but she willed them to tackle the snap and zipper on his shorts. No matter how much she hated the rough feel of her own clothes, she couldn't handle the complexity of getting rid of them. And she wanted Range to stand where he was, to allow her access to him.

Pulling his shorts down over his hips nearly took all her strength; she couldn't begin to plan how to dispense with his shoes. Besides, what did his feet matter when his cock was just out of reach?

Yes, his breathing was ragged, his cock fighting his briefs. And yes, she felt the same way. Ached and pulsed and burned.

Liquid fire seized her legs and sent her to her knees. She grabbed his legs to stop herself from pitching forward. How strange his knees felt with only thin layers of skin between her fingers and the remarkable meshing of bone and tendon.

Courage bolstered by the hunger between her legs sent her hands higher. She wasn't yet brave enough to expose his cock, but she could lose herself in the journey, couldn't she? Suspended between more emotions than she could keep track of, she ran her fingertips up the outside of his thigh and welcomed the delicious sensation of his fine hairs. Beneath the silken and gently curved strands lay his muscles. She was getting to him, maybe as much as he was getting to her.

By turn she sank down as far as she could and lifted herself up, breasts reaching for him but imprisoned in her bra. Much as she hated the confinement, it took her back to when he controlled her with ropes. Imagining restraints on her arms and legs fed her tension. If things were reversed and he was manipulating her, she'd be panting and straining, begging, not for release, but for his hands everywhere on her. She'd writhe under him as he kneaded her breasts, curse and plead, fight her bonds.

Grabbing her hair, he forced her to look up at him. She expected him to back off. Instead, his gaze drove into her as if determined to strip her soul bare. With her hands spread over his thighs, she absorbed his tension. What was this, some test of wills between them, maybe his way of letting her know he'd never let her have the upper hand?

Did she care?

Not at this moment.

When he continued to hold her head motionless, she began working her hands up his magnificent body. His tension increased, his gaze intensified. No, she concluded, he was no more in control of his emotions than she was. In fact, his body was abandoning itself to what she was doing to him. Fascinated by the question of how close she could take him to the edge, she shifted direction. When she finger-kissed his hipbones, he growled, making her think of a wolf. Was he one beneath the surface? When what passed for his brand of civilization had been peeled away, did he become a wild animal?

Good. Incredible. She wanted to join him in his wilderness, to run free with him, to turn her own back on civilization. To mate.

Lost in instinct, she made fists of her hands so she could roll her knuckles over his taut belly. She all but seeped into him. How incredible to have sharp bones grinding against skin, pressing, pressing, moving lower.

Growling again, he released her hair. Although she ached to study his expression while she rolled her knuckles over him, her own hunger demanded attention. Leaning forward and opening her mouth, she ran her tongue over the base of his belly. Shuddering, he ground his fingers into her shoulders. Then he stilled—at least still enough that she could continue. She'd never tasted anything as incredible as his pubic hairs. That combined with his cock now sliding along the side of her neck closed her off from reality.

In her mind, she was no longer kneeling before him in his small wood and wilderness-smelling cabin but had been thrust into a room of reds and blacks, of heavy music, of anticipation. Her hands were behind her, locked in place by metal that caressed her wrists. She was naked, shaking and full of need. Her man, her captor, her master stood over her looking down with superiority filling both his gaze and cock. He'd ordered her to her knees because it was her job to service him. Whatever she needed was secondary.

Yes, yes, the man responsible for her cuffs owned her. The only thing he wanted from her was a means to sexual release. How she accomplished it was unimportant, just that she not fail him.

A light touch on her left temple brought her back to the world she lived in. His fingertips skimming the blood vessel at the side of her head kept things soft so she could hold on to a part of the fantasy, build on it. His need was simple, to fuck. Hers was more complex, so complex she couldn't fully comprehend it.

Chapter Fifteen

Dropping her hands to her sides, she skimmed her tongue from his navel to the base of his cock. Although he was so tense she wondered if he might shatter, he didn't move until she turned her head and blew her breath over his scrotum. Muttering incomprehensibly, he widened his stance and backed away an inch or two. Filled with ill-planned determination, she reached behind him and cupped his muscled buttocks. Holding him in place, she went back to working him, working herself, teasing both of them.

Because he'd taught her well the art of anticipation and suspense, she tongued him everywhere, bathing his belly and the sides of his cock, his balls, the tops of his thighs. Her head buzzed and threatened to roar. Her skin, muscles, even her bones ached and throbbed. Whoever had proclaimed that a woman's breasts and pussy were her erogenous zones was dead wrong because every part of her ached with sexual need. But even with the ache so intense she could barely stay on top of it, she remained committed to putting him first.

He deserved it. This man who'd never had a family and until now had never felt he belonged anywhere, needed what—to be loved? Her love?

Undone by the possibility that she was falling in love with him, she pulled his scent into her. The mix of male and wilderness flowed over her and took her deep into sensation where questions and possibilities and danger couldn't reach her.

Yes, this was what she wanted. Her lips, tongue, even her teeth roaming everything while her fingers held him before her. With each damp tongue stroke, she imagined his cock doing the same inside her. He was taking her slow, drawing out the sex, exploring her cave and introducing her to new things about it.

Even as she ranged over what was hard and soft about him, she questioned how much longer he'd allow her full access to his body. If things were reversed and he was tonguing her, could she remain still? Could she keep from begging him to fuck her?

Self-control. His ability to withstand her mouth served as undeniable proof of his hold on not just his body but his emotions.

But it came at a cost.

Not sure what she had in mind, she released his ass and placed her hands on the floor between his legs so she could bathe the underside of his balls. He rose onto his toes, stayed there awhile then settled down again. As he did, he pressed on the back of her head indicating he wanted her to go still deeper. Although she managed to briefly tongue-stroke between his legs, the strain on her neck soon made her stop. "I'm sorry. Sorry."

He continued to hold her head down, and in his strength she read a playful power play. "All right, all right. I'll do better but first, sit down."

"What?"

"On the couch. Your ass on the edge and your legs spread."

"Only after you're naked."

Order or suggestion? Hell, it didn't matter. Neither did she care that her hands were shaking so much she could barely make them work. Things would have been easier if she kept her eyes off what waited for her, but that was impossible. With his legs widely and proudly splayed, she had a clear and perfect view of a cock so thick she couldn't span it with one hand and fat, heavy balls. The first time she'd seen an erect male, the sight had frightened her. Over the years, disbelief had given way to awe and from there to acceptance. She was back to awe now.

Stepping out of her shorts and briefs, she straightened. Warm air caressed her newly exposed hips and thighs to increase her awareness of that part of her body. Eager to feel the same on her breasts, she pulled off her top and unfastened her bra. About to yank off her final piece of clothing, she stopped with the straps between her thumbs and forefingers. Maybe, just maybe, she could balance things out between them. Turning to the side a little to obstruct his view of what lay between her legs, she slid the straps down her arms but kept the cups in place.

"Having fun, are you?" he asked.

"Yeah. What about you?"

"I'm not sure I'd call this fun." He folded his right hand around his cock. "A little too much pressure here for that."

"I'll get there."

"Yes, you will."

A shudder snaked through her at the near command. What was it about Range that kept pushing her from strong independent woman to compliant submissive? Maybe a game but maybe a sexually heated female's instinctive response to a dominant male. If that was the case, dominant was good. Damn good.

Fingers trembling, she freed herself from her bra. The moment air slid over her nipples, they hardened although maybe his burning gaze was responsible for the tight nubs. Fingering her nipples, she again acknowledged his command of her.

But not because he'd ordered her. Rather, he deserved the gift. It was the one thing she could give him.

"Why are you still here?" he asked.

There was that darkness again, the shuttered emotions, the questioning. "I don't know. Please, I don't know."

"You could have left."

"Yes."

“But you didn’t.”

Enough with this probing! Any and everything they said only kept them from doing what this afternoon was about. Later, yes later, she’d try to give him the explanation they both needed.

Still teasing her nipples, she willed her feet to kill the distance between them. Each step resonated through her. There hadn’t been any emotional components the first time they’d had sex, had there? Back before things became so complex, she’d only wanted to fuck and he’d had the perfect body for that.

His body was still perfect and nothing else, damn it, mattered.

Reluctantly releasing herself, she stood between his legs and leaned down so she could press her palms against his thighs.

The contact was all it took. Suddenly and without any reservation, he was more important than she. With the conviction came a shyness she couldn’t handle. What she could face was her determination to make the next few minutes unforgettable for him.

And for her.

If she were a man, she’d want to be treated like a king, a male lion, master of his domain, so she turned her attention and hands to what experience had taught her meant the most to a man.

Still reluctant to face him, she planted one knee on the couch, closed her hand around his cock and lifted it. Then she placed her mouth over his tip. Her breasts hung down, tempting her to play with herself again, but no. Him first. Him alone.

Pulling moisture into her mouth, she bathed him with her heat. Her ass sticking up in the air nearly caused her to laugh. No matter that that she wanted everything to be as erotic as possible, her butt jutting at the ceiling was anything but.

Make him forget how you look. Take him to the edge, hold him there.

She hadn’t had much experience sucking cock, but it didn’t matter, not with the feel and taste of him on her tongue. Eyes nearly closed, she allowed her consciousness to tunnel down, down to this connection, this contact. A steadying breath followed by relaxation of her throat muscles followed by further opening of her jaws and then, yes, taking him deep and true and honest.

He touched her, commanding fingers over her ass, rubbing, caressing.

Yes, caressing him back but using her teeth and tongue and the insides of her cheeks.

Yes! His hand sliding between her ass cheeks.

Dizzy but unwilling to lift her head, she slid her hand down his cock until she found his balls. Tightening her grip, she drew him up toward her. By contracting the muscles at the sides of her mouth, she constantly changed the amount of pressure. Her reward came in the form of his quickened breathing accompanied by hard gasps. He lifted himself toward her, but this remained her chance to put him first and only, damn it, so she pressed down on his thigh until he again sank into the couch. As he did, he

ran his fingers along her scalp, not to force her head to remain down but in what she believed was a gesture of acceptance, of gratitude.

Open further, pull everything of him you can into you, make him feel wanted.

The nearly frantic command gave her the necessary push to all but swallow him. And with his fingers at her back door, she slipped into a place of dark, hot sensation. *Pleasure him and by doing so, pleasure yourself. Stand on the edge of your own eruption, bring him to the brink of his, listen to him breathe and feel his moist breath at the back of your neck, go—*

“Oh shit! Shit!” His hold on her tightened, tugging her hair and running a finger into her ass. The finger, oh lordy, his finger!

“Can’t!” she gasped, coming up for air. “I can’t do you when you do that to me!”

“What then?”

The decision thrown at her. Fine. Good. She’d think of something.

The answer to that something came from her pussy, which had been empty and weeping too long. Locked heart and body in instinct, she climbed onto the couch and straddled him. Her ass twitched as if searching for what it had just lost, forcing her to fight its insistence. Tightening and relaxing her butt muscles in an attempt to keep on top of need, she looked down at the man sprawled on the couch.

Despite his nearly supine position, there was nothing relaxed or slack about him. Every muscle waited, insisting just as hers were doing so she braced one hand on his chest while the other went to the couch back. Sweat pooled under her arms and ran down the small of her back as she lifted herself over him.

His cock, there and ready, sliding along an inner thigh, poking her pelvic bone, searching. Sweating, her breasts and hair hanging, she too searched. By rocking back and forth and from side to side, she found the necessary alignment. Then, although her cunt twitched and silently screamed to be filled, she froze.

Now. Ready. Giving him everything she had to give, thinking of him first and only.

“Now!” he commanded with his fingers grinding into her hips. “Now, damn it!”

Yes, master, yes!

She came down slow and steady, head back, eyes glazed, thoughts beginning and ending in her sex. He expanded inside her, took over, consumed, sliding easy and strong with her juices greasing the way. She felt him in her pelvis and belly, along her throat and into her head.

Him, embedded in her.

She, imprisoned.

“Condom,” he growled but didn’t try to push her off him. “In the—”

“I know where it is.” Looking and yet not looking at him, she arched her back to realign their connection. A hot aching along her pussy walls urged her to start pumping, but if she did, she wouldn’t be able to concentrate on anything else. “When’s the last time you had sex without one on?”

“What?”

“Yes, you almost slipped up earlier, but you pulled it together and jacked off on me. What you consider a disaster was averted. When’s the last time you risked getting a woman pregnant?”

A hollow and lost look flashed in his eyes to be gone so quickly she wondered if she’d imagined it. “Not since the abortion.”

Oh, Range! Near tears, she closed her cunt muscles around him and held him tight and close inside her. “In—in other words, when you have sex, it doesn’t feel like this.”

“Charil, damn it.”

“This is better, isn’t it?” Head cocked, she lifted herself off him, taking his cock with her. “The real deal. Nothing blunted.” Focused on the present.

Jaw clenched and lips parted, he grabbed her arms and shook her. “You’re playing with fire.”

“I want to give you fire.” A man who’d never known a mother’s caress should experience the kiss of flesh against flesh from his lovers, but he’d denied himself that pleasure, that human need. “My period’s due to start. I’m not fertile. No,” she insisted when he shook his head. “Believe me.”

“I want to.”

Oh god, did he have any idea how deeply his words reached? Crying without tears for him, she leaned as low as she could and pressed her lips against his. His fingers snaked over her shoulders, and he held her close and hot. How long they remained like that didn’t matter but at length her back protested, forcing her to straighten. As she did, their connection shifted, reawakening her core.

“Concentrate on yourself, on what’s happening to your cock.”

“No problem.”

Drawn into the change from serious to irreverent, she began working him. His position severely limited his movement, something she hadn’t thought about until now. Could she do all the work, give him what he deserved?

Yes, or die trying.

Thank goodness for a physical life. Otherwise, her thighs might have caught fire. As it was, each time she drove down on and over him, every time she pushed off, her breasts shimmied. She pictured her buttocks jiggling, her toes curling back, her knees grinding into the couch. Range spoke to her with his hands, sometimes stroking her thighs as if trying to keep them from cramping, occasionally grabbing her nipples and stopping her breasts’ movement. He ranged over her arms, pressed his fingertips into her belly, surged up to pepper her ass with firm taps.

Throughout his messages she pumped up and down, up and down, pussy muscles holding on despite her ever-flowing juices.

“Ah, ah. Damn you, Charil. Damn you.”

“Shut up. Feel.”

"I am. Shit, I am."

Her cheeks caught fire. She half believed he'd closed his hands around her throat and was robbing her of the ability to breathe. Still, she kept after him, kept him foremost in her mind and body.

"Sweet," he muttered. "Sweet."

"That's – all?" She paused, started again. "Just sweet? After all this work?"

"Getting tired?"

"No! Damn it, no."

How foolish and ignorant not to know she thrived on a challenge. How dare he so much as question her ability to pummel him! She'd show him, fuck him until he didn't know whether it was day or not. Only one thing mattered. That he never forget this.

Her either.

Friction, right? Yes, that's what her relentless driving was accomplishing. Then why did she feel as if she was melting inside, flowing like lava, hot enough to burn down? No matter. This was good, energy and pain and screaming muscles and losing track of everything except her pussy. And his cock filling it.

"Oh god, oh god."

The voice. His or hers? No matter.

Her back was seizing, tightening, demanding relief, but she couldn't stop, not with his pelvis reaching for hers and his teeth reaching for her breast. Laughing, she started to pull away, but her back refused to heed the command. Before she could make sense of what was happening to it, he wrapped his arms around her and drew her down against him so their sweat bled together.

"Rest," he whispered. "I don't need Superwoman, I need you."

You need me? Of course, the practical woman she was countered. He needed her pussy wrapped around him to bring him to climax. She was providing him with a service, supplying a female part to go with his male one. Still, she could dream.

He nuzzled her breasts. "Shit but this feels good."

"I aim to please."

"No aim, success."

"But you haven't –"

"Damn near. Damn fucking near."

Hanging her strength and reserve on his admission, she rocked back and forth. The motion was barely enough to work his cock but increased her awareness of how thoroughly he filled her. This was what her pussy had been designed for, why she was a woman.

Shifting her awareness to her back, she slowly, tentatively brought herself upright. So far so good, tightness at the base of her spine gone, no warning cramp. Range was kneading her breasts, his fingers gentle. And despite the hungry tension playing out on

his features, he was waiting for her, taking his cue from her. So the wolf had a compassionate side.

The analogy took her back to what she'd been doing. She became a she-wolf, alpha female staking her claim on alpha male by fucking him as no other female could.

She started hissing, growling almost, pummeling both of them again. Desperation rode with her. If she didn't give him release now, if she couldn't make good on her promise to fuck him as he'd never been fucked, they might never get past her failure. He'd go back to putting on condoms and introducing them to impersonal cunts while she'd – what?

A blip of awareness of the outside world hit, but she shoved it away, staying in the moment was everything. Putting him first had become her existence. It would stay like that until she'd reached her goal.

Were his breaths changing cadence and becoming shallower and more frequent? If they had a history together, she'd know when he was reaching climax but had to go by instinct, by her desire to put herself in his place. She couldn't say how long she'd been grinding away – it felt like both seconds and endless minutes. What mattered, the only thing, was their union. And the reason for it.

Animals fucked. She was an animal, a raw creature in search of what was as vital as breathing. Functioning without a brain, she attacked this man. He had to explode inside her, had to! They both needed this, needed.

Ah, a new level reached, atmosphere thinner and nerves newly alive. Her body turned primitive, a starving beast ready to kill or be killed. Thrashing from side to side, she repeatedly skewered herself on him. He was growing even larger, his cock expanding and taking over, sucking the life out of her and filling her at the same time. "Ah, ah, yes!"

"Hot. You're so hot."

Swiping at his chest, she came away with her fingers sweat-drenched. "So are you."

An inhuman sound rolled out of him, and he surged upward, nearly knocking her off him. He shuddered, planted his legs under him, shuddered again. Wet heat flooded her passage and slipped deep inside her. Another wave, another guttural cry.

He fell back down, bringing her with him and as before, he held her prisoner against his larger and stronger body. The smell of sweat and cum, his out-of-control sounds took her – somewhere.

This place knew only heat and desperate energy so she dove into it. Screamed. Kept on screaming.

Beneath her, his deeper sounds rolled over hers and his arms gripped as if he was drowning and she the only thing that could keep him alive.

But she was drowning with him.

Going down into a deep and dark place, surging for the surface, sinking again. Drifting now while her body danced with itself and Range's cock absorbed her pussy's spasms.

"Shit, shit, shit," he chanted. "I can feel you – feel you come."

Chapter Sixteen

The sun hadn't finished setting but already Charil sensed the dropping temperature from her now-familiar perch on the deck. Because she'd spent considerable time in desert country, she was used to cold nights, but it felt different in the mountains, maybe because even in summer the air held the memory of winter snows. Sitting beside a sometimes dozing Range, she had no doubt that he would have survived the Donner winter.

Or would he? He'd put a child's well-being before his own. He'd starve so a child could live or risk freezing by hunting in impossible snow conditions.

Suppressing a shudder, she tried to turn off her mind, but his cell phone had rung yet again a few minutes ago. Although he hadn't gone into the cabin to see who had called, they both knew.

Reality had found them.

Looking over at him, she realized he wasn't asleep after all. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"You're right. Not wearing a condom makes a difference."

"Something you could get used to?"

His silence said what she didn't want to acknowledge—no matter how much his pleasure, his conviction about unplanned pregnancies like the one that had produced him and started what would have been his child remained the same. She'd expected him to grill her about where she was in her cycle, but he hadn't. Maybe he needed to pretend, at least for a little while, that the time had come for them to mate.

Did he need that? Despite his commitment to a solitary life, had it taken its toll?

A damp burning compelled her to close her eyes, and she found herself in a dark place swirling with images. She was looking at a man, Range. But instead of being at his cabin, he was behind bars.

Much as the image revolted her, she had to stay with it and learn what it meant. Moments later she realized that he wasn't the only person lurking in her mind or imagination or glimpse into the future or whatever it was.

Someone was standing on the other side of the bars with his arms folded across his chest in a superior stance. Tito. Range returned the hard glare with his head high and his chin squared, but his fingers were clenched and his heartbeat too fast. Trapped, his body language screamed. I'm trapped.

Her eyes flew open, but looking beyond the deck to the darkening woods did nothing to free her from what she'd just seen. Although she couldn't imagine how Tito

could put Range behind bars, the message was unshakable. If Tito believed Range had failed him, he'd have Range killed, or worse.

Much as she needed to stand and pace, she forced herself to remain seated so Range wouldn't guess at her turmoil. Maybe he too was looking into the future.

What did it hold for him? No losing herself in sex-fantasy or falling asleep or listening to wind and birds. Reality, hard reality.

Number one was the possibility that Tito would hire someone to kill him or even do the job himself. Maybe she could return to her world and pick up the threads of her life, but as long as Tito was free, Range was in danger. Range, only he mattered.

She couldn't ignore another possibility—that friends, the nursing home staff and business associates were looking for her. No matter what lie she might come up with, those lies could lead the police to Range. And if they found him, no matter how much she pleaded, he'd be arrested.

What if she told the police that Tito had hired some man to kidnap her in preparation for turning her into a sex slave? Shuddering at the thought of having to expand on that, she struggled to come up with a way to keep Range out of this, but nothing came to mind. His DNA was on her.

Range was a loner, maybe a shadowy figure law enforcement had long been looking for. Given today's technology, the trail would eventually lead from her to Range, or from Tito to Range.

He deserved better! After what he'd endured in his childhood, he deserved his freedom.

A freedom that would be ensured only if Tito was silenced.

Trembling from a cold that had nothing to do with the air, she pondered whether she was capable of killing Tito.

Cold calm washed over her at the thought of Tito dead at her feet. Not only would Range be safe, but the bastard responsible for what had happened to her family would have paid. Not long ago she would have never wanted anyone dead, but Tito had changed all that—him and the question of Range's future. His life.

God, if only she could concentrate, plan, make sense of all the pieces!

"You're quiet," Range said.

I'm trying to think. "When are you going to answer him?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Tomorrow. "That long? What are you going to tell him?"

"What he needs to hear."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not going there, Charil. Some things you don't need to or dare know."

Damn you! "What if he learns where you live? If he does something to this place, to you—"

“Don’t!”

Don’t what? Face possibilities?

Less than an hour ago nothing had mattered except sharing their bodies, but that had been fantasy and escape. Now they were back in the real world, and she was fighting as she never had fought for anything to find a happy ending.

But there wasn’t any. As long as she and Range were linked, he was in danger.

And after everything he’d been forced to endure, she couldn’t do that to him.

* * * * *

The night had taken forever to near its end and sleeping next to Range had made the waiting even more painful. She might have dozed off a time or two, her brain made hazy by hovering unconsciousness. Her mother used to say that a person’s mind could become like a hamster running in a cage during the night hours, endlessly looping over the same territory and not accomplishing anything.

Now as Charil slipped out of bed and tiptoed away from Range, her mind felt like tangled and frayed electrical cords. Fighting emotion, she’d spent too long looking at possibilities and options, plans and pitfalls. What it had all come down to was that she had to put distance between herself and Range if she was going to ensure his freedom, save his life.

One thing she was absolutely clear on—she’d go after Tito with everything she had in her. By the time she was done with him, he’d be in prison or pieces, him but not Range. Up until now Range had been able to remain under the law enforcement radar, but the drive for revenge would make Tito relentless, deadly.

Distance. That’s what she had to accomplish. If Tito believed she’d managed to escape Range, the bastard’s attention would be on her. Then she’d throw a net over him—once she’d found one.

Thank goodness she didn’t weigh that much, she thought as she eased down the stairs. Otherwise, they might have squeaked. Her suitcase was up in the bedroom but her purse and briefcase were still in the living room. Even more fortunately, the clothes she’d been wearing before she’d taken Range into her mouth and then her body were on the floor near the couch.

Despite her need to set her still-incomplete plan into motion, she had to force herself to pull off the old shirt Range had given her to wear as they were coming back to consciousness. As she tugged on her clothes, she kept looking over at what she could see of his bookcase. They’d spent the hours before bed comparing and contrasting their reading preferences. At her prompting, he’d shown her several of his home remodeling DVDs. The thought of him going into home improvement stores or watching HGTV only made leaving him harder.

But she had no choice.

Barely daring to breathe, she opened the front door and stepped outside. She'd made room for her purse's contents in the soft-sided old leather briefcase that had been her father's so she only had to carry one thing. She'd have to walk down to the road that went around Lake Tahoe and then however many miles it was to the closest small community since the local grocery kept bankers' hours and she might be recognized. Maybe she'd find a car rental service, maybe she'd have to hire a taxi. Whatever it took, she'd put as much distance as fast as possible between her and the country that meant so much to Range.

The first tears she'd allowed herself since making her decision broke free, but even with her vision blurred, she made her way through the fading dark to the road she and Range had walked along yesterday. There weren't any streetlights and only a few of Range's semi-neighbors had on outside lights, which meant she had to work at not wandering off the road.

How long would Range sleep? How far would she get before he came looking for her? Yes, she probably should have taken his truck but she hadn't been able to make herself do that.

By her inner clock, such as it was, it took the better part of a half-hour to reach the highway. During her hurried and yet not fast enough walk, she'd slipped into the trees four times when she heard approaching vehicles. None, fortunately, were his. Neither, fortunately, had any of the headlights reached her.

So this was what it felt like to be a fugitive. A confused fugitive because she wasn't sure whether turning left or right made the most sense. Right would take her back the direction she and Range had come from, and if her memory was right, the commercial buildings had been few and far between. Left represented the unknown and, maybe, Range's second choice when it came to looking for her.

Left. Take a chance heading left. But no walking along the side of the road where she risked being spotted or run over. Fortunately, the lake was little more than the length of a football field away and as long as she stuck to the shoreline, her footing would be relatively level. Besides, even this early she probably wouldn't be the only one strolling there, just the only one carrying a briefcase.

When she'd started out, it had been so cold she'd kicked herself for not grabbing a jacket, but that would have meant taking one of Range's and much as she wanted to surround herself in his essence, it would have been stealing. Walking had warmed her up, but now the icy lake seemed to be reaching out for her.

Maybe it wasn't the lake after all. Maybe she was, once again, reacting to the turns her life had taken.

She barely knew Range and yet knew him better than she ever had another human being. Given their background differences, that seemed impossible, but having sex with him had brought her close to his heart and soul. She could only hope he felt the same way.

And that made turning her back on him even harder.

As she'd already done countless times, she asked herself if there was another way, if somehow things could work out for them, but there wasn't any. He was mystery and mystique, a precious few magical moments when nothing except sharing their bodies had mattered.

Those magical moments were behind them.

Up ahead she spotted an elevated turnout where people could park their cars and look at the lake. The shore there thinned to almost nothing and a mound of boulders led up to the parking area from the lake. Working her way around the base of the boulders took her full attention, and she couldn't see what was ahead. Knowing motorists could look down at her was disconcerting, and although she told herself the chance that Range was up there was slim, she didn't quite buy her attempt at self-reassurance.

When she reached the end of the boulders, she saw that the shoreline was gradually widening again. Thank goodness because her sandals were hardly made for climbing. She'd just planted her feet on level ground when she sensed more than saw movement to her left.

A man stepped out from behind the last boulder.

Range.

Staring at her, Range fought to shove all feelings back in the cage he'd forced them into when he'd awoken to find Charil gone. A quick survey of the cabin had told him what she'd taken and left behind. He'd expected his rig to be missing. Realizing she'd left on foot had distracted him from much of his anger and other emotions he couldn't identify. What he couldn't understand was how he'd gone on sleeping with her gone. Hadn't life conditioned him to his surroundings, to take nothing for granted? But maybe fucking and being fucked had worn him out more than he'd known.

And maybe, for a few hours, he'd been at peace.

No longer. He once again accepted what had to be done.

"Go away," she hissed. "Please, go away."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Don't you understand! You're in danger. Tito, the police, you—" She backed away.

"That's why you left? To protect me?"

Behind her, the morning-quiet lake waited. Up on the road motorists went about their business, but although his awareness of his surroundings was back on high alert, those things barely mattered. Only she did.

As her plea for him to walk out of her life ran through him, he went back in time to when he'd stood just outside his truck. His mind had been full of questions about where she could have gone and why, his body still heavy with reminders of their lovemaking. Yet he'd nearly convinced himself to turn around and walk back inside.

He'd left women before. Hell, unless they ended things with him first he'd always broken off the relationships. Getting down to basics, a loner who didn't know the

meaning of the word commitment needed to be alone. None of those relationships had been as intense and layered as what he and Charil had explored but didn't that make walking away from her even more necessary?

But a necessary chapter in their relationship hadn't been written so he'd gotten into his truck and turned on the ignition.

Now they were face-to-face because he'd spotted her below the road while driving slowly along.

"No, that's not why I left, not the only reason." She took another backward step. "My god, look at us! We're like animals in heat around each other. There's nothing logical in that, nothing sane."

He couldn't argue with that. Neither could he take his eyes off her when the longer he looked, the harder it was to maintain his equilibrium.

"Did you ever play with fire? That's what we've been doing, only it has to end."

"You want to put the fire out?"

"Don't you? My god, this is insane."

The sun was making its way up the horizon with enough light reaching her to give her a rich glow. At the same time she was losing definition as if she was blending into her surroundings. No, not blending, becoming part of them. Studying the sun's influence on her even as the distance between them became a chasm, he suddenly knew why he was here.

She'd become part of his world. Whether she knew it or not. Whether he was ready for that to happen. No matter how much he hated what he was going to do to her.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" she asked.

Because I've never felt like this about any woman. "Our having sex was pure insanity, is that what you're saying? It had nothing to do with each of us needing something from the other, an intimacy that's been missing from our lives? Nothing like human hormones was at work? A simple wham-bam, and we'll each go our own way?"

"No. As long as Tito is alive, it'll never be that simple."

"He has you running scared, doesn't he? That's what's behind your cutting and running."

"Not—not everything."

Don't say you don't feel anything for me. I can't handle it. Shaken by his admission, he forced the thought to a dark corner. The sun was doing crazy things to his mind, that's all. She hadn't become precious to him, she hadn't! He'd simply let lust get twisted into something else.

"Come back with me. There's the right way of leaving and then there's what you've done. What about your clothes?"

"What about Tito?"

"Let me deal with him."

"You can't! He'll kill you."

"Not if I kill him first."

"No!" Horror transformed her from a woman into an animal bent on survival. "You'll be caught, convicted, put in prison."

On the verge of telling her that catching him was far from certain, he kept his mouth shut. Although he'd been deeply tempted, he'd never killed a human being. "What were you going to do? Go after Tito yourself?"

"I don't know. I'm not—much as I'd like to, I don't have your skills."

Shaking off the kind of image that could turn him into a ruthless hunter of justice instead of fulfilling the contract he'd made with himself, he forced himself to stop looking at her. Although she might try to run, he headed for the lake. He'd put his hands in the icy water enough times to know he really didn't want to, but squatting and stretching out his fingers gave him something to do, simple physical activity that clarified his thoughts.

In her mind, Tito had become a predator while the two of them were prey. She'd decided to sacrifice herself in order to protect him.

That wasn't going to happen!

Straightening, he shook his freezing fingers and walked slowly, carefully back to Charil. She studied him in an animal's wary way and yet her expression went deeper, denser. She was watching not just his eyes but his whole body as if trying to memorize it.

Damn it, no woman had ever done that!

Moving with the speed that kept him alive, he lunged and snagged her wrist. She jerked back but it was too late. Her pulse beat against his fingertips as if trying to slip inside him. A few hours ago she'd lain with her breasts pressed against his chest while he memorized her heartbeat. Back then he'd blinded himself to everything else and told himself that the connection didn't and never would go beyond sex. Now he knew better. Danger was everywhere, threats that had only a little to do with the man who'd hired him to kidnap her.

Time for things to change, for the chapter to be written.

"Let me go." She tried to slap him, prompting him to capture her other hand. And when she lifted a leg, her knee aimed at his crotch, he spun her away from him and held her against his chest. "Range, what are you doing?"

Trying to control you and what I feel for you. Trying to concentrate on what I must do. "Scream," he challenged. "Go on, call in the cops."

At that she went still, and although she was so tense she seemed about to shatter, he knew she wasn't going to cry for help because this was between them.

"We're going back to my cabin. I have a call to make."

* * * * *

Charil sat curled in a tight and tense ball. Not long ago this cabin had mesmerized her, but now she felt like a stranger in it. Watching Range fill the now too-small space, she struggled to reconcile what she knew about him with his recent behavior, but he was made up of too many parts. Her body cared only about the sexy beast. Even her mind kept getting hung up on all the ways they'd had sex and that made it next to impossible for her to concentrate. Had she been crazy to see him as primarily a man, a male, the owner of a large, lust-heated cock?

Of course she had! He was much more than a stud. He was – what?

She was – what?

He'd been standing with his back to her while looking out his front window, but now he spun and faced her, his right hand up so she could see he held his cell phone. Clamping down on questions she knew he wouldn't answer, she waited.

Eyes holding hers, he punched numbers. "It's me," he said after a moment. "No, shut up... Yeah, she's here. No wonder you want her."

What was that tone, a mix of sarcasm and superiority? And yet underlying those was a respectful note.

"Let's just say I wanted to sample the wares before I turned her over to someone else. I'm not sure she's what you want though because she takes some foreplay if you know what I mean."

Sick, Charil straightened but Range's glare held her in place. Despite the chill she couldn't control, she knew Range was choosing his words carefully. He needed to concentrate on Tito and Tito's responses, not be distracted by her. Something was going on beneath the surface, but what?

"Oh yeah, she knows how to treat a man right. At least I didn't have any complaints. Her breasts, prime. Her cunt, tight."

Closing her eyes didn't stop the horrible words from echoing. Besides, she had to concentrate on everything. When she opened her eyes, Range was standing over her, his large, strong, complex form pulling her into his spell.

"I don't know," Range continued. "What's it worth to you to talk to her?"

Horrified, she shook her head.

"Sorry, guess she's occupied after all, her mouth full of me if you know what I'm saying... What? Don't threaten me. You've got to find me before you can cut off any part of my anatomy. Look, you want her back or you wanna spend all your time cursing me?" Looking impatient, he waited. "No, that's not how it's going to be. Bottom line, I'm bored with her. I want my money, but it's going to happen on my terms. It's going to take me the better part of the day to get to Bakersfield. It'll take you about the same amount of time. There's some farming land east of the city, isolated. It'll be just the three of us, at least it better be because otherwise the deal's off. You bring money. I'll bring the merchandise. The handoff'll only take a few minutes and then I'll be on my way. As for her, she'll be your problem then, won't she?"

Listening as she'd never listened, Charil prayed Range was stringing Tito along, but the way he was studying her and the repulsive things he'd said made her question whether she knew him at all.

"Change your plans. This is a one-time offer... No, fuck you. You don't want her, I'll find another buyer. Or maybe I'll take her to the cops and let her point her finger at you... Ha, that's what I thought. Once we're both on the way, we'll talk again, finalize plans... Yeah, I'm scared shitless." He ended the call.

Her head roared. His wide stance, his arms folded across his chest and looking down at her as if she was a piece of merchandise made her sick to her stomach.

"What are you doing?" She forced the words. "After what we've shared –"

"Was a hell of a lot more than I intended, but it's back to business."

"I'm business? Nothing personal?"

His jaw clenched, then she swore he made an effort to drain emotion from his expression. "Tito offered me a hundred thousand dollars to pick you up and deposit you at the location of his choice. I got a measly twenty K as my advance. I've pulled a switch on him by forcing changes in the contract. It worked. He's even more eager to get his hands on you and is willing to up the ante to make that happen."

"I...see." She didn't.

"He'll never mention it, but he's scared to death I'm going to let you go. If you talk to the cops, it's all over for him."

"And you," she added although the thought of turning Range in was still more than she could handle.

"They'd have to find me."

"What are you going to do, abandon this cabin?"

Another wave of emotion buried itself in his features. "That's why I was bluffing when I threatened to take you to the police. As long as he's busy entertaining himself with you, I'm safe."

Was this what everything boiled down to? He didn't trust her to protect him? And because he didn't, he was willing to sacrifice her? "Tito's a monster. He'll force me to bring him here."

"I don't think so. He wants you on your back a hell of a lot more than he wants my balls."

Did Range really believe that? "What happens to me doesn't matter to you? As long as you're paid, that bastard can do whatever he wants to me and you won't lose a moment of sleep?"

Again Range clenched his teeth. Taking a backward step, he jammed his hands in his back pockets. "Don't forget something, Charil. For a person to be capable of love and compassion, he has to have experienced those things. That didn't happen to me back when it mattered the most."

This conversation wasn't leading anywhere! And the longer it went on, the more angry, betrayed and lost she felt. Unable to just sit there like some animal about to be taken to the slaughterhouse, she forced her legs under her. These legs were made for competition, for pitting her strength and experience against other motorcycle racers. Even more essential, she'd committed herself to avenging what had happened to her family. If it meant taking Range down along with Tito, so be it.

Not giving herself time to change her mind, she darted for the front door. Damn! Although she was in great physical shape, his legs were longer. She should have tried to grab a knife from the kitchen. And then—

The door opened, and she threw herself outside. Two strides took her to the end of the porch. She took two stairs at once, jumped to the ground, spun and headed for the woods. Behind her, the ground fairly shook. Range, jumping off the porch.

Range, snaking his hands around her and yanking her against his chest. "No," he hissed into her ear.

Certain he was speaking softly so no one could hear, she opened her mouth to scream. But she couldn't. No matter that he was sending her into hell, she wouldn't risk his freedom.

She tried to slide down out of his grip, but his hold tightened. Kicking back, she connected with a knee. Grunting, he shifted her to one side. Before she could take advantage of the change, his fingers pressed into the side of her neck. A familiar hot stab snaked into her head and over her shoulders. Stripped of all strength, she sagged. She vaguely realized he'd clamped his arms around her waist and was dragging her back to the cabin. Then the light inside shut off.

Chapter Seventeen

Bakersfield was hot. Even with the air-conditioning, Charil felt the heavy heat through the windows. Lifting her bound hands, she pushed back her hair, then stared at the cuffs around her wrists. Maybe she should have asked Range how he'd gotten the handcuffs and whether he'd ever used them before, but they'd barely spoken during the long hours in his vehicle, and she didn't want to hear his voice.

Or maybe, she amended, she was afraid of the sound because it might remind her of what he'd told her about himself.

She'd spent too much time trying to make sense of what was happening and why he was doing this to her, but it all boiled down to a certain reality. He'd handcuffed her just as she was returning to consciousness and had tied her feet after taking her into the bathroom. She had a vague memory of him talking to someone on his cell phone while she was pretty much out of it, probably Tito again.

They'd made two stops along the way, both to relieve themselves, although once he'd emptied several extra gas cans into his tank while they were parked down an abandoned-looking road. He'd packed some sandwiches and although the food now rested like concrete in her belly, at least she wasn't hungry.

Bakersfield. Nearing the meeting with Tito.

The cuffs and ropes had made her lethargic although maybe hopeless and helpless were more apt descriptions. Whichever it was, having no say or action in what was going to happen had led to an unexpected and yet comforting passivity. She'd broken her collarbone during a spill in one of her early races. As the bike started sliding and tipping, she'd simply and utterly accepted that she was going to crash and it was going to hurt. There wasn't anything she could do about it.

Her muscles were relaxed now and she was waiting. She just wished acceptance came as easily.

They'd left the freeway the better part of an hour ago and after winding east through commercial and then residential areas, had broken free of the city. The land on either side was rich as witnessed by the large farms. This late in the year, much of the harvesting had been done and the ground tilled in preparation the next planting. She wished the windows were down so she could smell the earth. Anything was better than this self-entanglement.

"You're just going to walk away. Wash your hands and sheets of me?"

Only the humming engine replied.

“What happens to me doesn’t matter? What about it? Are you ever going to get in touch with Tito and see whether I’ve worked out to be what he wanted, or whether he had to dispose of me?”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t. And I was wrong, Even if you have one, I don’t want to hear your damn explanation. Nothing you could say would make sense.” *And I can’t stand to hear to hear you say I mean nothing to you.*

He didn’t need to be this focused on driving, but it was better this way, wasn’t it? Shouldn’t his silence free her to face what was going to happen to her? She knew enough about Tito’s world that she should be trying to come up with a way to escape the bastard’s clutches or the clutches of whoever he was going to send her to for training, but even when she wasn’t looking at Range, he continued to consume her.

What she found the most incomprehensible was her body’s insane reaction. She’d heard of people who got off on the bondage scene and had done her share of fantasizing about being taken by a strong, dark man, but those dreams were simply that, escapism. In her real world, she’d never for a moment wanted to give up control—until now. Range had put on these cuffs and strapped her legs together. If he wanted, he’d have no trouble forcing himself on her, especially not once he discovered how wet she was.

Insane. Absolutely insane! And yet her pussy was empty and he had what she needed to fill it. His cock and no other would do.

A mental image of her spread-eagled on a four-poster bed while Range fucked her died when he picked up his cell phone. “I’m five minutes out,” he said. “This better not take long.”

“He’s already there?” she asked when he punched *end*.

“Yeah.” Ignoring her stare, he made another connection. “On in twenty... No, no changes.”

“What was that?”

“Look, your job is to deal with what’s about to happen. Everything else is immaterial.”

She didn’t try to stifle a bitter laugh. Then, although she fought to stop it, the laugh turned into a sob. “I was such an idiot, such a fool. To think there was something between us, that because you have a cock you were a human being—I feel sorry for you, I really do.”

The way he looked at her, she believed he was going to say something, but he didn’t. He was so tense she half expected him to shatter. The longer she studied him, the tenser she became herself until she would have given anything to reclaim her earlier lethargy. This really was happening. She was about to be sold to a monster—by a man she’d never forget.

Damn it, what was with this heavy ache between her legs? How could she possibly still want him? Sick, she was sick.

Slowing, Range turned onto a dirt road that led to a massive roofed but open structure filled with baled hay. There were several pieces of machinery around, but from the amount of dust on them, they'd been there awhile. No other buildings were in sight, no workers, no one who might come to her rescue. A thousand thoughts and words crowded her mind. Life as she knew it, over. Freedom, over. Range, gone.

It wasn't until he pulled around to the rear of the great stack of hay that she spotted the waiting silver SUV. *Shit, oh shit!*

"Bastard," she hissed as Range stopped and killed the engine. "I hate you."

"I know you do."

"Then why..." Tito was getting out of his vehicle, his head up and shoulders back in that *I'm taking on the world* stance she hated far more than she'd just said she hated Range.

The cab started to heat. If she'd wanted, she could have released her seat belt, but it was easier to sit there and swelter than get out and face the devil. Range, obviously, had no such reservations because he reached past her and opened the door. Then he undid her seat belt, but instead of getting out, he continued to lean toward her.

Damn him for coming so close! With his heat and strength and energy seeping into her, she couldn't think, could only go back to when they'd shared their bodies and everything had been new and bright.

Lies! He'd handed her lies instead of his soul.

"When you die and they open you up, they won't find a heart."

"Then it's good you discovered that now."

Tito was here! Standing with his hand on the door and a smile brought up from hell. "Finally. You belong to me." He reached for her cuffed hands.

Range knocked him away. "Not yet. The money first."

Tito responded with a string of oaths while Range exited and walked around his truck. The way the two men squared on each other made her think of male dogs after a bitch in heat, but she was far from in heat. She was! And even if she couldn't control the hungry heat deep in her pussy, she now understood it for what it was, terror masquerading as something else.

"No money until I'm convinced you haven't damaged the merchandise," Tito said, backing a step when Range loomed over him. "What the hell's she doing dressed?"

"Like I'd take her on the freeway naked? Look, you aren't getting any samples until you've paid for her."

"Fuck you! What'd you do, ruin her? What is it, bitch, he pack you full of him and your cunt's bruised, bleeding?"

Like she'd answer that question! Like she'd even acknowledge his existence.

"No, I didn't hurt her."

"But you fucked her, didn't you?"

“What do you think?”

“That wasn’t part of the bargain, damn it. I made it abundantly clear that she wasn’t to be touched.”

“You’re not getting a discount if that’s what you’re thinking. Either you pony up or she’s staying put and I’m getting back behind the wheel.”

They were talking about her as if she didn’t exist, as if she were a bail of hay Range had for sale. As incomprehensible as that was, nothing she said or did would change this moment. Besides, what could she do restrained like this with two men inches away?

Two men. One she loathed without reservation and might be capable of killing. The other, oh god, the other! *Range, please, don’t let this be happening! Care about me, please.*

“What has she said about our relationship?” Tito demanded.

“I don’t give a damn.”

Relief and doubt flashed in the soft man’s eyes. “She must have said —”

“She tried to, guess she thought that would change things, but I stopped her. Whatever’s between the two of you doesn’t matter to me.”

Tito’s skepticism would have been laughable if she wasn’t so unnerved. Funny, back when she simply saw him as the enemy, she’d been convinced she could beat him in a fistfight because she could run circles around the heavy but not yet fat man. His muscles were slack, his butt big probably as a result of his sedentary lifestyle. She’d even amused herself wondering if he had trouble finding his cock with his beer belly in the way.

Soon, because Range was abandoning her, she’d have to find it. And worse.

Bile soured her mouth and refusing to throw up took all her concentration. She was still trying to get her guts under control when she realized Tito was trying to run his hand between her legs. She clamped them together.

“So she still has spirit, does she?” Despite her resistance, he kept his hand in place. “I don’t ever want that wiped from her.”

“Where are you sending her?” Range asked.

“Vegas, not that you care. You’re right, Chicago’s problematic. Besides, this way I can deliver her myself and help get her settled in.”

Range grunted. “Whatever. Look, I’ve got commitments. Let’s finish this.”

No, no, no, she longed to scream. At the same time, she wanted nothing more than to have Range out of her life. Only with him gone, with his male energy no longer touching her, could she think about what she had to do to get out of this nightmare.

“I’d like nothing better than to end our association,” Tito said. “Check?”

“Hell no. Cash only.”

Laughing, Tito pointed toward his SUV. “Just testing you. One more thing—I want her hands behind her. The way she is, she could cause problems. In fact, shit, I’m surprised you’ve given her this much freedom.”

“Long trip. I didn’t want her losing circulation. Soon as I get paid, she’s your problem.”

This wasn’t happening, it wasn’t.

Grabbing her around the waist, Tito hauled her out. Although she could barely keep her balance thanks to her leg restraints, she vowed not to lean on either man for support. The sun beat down on her and fear whipped through her. Still, the rich hay smell calmed her a little. Range and Tito were so different physically, one repulsing her while the other, despite everything, still tapped into something deep and primitive.

That didn’t change even when Range grabbed the links between her hands and pulled her arms toward him. Then he pulled a key out of his back pocket. A moment of freedom. That’s all she’d have before he forced her arms behind her.

He didn’t give her that moment. Yanking again, he threw her off balance, and she started to fall. Even as she tried to prepare for hitting the ground, he eased her down on her side. Then sitting on her hip, he deftly slipped the key into the slot. Increasing the pressure on her hip and grabbing her shoulders, he forced her onto her stomach. What he was doing had barely registered by the time he’d re-cuffed her so her hands rested on her buttocks. Other than turning her head to the side, she didn’t try to move.

He’d be gone in a few minutes.

“Damn but you’re good,” Tito acknowledged. “I should have you show me some of your moves.”

“You don’t have the speed or strength.”

“Fuck it. Guess I’ll have to come up with my own moves, won’t I? Put my weight to work. You gonna sit on her all day?”

Range hadn’t come close to putting his full weight on her, allowing her to feel his cock pressing against the small of her back. He was erect but could she blame him? After all, her nipples were as hard as his cock while her pussy felt soft and swollen. Helpless under her man was a powerful aphrodisiac.

Hers? What a lie that was. Still, the body remembered—too much.

“Just enjoying myself.” Range ran his hand over her cheek and from there down the side of her neck. “Remembering some heated times we had. How about it, Charil?” His fingers slid under her top at the neck, touched her collarbone, paused and then continued traveling. Despite herself, she lifted her breasts off the ground. “Going down memory lane, are you?”

“Stop the fuck that! She’s mine now.”

“Not for a few more minutes. But you’re making a point. This is hardly the way to get to the goodies.”

Effortlessly getting to his feet, Range brought her up with him. Being cuffed in front had restricted her movements, but now her arms were completely useless, and she was forced to arch her back, to thrust her breasts toward him. Although it made absolutely no sense, she felt sexy, her body on display. Both men wanted her sexually while she wanted Range, hard and hot and now.

Then she'd kill him.

"Shit, look at that." Tito leered at her hard nipples. "Damn. I nearly forgot what a hot body she has. And to think it's mine."

"Soon." Smiling his half smile down at her, Range cupped her chin and lifted her head. He leaned toward her, his mouth open in invitation and challenge.

Surrender. Taste and feel him. Hold the memory for the rest of your life. Sighing deep and silent, she met him lips for lips. The kiss started soft but not tentative and something rippled through her before centering itself in her womb. Range melted her, swept her out of the world and into him. As the kiss deepened, both of them giving and taking equally, she set everything except sexual need free. Insane as this desire was, it bled through her.

Midnight, the two of them, the moon full and strong, hunger even stronger. Naked, hands on bodies, hissing and growling, cock in cunt, giving and taking, caressing and scratching, whispers and cries. Explosions, on and on.

"God damn it, what are the two of you doing?"

I don't know. Pulling back even though it was the last thing she wanted to do, she waited for Range's answer. Instead, she got his labored breathing and his hands still searing her.

"Can't you figure it out?" Sarcasm coated Range's voice, but something else was there as well, something heavy and only for her.

"Get her in my damn car."

"You can't do it?"

"Fuck you. Fuck both of you."

Tito stalked toward her but stopped just out of Range's reach. The way he stood there with his hands fisted told her as no words could that Range intimidated him, he also feared the younger and stronger man. Going by his possessive stance, Range had gotten the message and was giving out one of his own, one that said he'd received something from her that Tito never could.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you," Range said. "How I accomplish that is my business, but I don't want you to ever forget this. You harm her and I'll make sure you pay."

"Harm?" Tito straightened, falling just short of standing on his toes. "This is hardly going to be a picnic for her and you know it. Hell, what's the point of all this if I don't get something out of it? Power." His eyes raked over her, left her bleeding. "I've waited a lifetime to have this kind of power over another human being."

"You heard my warning. Deal with it."

* * * * *

Tito's SUV was nearly new with a heavy just-bought smell that added to her nausea. Had only a few minutes passed since Range had picked her up and deposited her in the passenger's seat, since he'd slid his hands over her and left her both loathing and loving him? The memory of Tito counting out hundred-dollar bills and putting them in Range's outstretched palm further sickened her.

Maybe she should be grateful because Tito was back on the country road instead of raping her, but all she could think about was that Range had left before them and was heading north back to his cabin. Alone. Maybe thinking of nothing except how he'd spend his money. Not giving a damn about her.

"What a bastard he is," Tito grumbled. "Pushing his weight around the way he did – the two of you got it on as soon as you could get your pants down, didn't you?"

Go to hell. Do you think I'll answer that?

"Fighting me, are you?" The interior trapped his harsh chuckle. "Damn, but I love that. Wanna know a secret? What I told him about shipping you off to Vegas for training, it's not going to happen for a while. Not until I see what I can accomplish on my own." His glare said he wanted some kind of response from her, which he wasn't about to get. "I've been busy. Might as well tell you about it because you're going to know soon enough. I own a piece of property no one gives a damn about smack in the middle of some fig orchards. The farmhouse needs so much work it's a joke, but it's private." Reaching out, he squeezed her thigh before she could turn away. "Yeah, you're getting it, aren't you?"

"Why are you doing this?" She had to think about something, anything to kill her last image of Range.

"Because I can, bitch. Because I've been kicked by The Man all my life and now it's my turn to win a round. And what a round!" He squeezed again, this time so hard that she gasped. "You got your kicks beating the crap out of your competition on the racetrack. That gives you some idea how much I'm going to get out of doing the same to you."

Because he could. That's what this was all about? Knowing how futile trying to change his mind was, she stared out the side window. They were returning to civilization. There were more buildings out here, occasional houses, massive barns and other ranch-related structures. Although the roadside weeds had dried out, it was peaceful. So quiet and undisturbed that her mind and body slipped back to Range.

Would he remain part of her as long as she lived? Why couldn't she simply hate him? What kind of man could do this to a woman he'd walked down a quiet road with, who he'd gone shopping with, who'd taken his cock in her mouth and his semen on her body?

"I shouldn't have hired that bastard, but he was the only one I could. You wouldn't think getting a good hit man or whatever the fuck he calls himself would be that hard, would you? You know, the first time I met him, I knew he was going to be trouble. Put

together the way he is, hell, what broad isn't going to be turned on?" He shoved her shoulder with so much force that she was knocked against the passenger door. "What was he to you, a lion? Maybe a stallion."

Both, and more.

"God damn it." Another shove. "I'll beat him out of you, make you forget you ever spread your legs for anyone except me."

Maybe. Until I find a way to kill you.

"You aren't scared, are you? What the fuck's with that? You stupid?"

She was actually trying to come up with an answer when she spotted a car approaching from behind them through the side mirror. Range! Coming for her! Wearing a white hat!

Tito cursed. Swiveling, she looked behind her.

A police car, lights flashing but no siren.

"Shit! Shit!"

Turning back around, she saw another police car coming toward them. Like the first, its lights were on. It looked huge, powerful, commanding.

"Fuck!"

When Tito jammed on the brakes, she lurched forward before being jerked back. Thank goodness for the seat belt Range had wrapped around her. Stringing out oaths, Tito yanked the steering wheel to the left and then the right, correcting each time when his vehicle nearly plunged into the ditches on either side. There was nowhere for him to go on this two-lane road, nothing to do except slam on the brakes again because the police car ahead of them had turned sideways so it blocked both lanes.

Tito yanked the SUV into reverse, then pounded his fist on the steering wheel. No wonder since the car behind them was also now taking up both lanes. If she'd been on her motorcycle, she would have headed for the left-hand ditch and freedom, but Tito didn't have her riding and racing skills.

He was trapped.

"Driver, put it in park and turn off the engine!" a magnified voice commanded. "Then roll down the window and stick both hands out."

As she watched a cursing and white-faced Tito do as he'd been ordered, she sent a silent question to Range. *Are you behind this? You made this happen, somehow.*

Chapter Eighteen

No, she insisted to a detective an hour later, if Tito had any accomplices, she was unaware of them. Tito had kidnapped her some three days ago and had been driving around with her. He hadn't raped her but had constantly threatened to do so, building himself up to something she didn't want to think about. He'd stayed away from populated areas and they'd slept either in his vehicle or on the ground, and he'd barely given her anything to eat or drink. The two of them had an adversarial history which she explained to the patient detective. Because she'd been forced to spend so much time listening to him rant, she was convinced Tito had become mentally unhinged. His desire for revenge had gotten the best of him, and although she was deeply grateful for being rescued, she hoped he'd get psychological help, once he was convicted.

"Don't you want to know why the patrol officers stopped him?" the detective who looked to be in his early sixties asked.

"Of course." Unlike the interrogation rooms she'd seen on TV, they were in the detective's small office with two soft drinks between them and pictures of the detective's family crowding out his paperwork. "I guess someone saw that my hands were cuffed behind me. Was it someone we passed, maybe one of the men working at one of those ranches?"

Detective John Brasher had been hunched over his tablet as he jotted down what she told him, but now he turned off the tape recorder and leaned back. "We're off the record now, Charil. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Range, where are you? "I'm trying to."

"We had a tip, all right, but not from those bullshit possibilities you just came up with."

"Oh." Leaning back herself, she struggled to settle her heartbeat. Everything that had happened since Tito had given up still felt like something out of a movie, not real.

"Let me put it to you this way. You're not the only one committed to keeping his involvement out of this."

Her heart leaped. "Oh."

"Charil, it isn't always easy being a cop. Sometimes the bad guys get away. We're supposed to do our jobs and let the legal system take care of the rest, but you know how slowly those wheels turn, if at all. We'd lose our jobs and freedom if we took the law into our hands, if we made revenge our priority."

Although she wasn't fully sure of what he was getting at, she remained silent.

"The media likes to portray the world as being made up of white and black hats, law enforcement versus the bad guys. But it isn't that simple, there are some gray hats

out there. Maybe I should say there's a bit of gray in the best of us. Some of those who live suspended between good and bad and can move in both worlds, provide what I believe is a necessary service."

Range was one of those gray hats? Concentrating on the undercurrent of emotion in the detective's voice, she found the answer. Yes.

"In order for those shadow men to continue to do what they do, sometimes people like me and the officers who rescued you work with them, and then get really stupid."

"That's how you knew what was happening to me. Because of a shadow man."

Detective Brasher's unrelenting stare continued.

"In other words..." She chose her words carefully. "When the case against Tito is turned over to the DA's office, your report will simply say you received an anonymous tip. It's a matter of my word against Tito's and since I was with him against my will, people will believe me, not whatever he says."

"You're a credible victim, Charil. I have little doubt that a jury will believe you."

"My word against his then? No one else will have to testify – or be identified?"

Spearing her with another of his telling stares, Detective Brasher nodded. "We're on the same page, aren't we?"

* * * * *

Where had the day gone? Standing in the police station parking lot, Charil struggled to reconcile the setting sun with her perception of everything that had happened since dawn. Obviously she'd been talking to Detective Brasher a lot longer than she'd thought. Thinking back over what they'd discussed once he'd turned the recorder back on, she admitted he'd done a skilful job of thoroughly talking through her abduction until she half believed she really had spent the whole time in Tito's clutches. She'd constructed a logical timeline and, because she knew southern California so well, had detailed all the territory they'd covered.

After consulting with whoever was interviewing Tito, Detective Brasher had informed her that the man was telling a completely different story, something about her having been kidnapped by some lowlife who'd tried to blackmail Tito into paying ransom to keep her alive. According to Tito, she'd been so traumatized by her brutal captor that he wasn't surprised she couldn't remember how he'd rescued her.

A pack of lies, lies that would sink Tito. As for her lies, well, the police were more than buying them, they were expanding on them. Brasher's report would include that the arresting officers had received a tip from a man who refused to give his name about spotting a woman being transported against her will.

Detective Brasher had offered to take her to a car rental agency and would join her in a minute. Because she'd have to stay in town until she'd talked to the DA's office, her transportation would be paid for by the city. She'd be staying at a motel on the

department's dime, eat under the same conditions, and in the morning, she could go to a clothing store with a voucher for enough to cover the cost of a new outfit.

Those things were necessary because her belongings were at Range's cabin.

Where was Range? Was the detective talking to him right now and bringing him up to date? What was Range thinking, that his assignment couldn't have turned out any better and he could now concentrate on completing the plumbing repairs?

Sunset, night coming. How many nights had she and Range shared? Not enough, not nearly enough for a lifetime of memories.

"Thank you," she muttered to her image of Range. "That's what those calls at the end were about, weren't they? Making plans for my rescue and Tito's ruin."

She longed to close her eyes, longed to open them again and find Range walking toward her. But happy endings only happened in the movies, not for flesh and blood women like herself who've made the mistake of falling in love with shadow men in gray hats. Range had made a life for himself in a world only a few people knew existed. It was where he belonged, where he wanted to be. Alone. Or with shadow women.

The growl of an approaching vehicle ran through her. Her nerves identified it.

Shaking and yet calm, she watched as Range pulled up. The driver's window was down, but he was in shadow. He was staring at her, silent, eyes hidden from her, his energy flowing out to caress her.

"Where have you been?" she asked, although did it matter?

"Listening to you and John."

"There was a bug in the room?"

"Are you surprised?"

"It didn't occur — no, I'm not. What do you think?"

"That you're an intelligent and resourceful woman. You nailed him."

On the verge of asking if he really meant that, she held back. He might have been in charge of everything that had happened between them, but the latest chapter had been between her and Tito. "Lying's easier than I thought it would be. Whatever it takes, I'll see him behind bars."

"And then?"

Shit, hard question. But although she wanted to tell him it was also the wrong one, she couldn't. Planting her elbows on the window ledge, she leaned in. Yes, his ebony eyes were as dark as she remembered them, his shoulders as dependable, his hands as capable. And nothing had changed between his legs. "I can't answer that now. One step at a time. The detective isn't coming out, is he?"

"Not unless you go back in for him."

Today had exhausted her physically and emotionally, and she'd actually believed she was looking forward to a long night in a motel room, but Range's voice and heat had changed that. "I won't. Take me where he was going to."

"Get in."

Even with her legs numb and shaking, she made it around to the passenger's side. When she opened the door, she saw that her belongings were on the seat. He transferred them to the back and watched while she settled in. She wasn't going to touch him now or for the foreseeable future. First she had to get in contact with herself. And maybe he had his hands back on the steering wheel because he'd made the same decision.

"I won't need to go shopping tomorrow, will I?" She indicated her suitcase. "You had it all along."

"Yes."

"And you knew how things were going to play out."

"I hoped they would."

"I believed you," she said without looking at him. "When you told me you were turning me over to Tito, I believed you. Why'd you put me through that?"

"Because your reactions needed to be real."

He'd risked her sanity in order to fool Tito? Bringing that bastard down had meant more to him than her? Than what she felt for him? "Take me to the goddamn motel."

* * * * *

Range was sitting in one of the uncomfortable motel chairs when she came out of the bathroom. She hadn't bothered drying her hair after her shower, and makeup would have to wait until she gave a damn about her appearance. At least the shower had revived her.

As for why she'd let him come in—

Only the light from the entryway illuminated the room, and as long as she didn't look at him, she could think about the things they needed to say, but how could she keep her eyes off that incredible body? Damn her own body for feeling his!

"Sit down, please," he said when she paced to the window. "I want to tell you some things."

Easy, easy, you can do this. "I can hear you just fine from here."

"Please."

That voice, like the beat of hawk wings. Half believing she was floating, she made her way to the hard bed and perched on the side. All right, she was facing him. She hoped he was satisfied because she was anything but.

"Why didn't you trust me?" he asked.

"What? When?"

"When you ran away."

"It wasn't that." Unexpected tears silenced her. "I—oh god, I don't know what I was thinking. I wanted to protect you."

"I can take care of myself. You know that."

Oh yes, did she. "Is this what you want to do, grill me? What was that crap about wanting to tell me some things?"

"It isn't crap. Damn it, I'm trying to learn certain things about you. I believe they're important. There wasn't enough between us to keep you with me?"

No, it wasn't like that! If she knew one thing in this whole insane mess it was that she and her body would never forget him. But sexual attraction was so incredibly dangerous.

"Range, I've been through so much starting with my brother's death. Do you really expect me to have a handle on all my emotions, to know what I feel?" *Is that it or is there something else, something even deeper?*

He hadn't moved so why did she feel touched? Maybe it was in his eyes, maybe because he was reaching out to her in ways that didn't take movement. "No, I don't expect that. Charil, around you I've felt things I've never felt before. Connecting. Caring. I didn't know it was possible."

With his quiet words, she was no longer locked into herself. Answering what she was going to do with the rest of her life didn't matter either. Nothing did except easing the loneliness in his voice. "Of course you didn't." Like him, she was whispering. "You didn't experience love back when it mattered the most."

He shook his head then leaned forward. She hadn't bothered with a bra or panties, and now her minimal clothes dragged against her tingling skin. "I don't want to go there. What's past is past. Charil, when we were back at the cabin, I asked what you were going to do with the rest of your life."

He was too large for this impersonal room and the tension between them too great. "Yes, you did."

"I asked myself the same question. When you took off."

What was it her mother had said about men, that they didn't know how to express themselves? If she was still alive to listen to Range, she'd say he was doing a perfect job of proving her point. But he wasn't the only one who couldn't contain or understand emotions. "You were angry."

"No." He didn't stand so much as what was going on inside him brought him to his feet. Looking at and feeling him, she nearly gave in to the same force. "I was scared for you."

Not concerned that she'd turn him in, not upset because he'd lost his sex partner, not determined to keep the police from storming his cabin. "What did you think was going to happen?"

Now he was the one walking over to the window and looking out at the half full parking lot. "I hate motels. They feel like cages."

How had she gotten to her feet and what insanity was bringing her close to him? "Why were you afraid?"

When he turned and faced her, she truly thought she'd faint. This gray-hat shadow man was the most magnificent male animal she'd ever seen. Sex seeped out of him to hum over her nerve endings. Touching a live electric current had sent less of a jolt through her. Her mouth went numb while another opening suddenly ached. He could make her float, maybe even fly. And if she touched him, she'd shatter.

"I know what men like Tito are capable of. I've seen their cruelty. I'd rather die than have him get his hands on you."

"But you did."

His nod went far beyond a simple gesture. What was she doing so close, nearly touching the most dangerous man she'd ever met? "Because that was the only way I could think of to bring him down."

"You—you could have killed him." Did she really mean that?

Oh god, he touched her, his so-alive hands on her shoulders and his legs so close to hers that his heat stroked her. "I wanted to. Damn, if I could have gotten away with it—but if I did, it would have ruined things between us. We'd never be able to get past that."

Shaken by how much he knew about her, she ran her forefinger over his chin. When had he last shaved? Not today. "You'd become even more of a fugitive than you already are."

"Maybe. Unless the police saw you as a suspect."

"Me?" she blurted, but he was right because she'd never made a secret of how much she loathed Tito. "You didn't slit that bastard's throat to protect me?"

"Yeah."

"But you wanted to because of me."

"That's hardly the only thing I thought of when I woke up to find you gone."

It was too late to try to regain her own space, to pull out of his arms. Besides, that was the last thing she wanted to do.

"The cabin was empty without you. I wanted you back in it, something I never thought I'd want."

His admission was simple, at least on the outside. If she didn't feel as if she might climax just standing here, maybe she would have made light of his confession. In truth if he'd said that just yesterday she might not have responded. But he'd saved her life in ways that went far beyond putting Tito behind bars. He'd helped her end a chapter in her life. Finished. No more reason to avenge what had happened to her family.

Time for courage.

"I didn't know why I ran," she admitted. In a moment she'd rest her head on his shoulder and let his strength become hers, but not until she'd let her heart free. "Not then when I felt as if my brain was going to explode. But I do now. I was fleeing what I felt for you. Range, you weren't the only one who was scared of what was happening between us."

A car with a noisy muffler and even louder radio pulled into the parking lot. Range was right. She too hated being here. Could hardly wait to return to his cabin.

"I'd lost everyone I loved. I-I was afraid I was falling in love with you and I knew – I believed you'd either walk out of my life or Tito would kill you. Anything was better than having my heart broken again." She waited out the pain in her chest. "Only it started bleeding the moment I walked out your door."

He ran his hands over her cheeks, lifted her head so she was looking into his eyes, and then kissed her until she felt the contact throughout her. Moaning, she arched into him. He was waiting for her – at least his hard and promising cock was.

"Walk back through that door, please. With me."

"Yes. Yes. But not tonight, not until I'm done here."

"No, not tonight."

She didn't try to speak when he pulled her top over her head, didn't move when he lowered his head and took her right breast into his mouth.

Then he ran his arm between her legs and arched her back so he could blanket her body with his and she cried out.

He kept her like that, supporting her weight and showing her the depth and breath of vulnerability and trust while she nibbled his hair and laughed.

His cabin. Their cabin.

"The kitchen needs to be lightened," she said. "And color brought in."

"What about winter? Can you take the snow?"

"You have a snowmobile, right?"

"Yeah."

"They have snowmobile races, right?"

"You'll blow away the competition."

"I intend to."

"What colors for the kitchen? Do we do that now or wait until after the remodeling?"

"I don't know!" Pushing herself upright, she locked her arms and then her body around him. "First things first."

"Such as?"

"Such as the queen-sized bed in here."

About the Author

“Of course I’ve time-traveled to the ancient Everglades, infiltrated bondage strongholds, done wilderness search and rescue, and spent a night trapped in a workout gym with Mr. Universe. How can I possibly write about something I haven’t experienced?”

Although I love telling readers that, the truth is much more mundane. In my “day” jobs, I’ve been a commercial pilot, brain surgeon, worked as a white-water river guide, bee keeper, snake charmer, and garbage collector.

And if you buy all that, let me pitch the bridge I have listed on eBay.

Vonna welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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