

# **Jane's Blonde**

## **Dakota Cassidy**

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## Chapter One

"Um, no."

"Yes."

"I saaaaid *no*."

"Why not?"

"It isn't in my color wheel."

"You sound like your sister."

"Well, duh. We're related."

"I like it."

"Good. *You* wear it."

"If I had boobs, I would."

"If you had boobs, I might like your fashion sense more. If you had boobs, you might actually have some fashion sense to speak of."

"If I had boobs, maybe I'd understand why you're so difficult."

"Uh, no. That would take a brain."

"Look, Jane. Why does everything with you have to be so damned hard?"

"Because everything you design is meant for a plastic doll with a waist you could span two fingers around. Her name starts with the letter 'B.' She has perfect blonde hair and a dreamy house. Oh, and a cool Corvette."

"You do have blonde hair and funny, but I remember you being just like one of those plastic dolls."

"I was a beauty queen, you Einstein dork."

"At least Einstein had brains."

"Yeah? Well, you obviously inherited his fashion sense too. Ever see Einstein's hair?"

Sheldon, the lab geek at NSU, ran a hand over his dark unruly mop and shrugged, pushing his glasses up over his nose. "Good hair isn't the key to a life worth living," he offered dryly.

"Well, it might not be the key, but it sure makes it easier to get directions at the gas station."

"Then it's a good thing I don't need directions."

"What you need is a class in fashion design. You make these Lycra suits because they hug and mold every curve on a woman. That gives you something to ogle."

"Well then if I was you, I'd work on my hugging and molding classes just a little harder and the Lycra suit won't be a problem."

Jane Blonde sauntered up to Sheldon and flicked him in the head with a finger. "Listen, you pain in my ass. I'm not any happier about being here than you are about having to whip me up one of these suits pronto, okay? Let's remember *why* I'm here. I'm here to help find my sister and I'm getting kinda pissy with you for holding that up. Cindy told me all about you. So here's the deal. You make the suit. If it has to be a suit that shows every lump in my ass, fine. Just make it in a color I like. Is that too much to ask? What don't you like about the color pink, anyway?"

"What is it about the color pink that old, ex-beauty queens find so fascinating?"

Jane made a circle around her face with a finger. A pink, freshly polished finger. "See this? It's my skin tone and pink works for my skin tone. Pink -- not gray. Got that? And if you call me old again, I'm going to knock your balls up into that scrawny neck of yours."

"Is that how you won all of those hokey pageants?" Jane cocked her head at him in question, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow. "By threatening people?"

"Yeah, wanna know how I did it, Shel? I used the spiked heel of my pumps and if you don't make this right, I'm going to gouge your eyes out with the one I have on right now." She stormed out of the lab toward the doors that were supposed to activate when you waved a hand at them. Instead of opening, they mocked her by not moving an inch.

"Try the wave," Sheldon said snidely from behind her. "You know the one you used to do sitting on the back end of a float that looks like that purple dinosaur?"

Crossing her arms over her chest, she huffed and then raised a hand in an all too familiar beauty queen wave. Magically the door opened with a hushed whir. Narrowing her eyes, Jane headed for Thor Newcastle's office. He was due for an earful of Sheldon's bullshit.

She was absolutely not wearing that ugly, gray Lycra suit, and while Thor was at it, he could commission Sheldon to make her a new lipstick gun. Laffy Taffy pink was in her sister Cindy's color wheel. Not hers. She was more Smokin' Salmon or Whacky Watermelon. And why the hell had Cindy left her gun, anyway? That wasn't like her. She'd had to have been in an awful hurry and some pretty grave danger if she'd left her lipstick behind.

Whatever the reason, something just wasn't right about it.

Swinging around the corner, Jane stopped only to see if he was alone when she looked through the glass window. "Thor? We need to talk."

"So I've heard."

"Jesus, did that whiny snitch Sheldon call and tattletale already? He must have you on speed dial. Sissy."

Thor raised a cynical eyebrow and the corner of his usually solemn mouth lifted a bit. "He did call me. You know how easily he's offended when questioned about his designs."

"Oh, I didn't question the design as much as I did the color. I can't think in gray, Thor, and I need to think if we're going to find Cindy." Jane's voice caught a bit. She *would* find Cindy. No matter what it took.

Thor made a steeple of his hands under his chin, putting his elbows on the desk. His black suit, always immaculate, made an impression even against the dark paneled walls of his office. "That's why I called you out of retirement. No one knows Cindy like you do. If anyone can find her, it's you."

"What about this James? Did we ever find him? He was the last person with her on that Missile Marvin thing, right?" James Bonde was supposedly Cindy's boyfriend. He'd been a newbie when they'd met on an assignment and fallen in... well, into bed, according to Thor. That was the last time Thor claimed to have seen either one of them.

"He's disappeared too. It's baffling all of us. They're both very thorough when it comes to letting us know their whereabouts. They had no need for deep cover. No outstanding missions to accomplish." Thor scratched his white-gray head and then shook it. "This is a very troubling turn of events for NSU. Cindy is one of our highest-ranking agents. Her diplomacy and grace are skills unmatched by any other current agent. I can't tell you how many important social functions she's maneuvered to our advantage on charm alone. She certainly followed in your footsteps, Jane. She worked incredibly hard to prove her worth here. I can tell you, I never believed an ex-beauty queen was of much value until the two of you. I saw your sister work the Sultan of Brunei for that border drop last year. It was like magic in the making," he said with a wistful smile.

Jane laughed in irony. Cindy was indeed very good at working a man into a frenzy. Enough of a frenzy that he'd leak almost anything. But that wasn't all Cindy was good at. She had an IQ to rival Einstein and she knew how to use it. "So we're sure they didn't just run off to bump uglies? I mean, Cindy isn't likely to do that. She never put much before her job, but lust is a powerful thing, Thor."

"I know and I might fall for that if she hadn't left her gun. Cindy never leaves without her gun. Not even to go to that beauty salon she was so fond of."

Yet another truism about Cindy. She might go on a mission without good hair, but she'd never leave her gun. "It was left in the warehouse?"

"Right on the bed." Thor cleared his throat, clearly embarrassed. "That's where I last saw both her and James. In the warehouse where I told them they'd be partners."

She planted her hands on her hips and bit the inside corner of her lip. "Cindy worked alone. Was she pissed about this James or what?"

Thor nodded then smiled. "I'm going to assume she wasn't too, as you say, *pissed*. They were certainly quite fond of one another by mission's end."

"But it wasn't a mission at all was it, Thor?"

His chuckle was hearty. "No. I admit to putting the two of them in the warehouse together for nothing more than to ease the friction between them. James was a new agent and Cindy couldn't seem to let him forget it. The tension between the two was difficult for those around them. As you well know, we must all work toward the greater good and we must achieve that together as a team."

Oh, indeed she knew the motto for No Stone Unturned. Harmony was an integral part of any spy's home base. If James and Cindy weren't cooperating with one another before a potential mission together, Thor would see to it they achieved a modicum of professionalism no matter how he had to go about doing it. You had to be able to count on another agent to have your back when a crisis occurred. "I can just hear Cindy griping," Jane said with a smile at Thor.

"She most certainly did gripe. However, last I was informed she and James had made up..."

"You had someone spying on the dueling spies?" she asked with a laugh.

"Well of course I did. Certainly you don't think I'd have let Cindy chew agent Bonde up into little pieces, do you?"

She threw her head back and cackled. "Is his last name really Bonde?"

Thor winked and smiled. "As sure as your last name is now Blonde, my dear."

Ugh. Like she needed to be reminded of the worst mistake of her life? Marrying Conrad Blonde, heir to a fortune in radial tires, had been the single most lame-assed shit she'd ever done. "Don't remind me!"

"I can't help but remind you of the very reason you're no longer with NSU," he said with sincere regret lacing his tone.

Whatever.

She'd left NSU to run off with her dream man. Thor had warned her in his fatherly way that Conrad wasn't beyond reproach. What he'd forgotten to mention was

Conrad wasn't beyond another chick's bed. Actually, last count had him in five other chicks' beds. She'd failed dismally at marriage and she'd given up a kick ass career at NSU to play Suzy Homemaker to a tire mogul.

Not even the lifetime supply of all weather radial tires she'd won in the divorce would make up for being married to Conrad.

Asshole.

But now that Cindy was missing, she was back -- and it was the only thing that could have brought her back to NSU at this stage of her life. She'd grown fond of the funk she was in since her divorce. Eating bags of Oreo cookies and watching Latin nighttime soap operas had grown on her. It had also grown on her thighs, but whatever.

"So what now, Thor? No leads, no information. Where do I go from here? This is about as cold as it gets."

"I do have one small bit of information. It might turn out to be nothing, but it's all I have right now." Thor handed her a piece of white notebook paper with a number on it.

"And this is?"

"James' mother's number. We think. It was the last number called on Cindy's cell phone."

"Did you try calling her?"

"I did, repeatedly. However, no one ever answers. Yet the listing is for an L. Bonde. And the voicemail is automated."

"Have you staked her home out?"

"That would be the perfect place for you to start. I've booked you a flight to Phoenix. You leave on the redeye tonight."

"I'm on it, Boss," Jane said with more confidence than she felt.

Thor came around his desk and gave her a quick hug. The warmth of it coupled with the smell of his woodsy cologne brought a flood of memories back that Jane wanted left buried. "I want to know where you are every moment, young lady," he



warned with a stern tone, and then he softened a bit. "It's good to have you back, Jane. I can't think of anyone better suited for this mission."

Yeah, a rusty ex-agent, out of the field for five years, was indeed the perfect choice.

Jane's retreating back left Thor in deep thought. His decision wouldn't make her happy, but if he were going to get any sleep at night, it must be done. "Marianne?" he said to his secretary, "send in Agent Estes, please."

Estes' muscular figure appeared at his office door in a matter of moments. He peered around the corner. "Sir?"

"Come in, Estes. We have a rather touchy situation."

"Agent Blonde, I assume?"

"Indeed."

"My mission?"

Thor sighed deeply. He hated to do it. Jane would hate it too, but in the end, she couldn't be left alone after a dry spell of five years. "Tail her. Make sure she doesn't get herself hurt or quite possibly killed."

"I can assure you she won't like this," Estes reminded him in his light Spanish accent.

Thor chuckled. "No, Estes, she definitely won't. However, Agent Blonde is what we call a cold agent. She's been out of the field for five years. Technology alone for NSU has expanded enough for me to worry about her merely having possession of that new lipstick gun Sheldon created. Many things have changed during her sabbatical. Keep a distance. Jane can be difficult when defensive, and she most assuredly will be defensive if she discovers you're hot on her heels."

Estes rocked back and shoved his hands in his dark trousers. "How hard can it be to trail an ex-beauty queen, sir?" he scoffed.

Thor roared with laughter. "Oh, Agent Estes, never underestimate the sheer craftiness of Agent Blonde. She may have spent a good part of her life in heels and a

swimsuit, but she has acute senses. She's anything but the fluff you'd expect. Yet I hesitate to leave her to her own devices due to her long absence from the agency."

"I'll keep a close eye on her."

"Do that."

"Sir?"

"Estes?"

"She doesn't know?"

"She won't have to if she doesn't catch you."

"My destination?"

"Phoenix."

"I'm there."

Estes backed out of Thor's office on silent feet and Thor frowned. Jane would be spitting mad if she knew about Estes. But Thor consoled himself with the fact that this was all in an effort to protect her and to find Cindy.

Picking up the phone once more, he dialed Sheldon. "Sheldon?"

"Yeah?"

"Make that pink Lycra suit happen."

A long, exasperated sigh rumbled in Thor's ear. "Yes, sir."

It was the least he could offer Jane. A pink, Lycra bulletproof suit.

After all, she just couldn't think in gray...

## Chapter Two

Jane exited the airport and tossed an overnight bag in the trunk of the car Thor had waiting for her. Glancing at her watch, she realized it was almost two in the morning.

What better time to check out James' mother's house than in the wee hours when there was less of a risk she'd be spotted.

Popping open the door, she slid into the driver's seat and inhaled. God, Thor was never cheap when it came to a nice luxury car rental. Opening the glove compartment Jane pulled out the note she knew would accompany this mission.

*Be smart, stay savvy. Welcome back, Agent Blonde. Thor.*

She smiled and threw the note up in the air fully expecting it to disintegrate like in the old days. However, it floated to the passenger seat and sat staring back up at her.

*Times they are a changin'*, she thought. Though she had to admit the lack of disintegration was a lot less messy.

Another glance revealed the note had completely disappeared.

Deep.

Sheldon *was* good for something.

Cheerist, how was she ever going to get through this? Sheldon had more new gadgets than she cared to mention. They overwhelmed her, and that wasn't particularly good when she needed to be in top form.

Looking down at her thighs, she grimaced. Top form was about twenty pounds, a failed marriage, and what felt like two hundred years ago.

Clutching the steering wheel, she let her head fall forward to rest on it and took a deep, cleansing breath. Stress would only cause wrinkles, and God knew her anti-aging cream had all it could handle.

Straightening, Jane turned the key in the ignition and put in the coordinates on the GPS system for Mrs. Bonde's house. There was no time for bullshitting if she was going to find Cindy, and James' mother was the only lead she had.

*So quit being such a chicken shit and move your sloppy ass.*

An hour later she did a drive by, scanning the tree-lined street for any sign of life. She parked the car in a nearby lot, then realized just how far away she was from James' mother's. Stripping off her outerwear she ran a hand over the Lycra pink suit Sheldon had begrudgingly handed her just before leaving for the airport.

"See?" She'd held it up and stuck her tongue out at him. "In my color wheel."

"Yeah, but obviously a four is not in your size wheel anymore, huh?" he'd snarked back.

Jane didn't even know why she needed the damned suit. She was in a residential area, for crap's sake. Who was going to try to kill her here in suburbia?

Breaking into a light jog, she headed north toward Mrs. Bonde's on stilted, stiff feet. Her chest wheezed from the effort.

All right, so she didn't run much anymore. Truthfully, the most running she did lately was to the frozen food section of her favorite grocery store to pick up more ice cream. And even then she was holding onto a cart for support.

By the time she reached the back yard of the house, her chest felt like a pressure chamber of air just waiting to explode.

It burned too.

This was pathetic.

Pitiful.

Piss poor.

There'd been a time when she could have run that far while she'd polished her nails, curled her hair and sang the national anthem all at the same flippin' time.

Gasping for air, she tried to walk it off, but then she got a cramp in her calf and hopped as quietly as she could while grinding her teeth. "Fuuuck!" she hissed a whimper into the night air, rubbing at her leg. Stuffing a fist into her mouth, Jane bit it hard to keep from screaming in agony.

Way to go, secret Agent Blonde.

You has-been.

She stumbled to the fence that surrounded Mrs. Bonde's house and clung to it, ducking to stay low and out of sight. Well, if anyone were going to take her out now would be the time to do it. She'd made enough noise to wake a roomful of patients lying comatose in ICU.

Looking down at the pink Lycra suit she figured maybe Sheldon had been right about the color gray. She sure as hell would have blended into the night better in gray. Especially seeing as she was hobbling around, kicking up clouds of dust.

A big, pink, Whacky Watermelon cloud of dust.

Way to lay low, Queen of the Covert.

Regaining her breath she headed for the back perimeter of the property. If whoever had Cindy and James had Mrs. Bonde too, she'd rather find that out sooner instead of later. Wasn't that one of the first things the enemy did? Weaken their foe by dangling a captive family member in their faces?

Then why hadn't they come for her, Cindy's sister?

*Who the hell could find you amidst all of the cookies and ice cream you were wallowing in?*

The house was dark and quiet. Totally appropriate for this time of night in suburbia. Young families with husbands and fathers who rose each morning to earn the bacon slept peacefully in ignorant bliss of her presence. Children with scrubbed faces and dreams of soccer games were tucked safely in their beds. Mothers and wives ticked off grocery lists and household chores in their minds before drifting off to dreams of the mundane.

Jane's sigh was wistful while she stared down into the puddle the garden hose had left. The murky water was filigreed with silver flecks from the light the streetlamp cast, and she blew out a sigh of discontent for her lame lost dreams. Ignoring her weak mental meanderings, she returned her attention to the fence surrounding Mrs. Bonde's.

She hoped she could still scale a fence.

With what little energy she had left in her, she climbed it and hurled herself over, grateful it wasn't chain link.

It only hurt a little when she got caught midway over the wood and ripped off half of her thigh. But really, who couldn't afford to lose some thigh when they bulged the way hers did?

She slid down the inside of the fence and landed promptly on her ass, rolling until she hit the side of the house. Jane lay still for a moment, pressed to the cool brick to assuage the dizziness she experienced from rolling too fast.

Jamming her hand into her Lycra suit, she yanked out her new lipstick gun and popped the top off it. Well, wasn't this a handy-dandy little gadget? You just couldn't beat the ability to knock someone off *and* freshen your lip color all in one gold-encased package.

More than likely, no one was going to shoot at her but it never hurt to be prepared.

A sudden rustle of leaves froze her to the spot and she cocked her head to listen with ready ears.

The wind. *It was only the wind, you moron.*

God, she was as shaky as a newbie. Where were her killer instincts, for Christ sake?

*It's in the carton of vanilla almond fudge swirl...*

Ignoring her paranoia, she shimmied up the side of the house and inched along the far wall to the first available window. And there was that rustle of leaves again. The flash of a dark silhouette brought her attention to the end of the property line where a large oak tree loomed.

Her gut clenched again. Someone was behind that tree and she was going to find out who because if they had her sister, they were gonna throw down. She just hoped it wasn't a throw down that hurt. Broken hips and the need for replacements might ensue if things got too rough.

With stealth she didn't know she still possessed, Jane turned and went around the house to the other side where the tree was closer to the structure. If someone was behind that tree, the element of surprise was on her side and she intended to utilize it. God knew she needed something to work in her favor. It sure wouldn't be her prowess these days.

Peering around the corner, she spotted the culprit. Her rusty, weak senses tingled with heightened awareness. Her gut tightened with apprehension. Her prey lay in wait for her behind the big oak tree.

A tall, dark and looming figure of menace.

And big.

Whoever it was, they were really big.

Well shit.

The motherfucker.

The element of surprise was on her side. If she played this right, she could have them at her Whacky Watermelon gun's disposal in no time flat.

Jane pressed the small button on the side of the lipstick case and flew out from behind the house, hissing the command, "Don't fucking move." She pointed the gun directly at the dark shadow, steadying her shaking hands by clamping one wrist.

A chuckle, thick like honey, sounded from the shadows.

Her once finely trained ears assessed the laughter while her eyes gave the looming silhouette a once-over. A male, probably no more than thirty-five years old. Six-foot-three, maybe four. Caucasian, dark-haired, pushing two hundred twenty pounds.

Terrific. He was the size of a WWF wrestler.

And he was mocking her to boot.

Wait a second. Who the fuck had the gun here?

"Who are you?" she croaked. God, could that have been any more pathetic? Any less commanding?

He laughed again. This time the laughter rang with sheer amusement.

She tightened her grip on the gun and widened her stance. Through clenched teeth, she spat, "I said, who the fuck are you?" Jane decided then that she should have listened to the ad that told her to buy one pair of lenses get one free. She couldn't make out anything but the outline of his hulking figure.

She'd probably always remember the sound his foot made, whizzing in the air just before her gun was knocked from her hands, because it was followed by the sharp sound of the crack of her nail.

Fuuuuuuuck, the bastard had broken her nail.

With a blur of motion, her gun skittered across the ground and the big guy turned her in his arms before he knocked her to the ground, his chest pressed against her back. His weight was heavy, thick with bulk and grinding into her spine. His head hung by her shoulder, his breath raspy in her ear.

Jane grabbed his hair, yanking his head far enough down to give it a hard thump on the ground, successfully causing enough of a reaction to give her time to roll from under him and scurry to her feet.

Until he tackled her again, that is, throwing her to the ground and forcing a hard "oomph" to escape from her lungs.

A million reactions flew through her mind. She just didn't know how to utilize them anymore. She was thirty-five, for Christ's sake. Well on her way to brittle bone disease and memory loss. What had once been second nature now was a jumble of information that flitted through her head at warp speed.

He had her pinned to the ground, his arm directly under her chin, his elbow pressed against her windpipe.

Fucker.



There'd been a time when she would have thrust her body upward, knocking him off of her, and then she'd clock the shit out of him.

*I think that time has passed, Samurai...*

"Agent Blonde."

The cool way he addressed her held a hint of recognition and his accent was very familiar.

And she'd answer him if she could breathe. It was just better to play dead.

"Agent Blonde, I'd recommend you don't try the dead technique."

Hookay. No dead. Fighting to speak, she lifted her chin, seeking more air. "Who the fu -- ck are y -- ou?" The question rattled and cracked on its way out.

"I'm hurt." He eased the pressure of his arm against her neck a bit.

"What?" she rasped, her lungs begging for air.

"I said I'm hurt, Agent Blonde, that you could so quickly forget." Again he eased the pressure against her throat a bit more.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up and her eyes narrowed. She tried pushing her chin down, but he held it up with his forearm. A warm, open-mouthed kiss with a momentary press of his tongue landed on the column of her throat. It held a hint of the familiar. It also sent a shiver to her now tightly beaded nipples.

Well then.

Ahem.

Jane struggled against the muscled bulk on top of her, finally catching enough breath to speak clearly. "Identify yourself."

A longwinded sigh preceded the response, "Agent Alejandro Estes. Ditched lover of ex, aging beauty queen and a now very out of the spy loop Agent Blonde. A lone agent left battered and emotionally bereft after you married the Michelin Man."

Alejandro?

Alejandro Estes?

Oh no, no, no.

Oh, fuck no.

## Chapter Three

"Get off me, Agent Estes. Now."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"But I like it on top."

"You like it anywhere."

"Apparently so do you."

"Estes?"

"Yes, *cara*?"

"Get off me."

"Not until you promise you won't misbehave and you'll mind your manners."

"Listen, Julio Iglesias, get off of me now."

"Julio is from Madrid. I am Brazilian. Big difference, Ms. Creamed Corn."

He'd slid down the length of her body to look her in the eye, grabbing her hands in his large one to keep her in check. He narrowed his eyes, black as coal, to peruse her, leaving her with the urge to squirm.

However, if she backed down now Alejandro would take it as a sign of submission, and she'd already flubbed this big-time. "Why are you here?"

"Why do you think I'm here?"

"To piss me off?"

"Beats the alternative."

"I guess you didn't just happen to be passing through Phoenix?"

"I like Phoenix. It's warm."

"I'm going to ask you this one last time. Why are you here, Estes?"

"I came to see the Grand Canyon?"

"Then your sense of direction sucks. It's near Flagstaff."

"Well, there must be something to see in Phoenix."

"You came to see me, Estes. What I want to know is why? I thought you were assigned in London."

"I was. I'm not anymore. It's cold there. I'm a hot-blooded Brazilian. We don't like to be cold, but I'm flattered you've kept track of me." Alejandro had relaxed against her some and his grip on her hands loosened.

"Don't be too flattered. I didn't keep track of you. Iggy in forensics told me quite by accident."

His dark face frowned and his black eyes narrowed. "So how have you been, Jane? How's divorce from Michelin Man treating you? I see you didn't let it stop your love of vanilla almond swirl."

That he remembered her favorite ice cream pissed her off and gave her pause at the same time. "Fuck off, Estes." She jutted her chin up at him when she spat the words. His chest pressed against her wasn't just growing uncomfortable. It was bringing with it some residual shit she'd rather not address.

His chuckle lilted, mocking her on the night air. "Well, it's true. Did you see *you* run down that road and climb over that fence? I did. You were winded, Agent Blonde. More than that, you jumped over that fence like a bumbling cat burglar, but it's okay. I like meat on the bones of my woman."

Yeah, yeah. She didn't need Estes to tell her she was out of shape. "If you weren't following me like some lovesick puppy, you wouldn't have had to bear witness to my horrible display of out of shape spy and I'm not your woman."

"Oh, Jane. Ever the defensive one."

Clenching her jaw, Jane attempted control and, above all, professionalism. "Estes, I'm going to tell you one last time to get off me and then I'm going to open up a can of whoop ass on you. Now get off!" she yelled into his face.

"No."

"I said get off!"

"You said you were only going to say it one more time," he teased.

With the minimal energy she had left, Jane thrust upward, slamming into his chest with all her strength. His shuddering exhale of air gave her great satisfaction when she rolled out from under him and jumped to her feet.

Then tripped on a branch.

Estes was on her like fried on chicken, pushing her up against the oak tree and pinning her to it.

Her head flung back with the impact, but he cushioned her blow with his hand. His body framed hers while he placed a strong leg between her thighs, wedging it in place. "Now, Jane. Surely you know you can't beat me."

Oh, she knew it. In fact, Estes was the only one she'd never been able to best. Not in anything. He had the strength of a thousand men and he moved like the wind. That was when she'd decided the age-old adage of "if you couldn't beat them" applied to her relationship with him. So she'd joined him. Had she ever. Not only had she joined him, she'd joined *with* him. "I don't need to beat you. I need you to leave me alone so I can do what I need to do. Now go away."

"No."

Rather than fight him, she let her hands fall to her sides and her body relax. "Fine, I'll tell you what. You stay right here. I have shit to do. If being attached to my ass is what thrills you, I'll live with it."

"There's nothing here, at least not until tomorrow."

"How do you know what I'm looking for?"

"I just do."

"Then give me the run down," she ordered impatiently. Whatever Estes was doing here, she was almost grateful she didn't have to play *Mission: Impossible* to get the info he already had. Her back hurt and she wanted to go to her hotel room and soak in a nice, hot tub.

"This isn't James' mother's house. It's his brother's. He's away on business and won't be back until tomorrow. The L stands for Lawrence. Larry, as he encourages his

friends to call him. He's married, has two children and a sweet, red BMW. His family is visiting his mother-in-law's in Tucson. He likes football, poker and the occasional beer. Pizza with pepperoni, no anchovies. Chips plain, not ruffled."

With a huff Jane stared into the face that had brought her so much grief some years ago. "And you came about this info how?"

Shrugging his wide shoulders he placed a less antagonistic hand on her waist and caressed the swell of her hip. "I'm good at what I do, Jane. You know that."

Yes, yes, yes. She knew that. She knew lots of things about Estes. Lots of things she'd like to forget. Like the span of his chest rubbing against hers for instance. "Bully for you. You win the spy trophy for most information gathered in a stakeout. Now go away. I'm going to go to my hotel and try to forget I ever ran into you. Thanks for the heads up."

"Cool. I'll follow. Where to? Motel Six?"

"Um no. No, you won't. And are you crazy? Would *I* stay in a Motel Six?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, I will. And do they have a Beverly Hills Wilshire in Phoenix?"

The warmth he was evoking in her infused her veins, spreading to her loins with rapid fire. She needed to get away from Agent Estes and fast. He did things to her. Crazy things. Things she had chosen to file away in her Pandora's Box of never mention again.

Estes' lips hovered above hers, just inches from her mouth. Full and lickable. God, those lips. No one had lips like Estes did. She licked her lips from nervousness and he nuzzled her cheek. His silken, black hair brushed against her skin, sending signals to her nether regions that screamed warnings like a siren in her head.

On a gulp, she put her hands against his chest, letting them linger for a moment before pushing off and moving aside. "You gonna tell me why you're here?"

"Nope."

"Fine. Then I'm going to the hotel to shower and sleep. Why don't you go do that thing you did seven years ago and disappear?" Jane heard the sour note in her voice, but keeping it from exploding from her mouth and seeping into her tone was next to

impossible. Yeah, she was holding a grudge, and she'd be fucked and feathered if she'd let go now. It kept her warm at night.

"I can follow you. I'm parked not far from you."

"Why are you following me, Estes?"

"I liked Cindy too, Jane. I would never want to see her hurt. Plus, she's a fellow agent and I'm all in if a fellow agent is in danger."

Cindy and Estes had gotten along just fine, that much was true. It was her and Estes who'd gotten on like a house on fire.

Shit.

"I don't need your help."

"Of course you don't, Miss America. You can take care of yourself. I heard you long ago in reference to your 'I'm a big girl' act. I'm here for the best interests of NSU. Cindy is a valued agent and I like her. I like James too. I want to know where they are as much as you do. I'm just praying the worst hasn't happened."

Pivoting on her heel Jane headed for the fence, ignoring Estes. He was interfering, but if she were honest it probably wasn't a bad idea. His skills were in peak condition while hers had lain in a closet dormant for five years while she'd been eye candy to the tire king.

Hoisting herself up, she pulled herself to the top of the fence. Peeking over, she found Estes smiling up at her from down below.

"The gate is just over to the left of the house," he remarked with dry sarcasm. "Need help getting over?"

She'd be dipped in deer shit before she'd ask for help. "Move out of the way." A lunge of her legs left her dropping to the ground below. Somehow she successfully managed to land on both feet. With a smug smile at Estes, she began to jog toward her car.

He caught up in no time, pacing himself with her and never missing a breath, his black suit unwrinkled from their scuffle. Jane, on the other hand, looked like she'd

rolled around in a briar patch. She had grass stuck to her Lycra suit and leaves in her hair.

"I don't need your help to find Cindy, and believe me when I tell you Thor will hear about this." She just wanted that out in the open so he wouldn't go thinking she needed his help. She didn't. Well, okay, she might. The problem was she didn't want help. Specifically his.

"I don't doubt that for a minute, Jane, and Thor was just looking out for you. You are what we call a cold agent." His words held an underlying snicker.

He was laughing at her. The washed up, ex-agent gone soft from civilian life.

"Sure you do, Estes. You think everyone needs a hero. You think I'm dried up just like the rest of NSU does. But let me make one thing clear to you, and you can pass this on to Thor. Cindy is my priority now. If it means I have to call upon my long-buried skills to locate her, I'll dig them up. I got married. I didn't acquire amnesia. I remember what being an agent is all about."

Reaching the car, she clung to the door handle and tried to hide her desperate attempts to gasp for air. Oh and look, there was that cramp again, creeping its way up her calf, chomping on her muscles. Jane ground her foot into the pavement, hoping to ease the gnawing ache.

Estes stopped beside her and caught the grimace on her face. "Need a rub?"

"Like I need a hole in my head."

"You just might get one of those if you continue to be so careless."

"Get in your car, Estes, and get off my back."

"My pleasure."

He winked at her then backed away and jogged to his dark sedan parked just a few cars away.

God, she hoped the hotel offered a massage tomorrow morning. She had an all over body ache.

To add to that, she had a headache too.

Estes brought back memories of a time that had long since passed. A time when her life had been on track and she'd been very clear on where she was going.

Until Estes and closed-mouthed mysteries, that was.

What she'd taught herself to set aside in her pile of the never to be resolved had rudely been awakened. Now she had to sift through that pile and it made her want to seek the answers she had almost been able to live without.

Why had Estes always been so secretive?

Why had Estes opted to let her go instead of fighting to keep her from Conrad?

Why did she give a rat's ass anymore?



## Chapter Four

Alejandro ran a hand over his stubble-roughened jaw and let his arms rest on his thighs while he considered this predicament.

He'd let Jane catch him. He'd ignored Thor's command to stay a few steps behind her and hide in plain sight.

Alejandro Estes wanted to be caught by Jane Blonde. No one nabbed him unless he allowed it.

No one.

He didn't care if there would be repercussions. She was probably on the phone right now to Thor, complaining about his interference.

He didn't give a fuck about that either.

He only cared that Jane was back in the saddle again and her seat was a slippery slope of outdated techniques. She needed someone to watch out for her. He was the man to do it.

The *only* man to do it.

He didn't care that she resented his presence. Alejandro just wanted to be in *her* presence. As pathetic as that sounded, it was the truth. He'd let her go for her own good.

Now he wanted her back.

*But you can't have her back without revealing your awful secrets...*

No, but he could stay as close to her as possible while he hid them.

He could hide them. He'd done it for this long. Why did that have to change?

*Because if you don't share the truth, you can't possibly consider keeping Jane -- or anyone, for that matter. It's not exactly something you can hide, butthead.*

The familiar need for Jane settled in his cock with a burning ache. Much the way it always did when he took his box of Jane memories out and allowed them to wreak their usual havoc. No one did to him what Jane did to him.

No one did to her what he did to her either. Alejandro knew that for a fact. She couldn't hide that. Not from him, anyway. That was impossible.

Her green gaze had haunted him for seven years. The sway of her hips when she walked. The smile that was one part girl next door, two parts vixen. Her long, blonde hair, soft and silky against his skin when they fucked and she lay her head on his chest. Or wrapped in his fist when he plunged into her tight channel.

So what to do about a woman he should forget for her own safety yet couldn't be forgotten no matter how many years passed between them?

The only answer he had was one that would leave Jane further from him than she was now.

However, it would be in disgust that she left this time. Not anger. He couldn't bear that. He could live with her supposed indifference and shunning him because of it. But he could never live with her disgust for what he was.

What he would always be.

For an eternity...

\* \* \*

Bathed and clean, Jane decided to pay a visit to Alejandro. They might as well air their differences now. They didn't need the murky waters of what had once been lingering between them.

She refused to ask the questions that had haunted her for five years now. Seven if you counted the two years Estes had up and disappeared like she'd never existed.

In that time she'd married a man she thought would bring her the family she'd always wanted.

She'd ended up with tires and hush money.

Her stomach didn't form the knot she'd expected it to upon facing Alejandro's door. Somewhere between the sweet smell of expensive shower gel and the rich bubble

of champagne, her nerve had returned. Her moxy. The old Jane was resurfacing in increments, shedding the skin of her failed marriage to emerge and once again become what she'd been for so long when her beauty queen days had ended.

A spy.

Cold, impersonal, uninvolved.

That she and Estes had banged to the high heavens at one time and she'd fully expected a proposal for a life together was now moot.

Unlike Cindy, Jane was much better at compartmentalizing. She could remain detached if need be.

Or maybe just sort of detached, she thought when Alejandro opened the door in nothing but his boxer-briefs.

Would he ever not be edible?

Pushing her way past him, she scoped the room out. No sunken tub. Bummer. "Guess you got the shitty end of the hotel room stick, huh?"

He crossed the room in a flash of bare chest and blue boxers. "I'm not quite the princess you are, Agent Blonde," he quipped. "Thor knows how to butter his bread." His hard jaw set on his chiseled face. A face that didn't look any older than it had seven years ago.

God really was a sexist.

Alejandro's olive skin had been an endless source of fascination for her years ago. It gleamed in dark, rich hues, yet had an underlying milky tone to it. He was as beautiful as he'd always been. Thickly muscled and still buffed to within an inch of his life.

His presence loomed over her and did things to her body that she wasn't being terribly successful at detaching herself from. It called to her. A strange, eerie song, a lullaby of hot lust that she'd thought would have long since been replaced by her anger toward him.

Jane's gaze scanned his chest and the trail of midnight black hair that ended where the waistband of his underwear began. Her fingers twitched for wanting to run

them through the crispness of it. He was all rough planes and rigid skin pulled taut by the bulk of muscle that lay beneath it. Alejandro's thighs bulged, clenching like he was tense, and she had to wonder if this was just as difficult for him. Why it would be, she couldn't grasp. He'd dumped her. In Rome of all places. If he was uncomfortable then he should have never shown up on *her* mission.

The cologne he wore wafted under her nose. It was still the same. Spicy, earthy, and doing the very things it had always done to her. Jane watched the rapid rise and fall of his chest and marveled at its sleekness, wondering why his whole body screamed discomfort and strain. He was rigid with it. It emanated from him in waves she could almost smell. His nipples tightened to hard buds and Jane moved a step closer, placing a hand that had no inhibition on his pec.

She decided she wanted him. Just like that. She had no control over it. She never had and she'd never been afraid to take what she wanted. She wanted Alejandro.

Like now.

Like always.

Bending her head, she let her tongue glide over the flat disc of his nipple, savoring the texture of it, the taste of it on her tongue. His hum of approval was evident not only in his moan but, upon looking down, from the prominent bulge in his underwear.

She grasped his cock, and ran her forefinger and thumb around its circumference. Pulling at his boxers, Jane let them fall to the floor and followed her hands with her mouth. His shaft, long and thick, never failed to make her mouth water with the overwhelming desire to taste him. Bathe him with her lips and tongue.

His breathing grew edgy, choppy, when she positioned herself between his thighs and wrapped her arms around them, encircling each one and digging her fingers into the solid wall of muscle. The purple head of his cock was swollen with pulsing desire, the tiny slit at the top already displaying a drop of pre-come.

She enveloped his sleek staff, taking as much as she could of him in her mouth and clamping her lips around him in a tight circle. She let her saliva moisten her path,

wetting his hot skin with long licks and pulls. Cupping his hard ass, she sank her fingers into the firm globes, kneading them. Pushing him into her mouth with hard thrusts forward, creating a slippery suction carnal to her ears.

Roaming over the head of his cock, Jane sipped at the thick drop of seed it emitted, laving it with her tongue.

Estes stiffened and jammed his hands into her hair, making a fist around the long strands and plunging into her mouth with forceful thrusts.

She took all of him, thick and silky hot, relishing the groans that escaped his lips in husky murmurs.

He rocked against her when she cupped his balls with gentle fingers, rolling the full sacs heavy with come. They tightened in her hands, drawing up against his body. His pumps became desperate jabs until he pulled her mouth from him and hauled her up against his chest. His eyes penetrated hers while he held her against him, her feet just grazing the carpet. Dark and seductive, Alejandro drank her in. Searing her with questions she chose to ignore.

Instead, she wrapped her legs around his waist and touched his mouth with hers for the first time in many years. Placing her lips over his, she lingered for a moment. His lips were cool, full and tasted like Scotch. She closed her eyes in rapture.

The contact was just as electric as it had been all those years ago.

It was still just as rich in texture, taste, smell.

It still exploded with a frisson of heat that sizzled straight to her cunt.

Jane shoved her hands in his thick hair and drove her tongue back against his, savoring the rasp of moist fire. She ground into his hips, letting the slip of a dress she had on ride up until the lower half of her body was exposed.

He jammed his hands into her lacy underwear, cupping her ass and moving to find the nearest surface for them to rest on. Swinging around, he sat in the hard chair by the window, planting her firmly in his lap. He pressed the heel of his hand over her pussy, now wet and needy.

Her clit ached and she rocked back and forth over his finger. Letting her head fall back on her shoulders, she took deep breaths to control the pending explosion that raced through her.

Pulling her dress over her head, Alejandro cupped a breast, tweaking her nipple and making it tighten with greed. He bent his head to sip at it, and Jane found herself looking down at the stark contrast they made.

His dark head against her lighter skin made her pulse jump with the visual decadence.

God, she'd missed him.

His cock teased her, rubbing against her panties and making her squirm.

Jane lifted the corner of them to push them aside and allow him access. On tippy toe, she positioned herself above his cock and drove downward. Mindless of taking her time, she thrust hard. The stretch of her muscles, the divine ache of being filled with Alejandro once again, overwhelmed her.

Their mingled hiss was rough to her ears and the growing need for release took over everything else. Jane rode him hard, lifting, driving down on his cock and meeting his upward strokes with a whimper.

Her chest was tight, filled with an anxious frenzy of emotions. Clinging to his shoulders, Jane dug her fingers into them, clutching the rippled muscles for support. His hands gripped her hips, guiding her in thrust after thrust until she heard his clenched whisper, "I can't hold on anymore, Jane."

And neither could she.

She came in bright, flashing colors and dizzying heights that only Alejandro took her to. The rush of her juices bathed them both, leaving his cock slick with her possession.

His final plunge brought with it his feral growl, low, grating, as his cock jerked within her with a violent spasm before he collapsed against her.

She held him like that. Their hoarse breathing chimed in her ears until they both relaxed and she realized what she'd just done.

She'd ignored all of the warning signals that told her to never get involved with Alejandro again -- not after the way he'd left her in Rome -- and let her loins take control.

Yet she couldn't summon regret.

He was, after all, the best damned fuck she'd ever had.

If she could just keep that kind of *c'est la vie* attitude, she'd be all good.

## Chapter Five

"You ready?" she asked with clipped words.

"After you." Estes swept his dark, suit clad arm outward, allowing her to pass him on Larry Bonde's front porch. His eyes were hidden behind his sunglasses and Jane couldn't search them to see any signs of last night.

Larry's car was back in the driveway of his neatly maintained house and it was indeed a red BMW.

Tugging the front of her tailored suit jacket down, she rapped on the door.

A man with a friendly face, round and welcoming, opened the door and Jane had to wonder if James looked anything like his brother.

"Mr. Bonde?" Jane inquired.

"That's me." He smiled down at her.

"I'm Jane Blonde and this is Alejandro Estes. We're friends of your brother, James. We have a few questions for you, if you don't mind."

His smile faded into a small frown, then returned to settle placidly on his lips. "From NSU?"

Estes and Jane gave each other a quick, cautionary glance. NSU was one of the best kept secrets. In fact, it was probably better kept than the recipe for the Colonel's original chicken. "NSU?" Estes asked, keeping his voice even.

Larry slapped him on his broad back. "Yeah, NSU. I know all about the secret agent men. C'mon in. Can I get you two coffee? You look like you could use it," he said pleasantly, reminding Jane that last night had lasted into the wee hours of the morning and she'd probably need more wrinkle cream before the day was through. As always, Estes looked fresh as a fucking daisy and this morning, that wasn't sitting well with her.



Estes nodded to Larry and followed him into his inviting house, taking a seat on the wide, puffy blue couch.

She sat as far away as possible on the ottoman to the cushy loveseat, scanning the silent house with a cursory glance. If someone was holding Larry hostage, there weren't any signs of it.

"What do you know about NSU, Mr. Bonde?"

"Oh, call me Larry. James wouldn't want his fellow colleagues to be so formal."

They exchanged brief glances again. James had only broken like the cardinal rule throughout agent-ville. Never give up your cover. Not even to family. Thor would shit a thousand Yorkshire puddings if he knew. What was going on?

Larry carried out a tray with mugs of steaming coffee and placed it on the table. "I know about NSU because James told me about NSU. It's his job. We talk about our jobs sometimes because we're family and all. Family does stuff like that. It's no big deal. Why would you care that I know he cleans some super spy toilets at NSU headquarters? He's a janitor, not a lethal weapon."

Both Jane and Estes took shallow breaths and gulped their coffee.

"Are you part of the janitorial staff too?" Larry asked with such apparent innocence Jane almost spewed her coffee on his nice blue plaid chair.

"Yeah, she's head spitball cleaner," Estes joked.

"Have you heard from your brother lately, Larry?" Jane questioned, turning her back to Estes.

"Come to think of it, no, I haven't. In fact, he didn't even call me on my birthday. What a little shit, huh?"

"How long has it been since you last heard from him?"

Larry looked at her and sat back in his chair. His brown eyes, crisp and clear, became clouded with worry. "Has something happened to James? Look, now you have me worried. Who sends out a search party for a *janitor*?"

"No one at NSU has heard from James in over a month, Larry. Have you?" Jane pressed, sipping her coffee and relishing the rich flavor even under dire circumstances.

"I heard from him about, well, about a month ago. Yeah, that had to be it because the Packers were playing the Steelers and I cracked on him about betting on a losing team. Except I was the one who ended up losing a bunch of cash."

"Did he say where he was calling from?"

"Vegas. He was in Vegas on vacation he said. Having the time of his life with some woman he'd met and wanted to introduce to us. James loves Vegas."

That had to have been the call that was logged on Cindy's cell phone. What were they doing in Vegas?

"Did he have a favorite hotel he frequented in Vegas?" Estes asked.

"He loves the Stratosphere. He said everyone knows him there. Isn't that the one with the roller coaster on top of it?"

"How often would you say James goes to Vegas?"

"Look, what's going on and who are you people?" Larry asked again, shifting in his chair with visible discomfort.

"I'm a co-worker of James' and so is Jane. We thought this deserved some more investigation because James has always been a reliable part of the -- the janitorial team at NSU. We decided to take it upon ourselves to look into this, on our own vacation time, I might add. We like James." Estes' concerned ploy had good delivery. Larry's face immediately held less suspicion now.

Larry ran a hand over his balding head and took a deep breath. "That's really nice of the two of you. I can't tell you anything else, and now I think I'm going to call the police because I'm worried. Can't they put out an APB on him? Although it's not unusual for James to have long periods where we don't hear from him, but a month is a long time for a janitor in the way of vacation time." Larry appeared indecisive suddenly. He certainly didn't look as if he were answering their questions under duress or that he was being held by some invisible, threatening force.

"Of course you can call the police, Larry," Jane assured him in her most diplomatic tone.

Estes gave her a sharp glance, his eyes narrowing.

Surely he knew Thor would take care of any call Larry made to the police. Hookay, this was an official dead end. Time to blow.

Jane rose and extended her hand, wasting no time in cutting the Q and A short. "I'm sure this is all some misunderstanding, Larry. Maybe James just decided he wanted a break. We didn't mean to worry you."

Larry popped up from his chair and blocked Jane from leaving. "You can't leave now," he said, clearly agitated. "You come here and get me all worked up about James going missing and then you're just going to leave? What kind of friends are you?"

Estes put his hand on Larry's shoulder. The subtle touch seemed to soothe, rather than anger Larry. Larry's body instantly relaxed. "It will be fine, Larry. We were just trying to be good friends. Relax. Have your coffee and if you hear from James, just call me on my cell phone. I'll leave my card on the table."

Larry nodded complacently, almost lethargic in reaction and said, "Okay. I will. Thanks for stopping by." He stepped out of Jane's way and gave her a placid smile before going back to his kitchen. His body language had changed dramatically. He was no longer jittery, but calm and serene.

Of course, she could sympathize with Larry. All Estes had to do was brush her skin by mistake and she was tearing off her clothes, asking where and when.

She gave Estes a questioning look, but he shrugged, threw his card on the coffee table and smiled, leading her out of the quaint house.

"So, we're back to square one," she commented while getting in the car.

"No, we're at the Stratosphere."

"I felt more like a cop in there than I did a spy."

"You acted like one too."

Jane opted to ignore his crack on her rusty interrogation skills. "It's not like he's a terrorist. We didn't have to tie him up and do the Chinese water torture thing."

"You told him to call the police, Jane."

"Don't you suppose it would have looked suspicious if I hadn't? You did tell him we were James' janitor friends. That's on you, Mr. Grimm."

"Forget it. You packed?"

"Yes. Everything is in the trunk."

"I should have known that's why the back of the car looked a little ass heavy. You sure you have all of your tiaras?"

"Fuck you, Estes," she growled, too tired to argue with him.

"Affirmative, Agent Blonde," he quipped with sarcasm.

Jane averted her eyes to the road ahead of them, ignoring his jab at her.

She'd better find James and Cindy soon, or she'd end up killing Estes.

The way she was feeling right now, that would be a sweet jackpot.

\* \* \*

Larry Bonde watched Jane and Estes drive off then picked up the supposedly untraceable cell phone and placed the call to the number he'd been given. He shook his head and tried to clear the odd cobwebs that seemed to have woven a web on his fuzzy brain. The other end of the line picked up on the third ring. "They're on their way, and I hafta say I should get an Academy award for that performance, you assholes."

"They?"

"Yeah, there were two of them. Jane and some Estes guy. Boy, he's a serious one, huh?"

"Interesting."

"So I've done my part in this crazy scheme. Now send me my money."

"I'll wire it today."

Larry hung up and smiled. Swirling his coffee around in his cup with satisfaction, he smiled again, happy with this turn of events.

## Chapter Six

Jane fluffed her fake hair and took one last glance at the full-length mirror before she left to go with Estes to begin questioning the staff at the Stratosphere.

Their cover?

They were going in as a newly married couple for cover and just the mere thought of it made Jane's stomach knot up.

It was bad enough that she'd had pangs of suburbia since they'd left the quiet neighborhood where Larry lived, but to pretend that she and Estes were doing just what she'd thought would happen in their long-lost relationship was eating at her tonight.

She adjusted her brown wig and rolled her eyes.

Those days were over. Estes had left her in Rome without a word and never looked back. When he'd found out about her pending nuptials to Conrad, he hadn't said a word against it.

So fuck Estes.

Oh, that's right, she'd just done that.

The memory of his body locked with hers last night made her breathing shaky and her tired legs feel like melting butter. Revenge, in all its sweet morsels, wasn't always so sweet the day after. Jane had wanted Estes to feel just a pang of what she'd felt when he'd rejected her, so she'd straightened her clothes and sauntered out of his hotel room like he was the one-night stand she'd once felt like.

When they saw each other again at Larry Bonde's house and on the flight to Vegas, neither of them had spoken a word about what had happened. Yet, it was there. It crackled between them in an almost visible current.

It was just as well. Her callous approach to their lovemaking wasn't an easy cover to maintain. For all of her supposed talent in the area of detachment, Estes was the one man who could knock over her carefully constructed fortress of defense.

Thor had booked them a room together because of their cover, and if they had to spend more than a day or so in Vegas, Jane wasn't sure she was going to survive the close contact.

Estes had gone off to scope out the casinos downstairs, giving Jane some time to shower and dress. It would never be enough time to sort out her skewed emotions.

The knock on her door made her straighten her spine and give one last look to her tight, red dress before answering. Thor had been kind enough to have clothes delivered for them and contrite enough to make them good designer labels.

That Thor wasn't confident about her skills as an agent should have made her very angry, but instead it just made her more determined to prove she wasn't as washed up as he thought.

With the desire to step up to the plate burning her gut, she released the chain on the hotel room door and found Estes dressed in a brightly colored suit and wearing, of all things, a pinky ring. It flashed under the hall lighting with a prism of color.

"Yo, yo, yo," Estes mocked a New York accent. "Whassup?"

"God, are we from New York? Tell me now so I can get this right."

"I'm wearing a pinky ring. I feel very Mafioso so I went with the vibe." He held out his arm and offered it to her.

Jane latched onto it and sighed. "Brooklyn. Let's go Brooklyn. Married yesterday, dated and engaged two years total. James is a good friend of ours who highly recommends the Stratosphere. And stop walking so fast, I have on three-inch heels."

"I've got a list of the regular staff from Thor. Looks like James was particularly fond of the blackjack tables."

"Blackjack it is." She hit the elevator button and waited, leaning as far away from him as she could. His rock hard body next to hers made her feel dizzy and the whole newly married couple cover was too close to home.

Estes guided her into the elevator, letting his hand rest at her waist.

"We're in the elevator. No one else is with us. Get off me," she huffed irritably, avoiding his coal black eyes.

Leaning into her he whispered, "That's not what you were saying last night, Agent Blonde." His Brazilian accent, light to begin with, thickened with suggestion.

*Ping!* The elevator door popped open before she had the chance to snark back at him. They made their way into the huge lobby and followed the sounds of the hum of the crowd and the clang of the slot machines.

Estes nodded toward the center tables, his hair sleek and black under the lights. He had it pulled back in a slick ponytail. Even in his ridiculous outfit, he made her mouth water.

Jane followed him, clinging to his hand, and they sat at a table that appeared quieter than the rest.

"You in?" the blackjack dealer asked.

"Deal," Estes said, throwing a stack of chips on the table.

"Oh, pookie! I'm so excited," Jane cooed at Estes, peering over his broad shoulder and resting her head on it.

Estes winked at the dealer with a cocky grin and said, "Yeah? I like 'em excited. It's the only way ta have a broad."

The dealer smiled his agreement and dealt the cards to Estes.

"Ya know, punkin', James was right. This place is awwwwesome."

"Dat James knows his shit. Hey, you know a James? He sent us here. Says youse guys are da best hotel in town."

"James?" the dealer cocked his head.

"Yeah. James Bonde. Tall guy, like maybe over six feet. Brown hair. He's a real card, ya know?"

The dealer nodded his head. "Ahhh, yes. I know Mr. Bonde well. He was just here two nights ago."

Jackpot. Twenty-one. Royal flush.

Her insides shifted. At least she knew James was alive and that gave her hope for Cindy's well-being.

Estes threw the dealer a look of surprise. "No shit? Ya mean we missed him by two days. Shit, I woulda liked ta see him. Can ya believe we missed him by two days, cookie?" he asked in her direction.

"I haven't seen him since him and his lovely lady friend popped in for a friendly round of blackjack."

Lady friend?

"Lady friend? James's got a squeeze? I never thought I'd see dat happen. He was a lady killer, dat James."

"He does," the dealer smiled. "I can't remember her name, but they were pretty wrapped up in each other. She was a looker."

Cindy. Oh, God, Cindy was alive. Jane hid the deep breath she longed to visibly exhale.

"So James got caught? Just like me. This here's my wife. We was just married yesterday." Estes pulled her closer and playfully slapped her ass. Giving her a sly look, daring her to blow their cover.

The dealer snickered. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." She sucked in her cheeks and tugged on Estes' ponytail, yanking hard enough to let him know who was in charge.

"Hit me," he said to the dealer.

The dealer flipped another card and waited while Estes grunted at the results.

Estes held his cards up and shook his head. "Blackjack just ain't fer me. What's say you and me go make some noise in dat honeymoon suite?"

She did her best girly giggle and waved to the dealer while Estes swept her away. "Well, that was easy enough," she commented.

"Yes it was, pookie."

"So they were here two days ago and that had to have been Cindy he was with. Now what?"



"Now, I think we're done. It's obvious that they aren't in any danger unless it's the danger of losing money. It sounds to me like they were having a great time. Why Cindy didn't call you and tell you that, I have no answer for."

So it was over and it was over just as she was getting warmed up. Jane reluctantly followed Estes out of the casino and back to the elevators. She was deflated. It was indeed obvious that Cindy and James hadn't come to any harm, and that meant upon their report to Thor he would probably instruct them to end the mission.

She was relieved as all hell that Cindy was all right, and when she finally heard from her, she was going to kick her Miss Universe ass for not calling her, but it meant that her small stint as a returning agent was done.

It also meant that she and Estes could part once more.

Thank God for a bucket of ice cream and nighttime soap operas.

\* \* \*

Jane stripped out of the tight red dress and stood in front of the hotel mirror in the bathroom. Yanking off the wig, she threw it to the floor, wondering if Sheldon had some special effects that would make it disintegrate. It sat in an ugly hairy pile, taunting her.

Now what?

Go back to her pathetic existence and her radial tires?

What choice did she have? Thor wouldn't want her back after her performance here. She was out of shape and out of practice. To think she'd given this all up so she could marry that jack off and start a family.

NSU had been her family and she'd left it the first chance she'd had to find her white picket fence.

Jane let her head hang low between her shoulder blades. The contempt she felt for her choices fueled her anger and defeat.

Large hands, slightly rough and cool, cupped her breasts, catching her off guard. Her head flew up to meet Estes' eyes in the mirror. He stood behind her, his eyes dark with desire.

Naked.

His cock jutting forward to press against her ass.

He curled his lips into her neck and murmured, "Just the way I like you. Bent over."

Jane waited, but Estes said nothing more.

He never did.

Words were never necessary when the passion they shared reared its head.

She couldn't stop herself from leaning back into him, letting her hips grind against his hard abdomen. His skin was cool to her heated spine. His hands were urgent on her breasts. Her nipples rose to attention as she watched him roll them between his fingers.

His gaze pierced hers in the mirror while he stroked his hand down along her side, resting his palm on the indent of her waist. The slow pattern he made sent shivers along her flushed skin.

She watched in the mirror while his hand slid over her hip and down along her thigh to disappear between her legs. When he spread her flesh, he thumbed her clit. Moistening his path with the juice of her cunt, he made long passes over the exposed flesh. Slow, measured, timely silken strokes.

Her nipples beaded to sharp points when his other hand came around to cup one breast. It lay in his dark hand, pale in comparison, erotic to view and making her legs shake. Rolling her nipple, he tugged it, sending a sharp sizzle of pleasure to her pussy.

He let his lips, hot and full, work their way along her back, bending her forward at the waist, sliding his tongue over one cheek of her ass. Kneeling between her legs, he parted them and Jane whimpered with anticipation.

The first electric stroke of his tongue made her hips crash against his face. He circled her clit with the tip of his tongue and she lifted her leg to rest it on his shoulder, widening her stance.

He laved her, lick after lick, making her back arch almost painfully to get as much of his mouth on her as she could. The sound of the soft slurp of his tongue drove her insane and the ache for release clawed at her chest.

When his hands wrapped around her thighs to press her closer, Jane's head swam and she cried out as she came.

Her head fell back and she gasped for air, but Estes wasted no time in standing behind her once again. Pulling her against him and positioning his cock between the hungry lips of her cunt, he teased her clit. Rubbing with tantalizing strokes until he hovered near her passage.

"Bend over, Jane. Bend over so I can see your sweet, wet pussy fuck my cock."

Jane did as she was told, bending at the waist and relishing his uninhibited words. When he said those things to her, it made her shiver with hot need.

The tip of his cock pressed at her entrance and she lifted her hips, silently begging for him to enter her.

His thrust made them both gasp. It was forceful, hard, making her body jolt forward. The clap of his balls when he drove himself inside her made her groan.

Frenzied fingers found her clit again, throbbing and swollen. She placed a hand over them, guiding them to the spot that would ultimately send her tumbling over the edge of orgasm.

The suction of their bodies slick with sweat clapped like thunder. His cock, long and delicious, pushed her with relentless strokes.

He stiffened behind her, clenching her hips with urgent hands. He ground against her and she raised her ass high to take all of him. Her cunt gripped his shaft, milking it. Her knuckles were white from clinging to the edge of the sink, and then she could no longer stave off the decadent pressure.

Estes' roar was triumphant when he took the final plunge into her, swelling inside her and pumping his hot seed into her.

Jane sagged against the cool porcelain of the sink and waited for her lungs to accept the air she forced into them. She felt the tension immediately return to his body. It was in the way he drew back from her, removing himself from her with a quick tug.

Oh, no. He wasn't going to get away with not saying another word.

Turning, Jane put a hand on his chest to stop him and he enveloped her in an embrace that crushed her. She buried her face in the protective warmth of his chest and fought the sting of tears.

He ran a hand over the top of her head and took a deep breath.

"Talk to me, Estes," she said, focusing to keep a plea from lacing her voice.

"I can't."

"You won't."

"I won't," he confirmed.

Pushing away from him, Jane took a towel from the rack and wrapped herself in it. She ran a shaky finger over his bottom lip. "I know," she responded from a throat thick with remorse.

Moving past him, she opened the door to the bathroom and closed it without looking back.

\* \* \*

"Omigod, Jane. I'm so glad to see you. Before you go off on a tangent, just let me say I'm soooooo sorry. I really had no idea Thor would assign Estes to this. When James told me he was with you, I nearly shit a brick. I know how you feel about him and that's what made me call this whole thing off --"

Jane clamped a hand over her sister's mouth to prevent her from revealing anything else Estes could use against her if he overheard. She used her other hand to tuck her bathrobe together. "Cindy, shut your yap, would you?" Jane crooked her head over her shoulder, motioning to the bed.

Her eyes grew wide, and then she frowned at Jane.

"Why don't I let you two ladies talk while I shower?" he said, draping the sheet around him and heading for the bathroom.

Cindy's eyes bulged and her huff of breath made Jane's fingers puff outward.

She sighed heavily before throwing her arms around her sister. "Do you have any idea how worried I was about you?" she squeaked. "Of all the scenarios I had you in, they sure didn't include a boink-fest and Vegas!"

"I know. I'm sorry, Jane. I really am. James and I... well, we just wanted a break is all. I don't know that we'd get one if we didn't run off and take it. There's always some new crisis or another. You know that. If we didn't lay low, NSU would be beating our doors down. Thor works us hard."

Jane planted her hands on her hips. "That's what you're paid for. Handsomely I might add."

Cindy waved a hand. "I know, but that isn't the only reason I did it. I wouldn't have stayed gone this long unless I knew Thor would come and ask for your help. And I knew he would. When an agent goes missing for a *week*, Thor goes ballistic. Especially two agents like James and I. Someone always knows where we are. Who better than you to help him find me?"

"Um, ya got me. You went to all this trouble so Thor would ask me to help find you?"

Flopping down on the edge of the circular bed, Cindy crossed her feet at the ankles. "I knew Thor would ask you to help find me because you know me best. I also knew that if you spent one more night alone in that stupid gilded cage you call an apartment with another gallon of ice cream, feeling sorry for yourself, I'd just scream. It was time you got off your divorced ass and did something. What better something to do than come back to the agency to look for moi?"

Jane ran her tongue over her bottom lip and crossed her arms over her chest. "You fucked with me so I would come back to NSU? Are you a friggen' whack job? Do you have any idea how worried I was about you? The horrible images I had in my head for the past week of you tied up in some Afghani prison being tortured? Forget that part of it," she scoffed. "Do you have any idea how out of shape I am? I can't tell you the last time I threw this ass," she slapped her own backside, "over a fence! Christ,

Cindy. I'm as out of shape and out of practice as a newbie, and you went to this length to humiliate me?"

"Oh, stop making this about you, Jane Blonde. Wait, it was about you, but it had nothing to do with humiliating you. I love you. You're my sister and you made a stupid choice by marrying *Conrad*. Ugh. I could just vomit saying his name. Anyway, now he's gone. It's o-v-e-r. You needed to do something productive besides sit in a penthouse apartment and eat. You can't tell me it didn't feel good to be back at the agency again because I won't believe it."

"Yeah, it felt real good to have Estes show me up at every turn. Skilled practitioner of all things spy-like that he is."

Cindy popped up and hugged her hard. "That's where I drew the line. Right after Larry called his brother and told him Estes was with you. I never thought Thor would assign him to you. The last I knew he was in London. I'm sorry about that, Jane. But it doesn't look like Estes is sorry. Besides, Thor doesn't even know about you and Estes."

"Larry knew?"

"Well, yeah, he knew. He was the last call we made on my cell phone before we left for Vegas. I knew you'd find it and trace it eventually. We gave him an untraceable cell phone -- they cost a mint by the way -- and that's how we've kept in touch. Larry loaned us cash so we didn't have to use our credit cards or bank accounts. I knew you'd go sniffing around there eventually. So we told him to call us when you did. That's how we found out about Estes. I got to you as soon as I could."

"Thor is going to be furious with you."

She pinched Jane's cheek. "Not after he knows why I did it. Besides, his goal was to have James and I get along. We do that just fine." Her smile said what Jane had suspected from the moment she'd heard Thor's story.

Brushing back Cindy's dark hair from her face, she asked, "So you're in love, huh?"

She hugged Jane again. "I am. Stupidly, in fact."

"I'd do the squee thing with you, but I'm too pissed right now."

She playfully punched Jane in the arm. "You are not. You have a glow about you that you haven't had for five years. It's the adrenaline rush of spying."

Jane had to admit this little adventure, though minor on the list of dangerous, had been better than watching TV all night long. "Well, now it's over and it's time for me to go home and for you to go back to NSU." Speaking the words out loud left her cold and empty.

"You don't have to go home, Jane. I'd bet Thor would take you back if you'd just ask."

"I'd bet you're going to be in a shitload of trouble when you call him."

Cindy frowned and wrinkled her nose. "Probably, but my heart was in the right place. I did it out of love, and he wouldn't fire his top female agent."

Yeah, but would he re-hire his rustiest aging agent?

## Chapter Seven

"I'm glad you came back, Agent Blonde. NSU has missed you." Thor's half smile, stilted and reassuring in his own way, made her feel better about her decision to possibly come back.

Jane settled into a chair and crossed her legs. "Let's talk turkey. I'm not on my game anymore, Thor, and you know that. Otherwise you wouldn't have sent Estes to follow me to Phoenix like I needed a babysitter. I don't know how much use I'll be to you now, but I'm here just the same. Cindy's right. I need to get out of my apartment."

Thor rolled his tongue in his cheek. "That sister of yours... she's quite something. I'll speak to her later. As for you, there isn't anything you can't do when you put your mind to it. We'll put you back in training if you'd like, but before we do that I have an assignment for you."

Jane's ears perked up. Anything that would take her mind off Alejandro and leaving him in Vegas would be a welcome diversion. She could terrorist-sit for all she cared. Whatever Alejandro's problem was, she couldn't solve it. He'd have to figure that out on his own. If he wouldn't tell her then she couldn't read his mind. She'd learned something from her divorce and that was that you just couldn't make someone something they weren't.

Estes had never been a talker. He could keep right on being silent. No matter how much it hurt her, she wasn't into blaming herself anymore. It wasn't anything she'd said or done. She needed more from him and he couldn't give it. Not back then and not now. She'd opened the door for him to tell her what had happened and he'd closed it. Estes chose to remain silent because it was what he did best.

It was time to get back into the game again and let go of what she couldn't change.



"Jane?"

"Sorry. An assignment? Do you need a security guard for kinder care?"

Thor barked a laugh. "Give yourself more credit than that. It's a beauty pageant. Perfectly suited for you. A good friend of mine owns it. The Miss Galaxy pageant. Trouble has been brewing so, naturally, he called me for help. A Miss Northern Lights has been the recipient of death threats."

"Wow. Things have changed since I competed. We might have secretly wished someone dead, but we never spoke the words -- or sent them."

"These notes are quite severe in nature, I'm afraid."

"When do I leave?"

"You go in tomorrow. Do you think you can do it?"

Her mind raced with the chance to do a beauty pageant, ticking off the things she'd need to prepare. God, it had been far too long. "Well, of course I can do it. I've done hundreds of pageants. Get that dork Sheldon on the phone and have him rustle me up a bullet proof Vera Wang, would ya, Thor? Gold will work, or maybe a glittery bronze? Yeah, I think bronze or even copper would be right. Definitely colors that work for me. Now, I'll need a manicure, pedicure, hot oil treatment, because really, look at my ends." She held up a length of her long blonde hair and wiggled it at Thor. "Phoenix was hard on them. It's soooooo dry there. Then I need shoes -- heels -- at least three inches. Height is crucial in the appearance of your stature. Oh, and make me an appointment for a wax too. I need it to last at least a week. A hairy beauty queen is an ugly beauty queen."

"No, Jane," Thor interrupted her litany of demands with an amused smile.

Swinging around in Thor's office chair, she furrowed her brow. "No what?"

"You're not going to be a contestant in the pageant..."

"Are you kidding? I'm the obvious choice. Who else is qualified but Cindy, and she and James are off mooning over one another on the island of Bali or some such tropical place."

"You're misunderstanding me, Jane."

"What's to misunderstand? You said you needed a plant at the Miss Galaxy pageant. How else would you plant me if not in the contest? Do you have another agent with the kind of skills I do in that kind of arena? I think not. I've won over forty pageants in my reign of tiara-nabbing terror. There isn't anyone better than me at wooing a judge, Thor."

"Jane --"

"What, Thor? Spit it out. Is there someone else at NSU more qualified than I am to beat the banners off those big-haired snots?"

"No, but I'd bet there are plenty of agents here at NSU who are younger," Sheldon snickered, sailing into Thor's office and dumping some files on his desk.

"You know, Sheldon, were I you, and thankfully I'm not, I'd shut my dorky mouth before someone like me shuts it for you."

"You know, Jane, were I you, and thankfully I'm not, I'd quit threatening the guy who makes my color wheel spin. Because if you don't, I'll design one of those sparkly dresses in your honor and make sure it disintegrates at an unknown time and in a very indiscreet fashion."

Jane rose from her seat and cornered Sheldon with one quick move. "Goddamn it, Sheldon, who invited you to this, anyway? We're talking about something you don't have the first inkling about. Scurry on back to your formaldehyde, freak, and leave the important stuff to the adults."

Sheldon screwed his face up at her. "Can you even spell tiara, Jane? It's sort of complicated. Do you debate over using one r or two?"

Jane grabbed him by his lab coat and thrust him up against the wall hard, knocking the wind out of him and sending his glasses flying. "I will kick your scrawny, microscope-loving ass, you *CSI* lover," she shouted into his startled face.

Thor put a hand on both of their shoulders. His grip was firm and directed them to different designations with just a mere nudge. "Agents, that will be enough," he said sharply. "I asked Sheldon to be here because he'll design things that are very useful to your mission, Agent Blonde."

Jane let go of Sheldon with a thump. "Please, Thor. What could Sheldon possibly design that will help me do anything other than piss me off?"

"How does a blow dryer that shoots laser beams grab ya?" he asked in his *so there* kind of way.

Jane's ears betrayed her and she perked up again. A laser beam blow dryer? Ohhhhh, now that scored on her wet panty scale of invention. God, technology was a beautiful thing.

"Agents, go to your separate corners, please," Thor commanded.

Jane rolled her eyes and mouthed the word "baby" at Sheldon one more time before retreating to the far corner of Thor's office. "Fine. So explain to me what I'm doing in this pageant if not competing."

"Set design?" Sheldon called from his corner.

"I will kick your ass, Sheldon!"

"Sheldon, that's quite enough," Thor reprimanded yet again. "You'll be a judge, Jane. It's the obvious solution. You're more than qualified and it's an in for NSU to have a look at who is making these threats to Miss Northern Lights."

Jane was almost grateful she wouldn't be competing. She wasn't in top form anymore. She wasn't even in mediocre form anymore.

"Was that a sigh of relief I heard over there, Tiara Queen? You know, because you won't have to wear a bathing suit? I can almost hear all of America sobbing in gratitude."

"That's it for you, dweeb!" she yelled before rushing at Sheldon and instead slamming into Thor's chest.

"Sheldon," Thor said over his shoulder with a hint of a threat. "One more word and I'll take away your DNA samples. Jane, back to your corner."

She took a deep breath, blowing a strand of loose hair in exasperation, and sauntered off to her corner again. "You'd better shut him up or I'll beat him up in the parking garage after work, Thor."

Thor shook his finger one more time in warning at Sheldon, who retrieved his glasses for the second time and stuck his tongue out at Jane.

"So, what's the scoop? Can you trace any of the letters to this Miss Northern Lights? I know it's what some would call just another beauty pageant, but Miss Galaxy is pretty prestigious. Lots of benefactors and big-time sponsors. God, this is as bad as the cheerleading mom crap these days." Jane shook her head in sadness. That her beloved pageants had taken on this severe, cutthroat attitude made a beauty pageant look just like what most people mocked it for being.

Fluff.

To a degree, competing in her day had had its share of crazies, but never to this extent. Not that she'd been aware of. She'd learned the value of a tiara and it didn't add up to much when your day had come and gone. It was a lovely sentiment to remember yourself as Miss Whatever, and she'd made some wonderful friends along the way. Usually the only people who remembered much about pageants were the contestants. Hardly anyone but serious pageant aficionados would remember who last year's winner was, let alone a former winner from some fifteen odd years ago. Even Jane couldn't name some of the most recent pageant winners.

It could be a very catty way to earn a scholarship, but in all honesty, most of the women got along quite well. The myth that women sabotaged each other was mostly that -- a myth -- with a few incidents scattered in between. Certainly grudges might be held, but they didn't involve death threats. They entailed slashed nylons and suspiciously lost shoes.

"No, tracing them seems to be a problem. Whoever sends them is very crafty. No fingerprints, no ink, paper or printer that's out of the ordinary were used in creating this drama. Though Sheldon did discover that the person that sends them has an aversion to the glue on an envelope."

"Huh?"

"Whoever this is, they don't care for the taste of the glue on the envelope. A sponge is moistened then applied to the sealant. Or they're very wise to the possibility of someone finding their DNA on the envelope."

"So when do I go in, and am I taking someone else's place as a judge? The judges can be real assholes when usurped."

"Apparently, judge number three, a former Miss Island Breeze 1986, has taken ill. No suspicion will surround you replacing her."

Jane smiled in fond remembrance. "Gilda was Miss Island Breeze back then. I remember her because she didn't have a mean bone in her body. Not at all competitive."

"Maybe you can have a real tropical reunion then, huh, Jane?"

"Sheldon, to the lab with you. *Now.*" Thor thundered his demand and pointed to the door.

Jane folded her hands behind her back and sashayed over to Sheldon, cocking her head. "Way to piss off the boss, dork."

"Jane! That's enough from you too." Thor narrowed his gaze at her.

"Okay, look. Where do I have to be? What do I have to do? Give me my cover."

Thor's anger turned to amusement again. He chuckled. "All you have to do is be the ex-beauty queen you are, Jane. This, as you Americans say, is right up your alley."

Well, her alley was kinda old and dark these days, but once a beauty queen, always a beauty queen.

"Agent Estes will accompany you. He's your companion."

Oh.

That was a nice lead balloon. Jane kept her face passive when she looked at Thor. "Why Estes?"

"He requested it."

Interesting. "Okay, I'm on it. Sheldon, hurry up with the blow dryer or whatever else I'm supposed to take with me. Thor, give me the file and I'll study it. You have my credentials for the pageant officials?"

"Indeed I do. I was quite impressed with your reign as Miss Kitten Soft..."

Christ. The toilet paper company. How could she forget the *as soft as a kitten* slogan? "My only defense is that it was early in my career."

Sheldon smirked, standing by the door. "Wow, what was your next big leap? Miss It Has Wings?" He ducked out just as Jane's shoe sailed toward the door.

\* \* \*

The quiet of the gym soothed Jane while she sat taking shallow breaths after attempting crunches.

Christ, that had hurt.

She didn't even know why she'd bothered. It wasn't like she could work off the extra pounds overnight. She left tomorrow for Miss Galaxy.

If she did crunches all night, it wouldn't leave a visible impression. The gym was deserted now, and she'd been relishing a moment to catch her breath.

"Well, look who's back in action." Estes sauntered toward her in the darkened gym. His sweats didn't hide the thickness of his thighs and his T-shirt hugged his chest like a second skin.

She didn't welcome his sullen, ever moody presence. "Look who's going to help me get back into action."

"Yeah, imagine that. Me and Miss Universe, a couple."

"We're not a couple, Estes."

He came to stand over her, offering her a hand that she shrugged off and rose to her feet without. "You made that abundantly clear by leaving Vegas without a word."

Was that the whine of the dumped she was hearing? Tough shit. "What else was there to say? We were done, weren't we?" Jane felt foolish for offering him a chance to explain, but why not beat a dead horse? Really, the ability to self-torture had an amazing capacity.

"If you say so."

"I think I say so."

"Your mind may say so, but the rest of you doesn't."

"Don't pretend to know me, Alejandro. You don't and you choose not to. I let it go. Would you rather I cling and cry? That's not my thing."

He took a step closer to her and cupped her jaw with a tenderness she'd once known well. "I wouldn't mind if you clung to me."

Jane shook her head and searched those unreadable, black eyes. "I deserve more. I deserved more in Rome and I won't settle for less. Not after what my marriage to Conrad taught me."

"Conrad wasn't me, Jane. That was your problem from the start."

That much was true. Conrad would never be half the man Alejandro was, but he'd offered her something she'd wanted desperately then. A family. If she didn't love Conrad like she'd loved Alejandro, she'd at least had something comfortable with him. In her estimation, and after much heavy thought, she'd come to the conclusion that Estes had been one of those bad boy scenarios every woman experiences once. Oh so good, yet destined to end, leaving you with a box of tissues and a heartache you thought would never end. When he'd left Rome, he'd left her questioning her instincts. Conrad had been as different from Estes as night is to day. Yet he'd wronged her unforgivably with his lies and infidelities.

Maybe she was just picking the wrong gender. Lesbianism was looking very favorable after an overview of her relationships. "No, he wasn't you. That's why I married him." She said that to hurt him, but he didn't even look a little fazed.

He tilted his head and leaned into her. With his breath fanning her face, he whispered darkly, "You made an awful mistake doing that. You'll always be mine. No matter who you marry."

The tight fist in her stomach felt like he'd physically punched her. Why was it so important for him to tell her that no one had ever made her feel quite the way he did? It was like he enjoyed ripping off a scab that was partially healed. "No. Being yours would imply I still wanted you. That I was pining for you. I don't. I'm not." No matter how her body betrayed her.

With a rough jerk, he pulled her flush to him, bending her at the waist. Forcing her to look up at him. "You'll always want me, Jane. I'll always want you."

*Yeah, me and how many others?* Jane closed her eyes, hoping she could ward off the rush of heat he was so forcefully shoving down her throat. Her heart hammered with his words. "You don't want me, Alejandro. You've always known where I was. I don't remember you beating down my door." Those dark thoughts spoken aloud killed her. They hurt to say. It had hurt far worse to feel.

Grabbing a fistful of her hair, he wrapped the long tresses around his hand. "Oh, but I do want you, Jane. Right here. Right now."

And without preamble his lips crashed down on hers. His tongue slid between them and caressed the roof of her mouth with a long, silken stroke.

The invasion made her moan before she could stop it and he took that as a sign to continue. It took but a moment to end up on the mat she'd just done her crunches on.

There was no thought to the possibility of intrusion or of being caught. Jane didn't think at all.

She felt.

Felt every aching fiber of nerve. Every twitch of muscle. Every nuance of his heavy body, crushing hers with delicious weight. She ran her hands over the broad width of his back. He pushed her shirt up with rough hands, cupping her breast, lowering his lips to twist a nipple into his mouth and tug on it sharply. Her cunt reacted with a rush of slick juice, and Alejandro caught it when he shoved her gym shorts off and dragged a finger through her parted flesh.

The effect of it left her dizzy and spreading her legs wide for more. Using the pad of his thumb, he caressed her clit for a moment then slid to position himself between her thighs.

She trembled with anticipation. With need.

He opened his mouth wide and laid it over her pussy, humming in satisfaction against her hot flesh while moving his tongue in a slow circle.



The contact made every muscle in her lower body tense and she arched upward with a twist of her hips. Begging for more, seeking the exquisite torture of his tongue.

Two fingers, thick and lightly callused, plunged into her, moving upward to stroke her G-spot.

Jane's growl was audible and she came instantly while his fingers fucked her and she grabbed at fistfuls of his hair. She rode the wave of orgasm until she was breathless and desperate for his cock.

The loss of his fingers made her whimper, but he slithered up her length until he was on top of her. Dragging his tongue over them, he licked each finger while his eyes held hers. Mesmerizing her.

In seconds, he'd released his cock by shoving his sweats to his knees and then he drove into her willing body without pause. Hard as steel, he wasted no time in planting himself in her balls deep.

The drive of his thick shaft stretched her with maddening bliss. His plunges were punctuated with groans and the slap of their flesh. Jane found her hands clamped on his ass, pushing him deeper, wrapping her legs higher around his waist until her clit scraped his abdomen deliciously.

Hips crashed together in sync, creating a tight rhythm of pleasure.

Her climax was a slow, steady rise and then a rush of wild, magnificent, electrical explosions. It held her in its hand then let go with a fury and she clung to him, burying her face in his neck.

His hard hands gripped her hips, lifting her with each hot stroke, and with a roar, he too spent himself.

Jane waited for him to say something while they caught their breath. Lifting his head, Alejandro pushed the sticky strands of her hair from her face, but he said nothing. His lips grazed hers and he nuzzled her cheek.

She felt it.

He wanted to talk. He just wouldn't.

And that still wasn't good enough.

Sliding out from under him, Jane fought the urge to flee and said, "We have to stop this. Sex isn't our problem. It's obvious we don't have any trouble working up a little passion between us."

Sitting up, he ran a finger down the tip of her nose. "I crave you, Jane. I crave you like no one else."

Grabbing her gym shorts, she pulled them on and stood. "Those are intense words, Alejandro, but they aren't enough. Not this time. They mean nothing unless you back them up with something more substantial than your wanker. Until you can explain to me what's wrong, the secrets you obviously hold close but won't share, I can't do this. I *won't* keep doing this. I'll see you tomorrow when we leave."

Her exit was purposely measured. So he would see she wasn't running away, but there would absolutely be no more giving in to her body.

When she hit the locker room, her bravado gave out and she plopped on one of the benches to let the first of many sobs escape her clogged throat.

## Chapter Eight

Oh, the smell of Aqua Net.

God, she'd missed it.

Jane picked her way through the dressing room on the first night of un-televised competition, watching the young women prepare for the talent portion of the pageant. Miss Northern Lights in particular. Though she hadn't received another death threat since Jane's arrival, her worried frown displayed her uneasiness. She had a wonderful personality, a winning streak that would soon rival Jane's, and a father that never let her out of his sight.

According to the buzz, she was the favorite to win.

Jane and Estes had observed them for three days now and not one of the contestants seemed at all suspicious. In fact, they were all grinning and bearing it without one outburst over shredded nylons and lost lipsticks. Neither she nor Alejandro could fault any one of them for even appearing remotely suspicious.

All that world peace must have finally rubbed off.

Now the mothers of the contestants -- that was a whole other story. Estes had raised an eyebrow over one mother who cattily snickered when one of the girls had tripped on her practice run. Miss Big Dipper wasn't exactly light of foot and Miss Orion's mother was more than happy to make everyone aware of it.

On the other hand, Miss Andromeda's mother just wanted everyone to shine like the constellations they represented.

Jane shook her head. This got tougher and tougher to figure. If the last threat that was sent came down, Miss Northern Lights had better not place in the top five.

The letter had been very clear.

If she placed in the top five, she'd die before the pageant was over.

She shivered just thinking about it. Mostly because it didn't make a lot of sense to her. Not from the picture she was getting behind the scenes anyway.

Though she wasn't allowed much contact with the contestants, she was encouraged to observe them casually. Back stage and in relaxed settings only. What she was observing sure didn't bring about the kind of rage that letter had displayed.

As she made her way out into the hall of the dressing room, a voice from behind called her by her maiden name.

"Jane? Jane Crisco?"

That voice -- a bit nasally and whirring with a whine that struggled to hide the mid-western accent. Pulling her shoulders back, Jane turned to identify the face that went with the voice just as Estes came to stand at her side. She'd successfully managed to avoid him for the most part. They'd spent three days in a suite and she'd had to cling to the headboard to keep herself from pouncing him, but she'd done it. Her fingernail marks in the soft wood were proof she'd done it.

It wasn't an easy task. Especially when he wore a tux. It fit him like a glove, perfectly tailored to cling to those sinful muscles.

"Where have you been, sweetness? I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Doing my job," she hissed in a whisper.

"While you avoid me."

*You'd avoid you if you had any sense too,* she mused. "I'm not avoiding --"

"Jane?"

When the voice came into focus what she found was a striking brunette. Long and leggy if not a bit wrinkled and weathered from a tanning booth. Her slip dress hugged her lean hips and the tops of her breasts bobbed while she walked.

"Do you remember me?" she asked, extending her hand and enveloping them in a cloud of expensive perfume.

Damn, this was a pickle. She looked like someone Jane should remember. She acted like she was someone to be remembered, but she drew a blank.

"You are Jane Crisco. Miss Universe 1988, right?"

"Blonde. It's Jane Blonde now and yes, I am. Forgive me, but I can't seem to place you..."

"Connie Willows. Miss Idaho 1988. Er, almost. First runner up."

Wow.

And wow again.

Now she remembered her. The Miss Idaho pageant in 1988 had been one of the most controversial Jane could remember, and Connie Willows was at the center of that controversy. She'd demanded a recall of the judges scores, declaring the winner had slept with one of the judges. She'd also claimed she had proof of those supposed trysts on video tape.

Unfortunately for Connie, the proof she was supposed to have in hand never surfaced. Thankfully for the winner, only insiders were privy to the allegations. She never made good on her threats to go to the press, but Jane could remember Miss Idaho regaling the tales of Connie Willows at the Miss USA Pageant.

What a viper.

Estes nudged her while Connie stared at her intently. "Of course. Now I remember. How are you?" *Baked a potato lately?*

"Fabulous. Just fabulous. And you? How did the world treat you after Miss Universe?"

"Very well, thanks." Divorced, dried up career wise, but all in all just fricken' peachy. "So what brings you here to Miss Galaxy?"

"My daughter, of course."

"Your daughter's a contestant in Miss Galaxy?"

"Can't you guess who she is? She looks just like me," Connie offered with a smile on her crimson lips.

*Bet I can't.* Jane laughed politely. "No. No I can't."

"She's the most beautiful girl here of course. Miss Cassiopeia." She covered her irritation with Jane for missing the clue with a grating laugh. However, it was crystal

clear that Connie Willows thought everyone should recognize her offspring. "Autumn," she called into the dressing room with a bark. "Come meet Miss Universe 1988."

Estes snickered and plastered a smile on his face, nodding to Autumn.

Well, Autumn was certainly lovely, but she lacked the sparkle in her eyes that said drive. Her hair was darker than her mother's and it gleamed beneath the corridor lights. Almond eyes, the color of the finest sapphire, were lined with a naturally thick fringe of lashes. She moved with the grace of a cat, long lines curved in just the right places and breasts that didn't need any aid from a roll of duct tape.

Duct tape could be a pair of boobs' best friend at a pageant.

"It's a pleasure." Autumn extended a slender hand and Jane took it, noting the tremble in it.

Connie wrapped an arm around her daughter's shoulder, grabbing her cheek and pinching it. "Fix your sash, darling," she reprimanded. "Did I lie? Isn't she simply the most beautiful girl here?"

Autumn shrugged her face away and said, "Mom, Miss Universe, er, Jane can't say that because she's a judge. Stop pressuring people to tell you I'm beautiful, would you?"

"A judge? *You're* a judge?"

*Yeah, cuz I was Miss Universe and you weren't. Nah, nah, nah.* "I am indeed," Jane said, keeping her tone light. "And, yes, Autumn is lovely. All of the girls are."

Connie's mouth drew into a thin line. "Not like my Autumn."

"Mother, stop! I'm sorry, Ms. Blonde. Mother is overzealous. It was lovely to meet you." Autumn slithered off without a backward glance at her mother, leaving them with Connie and a very awkward silence.

She seemed like a nice kid who had a pushy mother.

"So Jane, who's this?" Connie nodded in the direction of Estes.

*The guy who dropped me like one of those hot potatoes from your fine state?* "My companion."

She leaned into Jane and winked. "Niiiiice job. Miss Universe obviously was very good to you."

Estes had remained silent, which was his way, for most of the conversation so when he spoke both women listened. "She's done very well, Miss Willows. Very well. And now we must take our leave. Jane has duties to fulfill as a judge." His tone was commanding and hinted at curt.

Connie narrowed her eyes for the briefest of moments before smiling complacently. "Of course. Jane, it was wonderful to see you again. You look... well, you look..." She seemed to struggle to say something favorable. "Very blonde. Just like your new -- is it new? -- last name."

Figured she'd bring up her divorce. "Yep, it sure is. I just paid for it," Jane joked. "You take care now, Connie. I have to go." She grabbed Estes and let him direct them out of the hallway.

"And your take on her?" he rumbled in her ear while they made their exit.

"She's your typical stage mother. Pushy, rude and at one time surrounded by controversy."

"She was almost Miss Idaho?"

Jane relayed the tale of Miss Idaho's infamy and he nodded knowingly. "She definitely fits the bill. However, all of the contestants, including their present family members and supporters, were thoroughly questioned. Maybe it was just a hoax? Thor is doing this for a friend. This isn't like we're working an arms deal. It's hairspray and gel breast enhancers."

"You're right, but it's obviously important to Thor. So we're here for the duration."

"Your take, Estes? You think Connie's involved?"

"I think she's as likely a suspect as any. We don't have much else right now. You heard anything at night? In the halls?"

They were intentionally on the same floor as Miss Northern Lights and while she spent most of her nights awake with the reminder that Estes shared her room, she'd not heard a peep. "Nope, nothing."

"Me either."

She glanced down at her watch and winced. "Damn. We have to get moving. I have to judge the talent portion of this shindig."

Estes rolled his eyes at her and cracked a smile that made her insides gooey and soft. "More batons that flame and poetry readings?"

"And bongos. Someone plays the bongos. The flute too. Oh, and a xylophone."

"Will there be more singing? I have to tell you, Miss Ursa Minor could make your ears bleed from all that caterwauling in practice."

"Yep. Prepare for her very special rendition of *Feelings*."

"Know anywhere we can stop and buy earplugs?"

Jane giggled in sympathy, pushing open the door to the auditorium. If she never heard the song *Feelings* again, she couldn't say she'd be too upset.

One more "whoa, whoa, whoa" sung off key like Miss Ursa Minor howled it and she might offer to pay for singing lessons for her personally.



## Chapter Nine

How could they be out of ice? Damn Estes for not filling the ice bucket back up. Where was he anyway? She plucked the empty bucket up and stormed out of the room to find an ice machine.

All she wanted to do was get out of this dress, even if it was fabulous, and forget that she'd just been subjected to a myriad of talents she'd like to stop thinking about. Her ears still stung from Miss Mensa's violin.

With a ragged sigh she looked for a sign that directed her to an ice machine. When she rounded the corner to locate one, her breath caught in her throat. Two figures loomed at the far end of the hall. They were great, hulking figures with ski masks and black clothing.

Okay, so maybe this wasn't the hoax she'd been ready to chalk it up to after all.

Fuck, that was in the direct vicinity of Miss Northern Lights' room and there was no way to get to whoever it was without being seen. A surprise attack was out of the question. Reaching into her gown, she felt between her breasts.

Oh, of all the dumb assed things to do. She'd left her room without her bloody gun!

The two figures hovered at the door, obviously preparing to force their way in.

Jane did the only thing she could do.

She charged them, hurling the ice bucket at one of them with as much force as she could muster. The taller of the two grunted when it cracked his head with a loud pop and reached for what she suspected was a gun.

Fear, clammy and cold, raced over her spine.

While she was debating a split second decision, the second man clocked her, snapping her head back with violent force. The pain that seared her jaw infuriated her and blood trickled down her jaw and onto her left breast.

Ohhhhh, God. Not the Vera Wang. It was criminal and it almost pissed her off more than the actual blow to her face.

Almost.

Jane reacted far more quickly than she'd ever have given herself credit for by jamming her fist into his gut and twisting upward. A gut that was rock hard and inflexible.

Yet the punch made him stumble and fall into his criminal friend, leaving Jane with two choices presented to her.

Run and run faster.

She took off at breakneck speed, searching for an exit sign. When she saw the sign for the stairs, Jane made a left and ran harder. The heavy footfalls of the men behind her thumped with impending doom.

Where the frig was everyone? Hadn't anyone heard the commotion?

She didn't have time to wonder. Seeing the sign for the stairs, Jane came up short against the door and ripped it open.

She ran like she hadn't run since she was back in training at NSU. Her legs pumped with a fast fury she didn't know she possessed anymore when it hit her. She was running up, not down.

Why had she run up instead of down?

*You're a rusty-assed agent that's why.*

There was no going back. The clomp of their feet wasn't as distant as she'd have liked.

Her thighs screamed in agony when she began to take the stairs to the roof two at a time, gathering the length of her gown into a fist that shook. Crashing into the exit door at the top of the stairs, Jane yanked it open, her palms greasy with sweat.

Without looking back, she flew over the hard surface of the rooftop, praying the grip Sheldon had put on the soles of her shoes would keep her from skidding.

The wind caught at her, biting her skin and catching at her gown. Damn it all, this was a Vera Wang and it would never be the same after this. A sob was in order, she thought fleetingly. A bugle call of "Taps" should be played to honor the ruination of such a fine frock.

Unfortunately, she should have been less focused on her gown being trashed and more focused on the end of solid ground beneath her.

She had one heeled foot completely off the edge of the roof before she had what would probably be her last thought ever.

Well, two actually.

The first -- "always look where you're going."

The second -- "sucks to be me."

And then Agent Jane Blonde prepared to die.

\* \* \*

Estes flew across the top of the high-rise roof after Jane with a speed most would witness as a blur.

With a loud whoosh of the cool night air, his body slammed into hers and she gasped sharply. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pinned her to him while her feet flailed and her mouth opened wide.

Jane's scream tore through his sensitive ears and her nails dug into his forearm hard enough to penetrate the jacket of his tuxedo.

Their descent was choppier than he would have liked. He hadn't been prepared for a twenty-story drop so they didn't sail quite the way he would have hoped. The trick was to catch the wind at just the right moment and ride it. It didn't help that she was alternately screaming and clawing at him either.

She probably had no idea if she should fight off a potential assailant or welcome the rescuer that would save her life.

Just before they hit the ground, Jane distracted him by twisting in his arms, causing him to lose his balance. Their landing was less than perfect. Alejandro rolled her atop him so the unforgiving pavement would hit him first and she'd be cushioned by his body. The thunk of the blacktop jarred even his bones and his loud "argghhhh" bounced off the sidewalk.

The shock on her face was evident and he could see the wheels in her pretty, blonde head spin out of control. Gasping and sputtering, she found enough energy to flick him with a finger. "Is *this* why you're always so secretive?"

The sounds of oncoming traffic grew clearer and the honk of horns carried with them the realization that they were lying on the sidewalk. "Sorta." He kept his answer vague. The agent in him knew she would crash once the adrenaline of the incredible feat that had just occurred sunk in for her.

"Sorta?" She screwed her face up while looking down at him.

"It's not the whole reason."

"You just landed with the grace of Mary Lou Retton doing a dismount from a balance beam. Except that was a twenty-story jump. We should be near dead. Or at least a whole lot of broken."

"Yep, I guess we should."

Gathering the lapels of his tuxedo, she narrowed her eyes and gave him a hard shake. "I've seen some crazy stuff in my time as an agent, Alejandro. I can't recall anyone being able to jump twenty stories without broken bones being a part of even the nuttiest scenarios I've been in. Are they shoes Sheldon invented? Because that would mean I have to thank the little shit."

"No, Jane. They're mine. My feet."

"Oh. Okay then. Anything else yours?"

"Yes."

"Sharing is caring."

"You look a little green, honey. Maybe the sharing can wait."

Lifting him up closer to her face, she ground out, "That's because I just fell twenty stories. I should be dead, but I'm not. Because a guy with magic powers saved me."

"Of all the luck."

"I think I'm going to be ill," she gagged.

"That would be tragic. This," he ran a finger over the shoulder strap of her gown, "is a Vera Wang."

Jane didn't hear him. She'd passed out, falling against his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Which meant he was safe from her interrogation.

For now.

Scooping her up, he looked around and made a break for the narrow back alley. If he had to, he'd climb up the fire escape to their room's balcony and break in.

Whoever had been chasing her was still prowling around. He couldn't take the chance they'd be caught.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, Jane woke to find Estes staring down at her with that intense gaze. He sat at the edge of the bed with his hands folded in his lap, obviously waiting.

Estes had survived a twenty-story jump.

She'd survived it because of him.

"How do you feel?"

"Like I just stepped into a Stephen King novel while holding Dean Koontz's hand for support. You?"

"I'm fine."

"Of course you are. Who wouldn't be fine if they could fly? I'd be fine if I could fly too."

"You'd be dead if I couldn't," he reminded her. "And I didn't *fly*, per se."

Struggling to sit up, she let him prop some pillows behind her. She pinched the bridge of her nose and massaged it. Where to begin? "Um, let's start over. How did that happen? It was almost as if we were flying. Explain."

"Birth."

"You were born with the magical, mystical ability to fly? Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds?"

"Of course I do."

Of course he did. "There's more to this isn't there?"

"Yes."

Poking a finger into his chest, she clucked her tongue. "So tell me the rest of the story. Don't make me break out my interrogation kit. I'll have to polish your toenails in a shade that's totally not in your color wheel or something."

His chuckle was genuine, coming from deep in his throat. "I'm a werewolf. A werewolf who can also read minds and, well, jump. High. No wings, just my feet. I come from a long line of werewolves."

"A werewolf..."

"Yes. A werewolf. Raw meat loving, hairy when I shift, centuries old, all the stuff werewolves are infamous for with the added bonus of a nice lunar romp from time-to-time."

"You eat people." Her hand went to her neck in a subconscious move to protect the skin she worked so hard to keep smooth.

He grabbed her hand and pulled it from her neck, caressing it with his. "I won't eat you. I can exist on the normal source of protein. I don't kill for pleasure, Jane. I never have. I never even killed for just the nourishment unless some pig deserved to die. That's a rule we strictly adhere to in our pack."

This explained why he was such a successful agent. What could kill a werewolf? "Your pack? There are more of you?"

"Yes. I have a family, albeit small."

"You have a mommy and daddy werewolf?"

"Yes, though they're surrogates. My biological parents are long gone. I was bitten by a werewolf a long time ago and this pack, my pack, took me in to protect me."

"Someone bit you and that's how you got this way?"

"Yep, that's how it happened."

"Centuries ago."

"Several. By most werewolf standards, I'm young."

"Does Thor know?"

"Of course he does. I'm not the only paranormal entity at NSU. The FBI has a secret sect of physics they don't talk about and NSU has agents like me, among other things."

"Other things..."

"Yes, Jane. Other things. Thor's a brilliant man and taking some of us on as agents is a smart move. I can read minds. Given the proper circumstances anyway. I can sense distress, unease. I guess I'm more empathic. It's how I knew you were on the roof. Killing me is difficult at best, and you saw me leap tall buildings. It's a quirk in my pack that no one can explain, but exists nonetheless. If I found someone like me and I was Thor Newcastle, I'd hire me too."

"Do you prefer sleeping outside?"

"Only if I can have my silk sheets. I'm spoiled."

She couldn't help but laugh. The lighthearted moment lasted only mere moments though. "I suppose this is your very convenient explanation for Rome?"

"In a nutshell."

"You think just because you're a -- a -- secret weapon of some kind that you can leave with no explanation and never look back? Who the fuck do you think you are? I'm almost glad you live right next to forever. That's how long you have to live with the fact that you're a chicken shit baby." The shock she'd first experienced turned with rapid fire to anger. Okay, so he was a -- a... werewolf. And? Did that mean he had to leave without looking back? Did it mean that he couldn't have left with the typical human male copout for goodbye? Sort of like, "this isn't working for me anymore." Or the classic "we're just not going in the same direction."

Estes ran a hand over his stubble-darkened face. "I've lived with it every day since I left you in Rome. I should never have put you in the position I did to begin with."

Oh, so now he regretted their affair? Fucktard.

"I don't regret it, Jane. I regret that it came to this. I regret that I hurt you in trying to keep my secrets."

"That was the mind reading thing, yes?"

"Sort of. I can't always read your mind. I can read some of your thoughts. Feel what you feel."

"Then I suppose you've read the one that thinks you were just plain scared in Rome. Working for NSU leaves us in many strange predicaments. I've been on plenty of missions that had some pretty bizarre circumstances. We have all sorts of technologically superior gadgets to play with to boot. I don't think I'm falling for the 'Telling you I'm a werewolf would have freaked you out' explanation. Sorry. I just don't buy it.

"That Thor hasn't told his 'human' agents about your special powers or whatever it is you have doesn't really shock me. Even in our line of work, it would only promote a competitive atmosphere he wouldn't want to cultivate. That makes sense. Had I known you had all the capabilities you do and that you were some kind of secret weapon for NSU, I probably wouldn't have wanted to partner with you either. You'd just show me up. Granted there are just some things you can't do. Like be cute and coy and play an unsuspecting man. But you certainly could have told me. We were lovers. Do you suppose I would have been any less freaked out than I was when we jumped twenty stories to safety?"

"You make a good point."

His calm, reasonable answer only made her angrier.

"Don't agree with me, Alejandro, just to shut me up. Tell me the real reason you dumped me in Rome. Stop pussyfooting around. Was it the sex? Not hot enough for ya? Was it the fear of commitment? I know there's more to it than what you're giving up."



His face grew dark and unreadable. The stoic presence he was so good at presenting to the world remained intact. "I think we should focus on who was chasing you."

"Yeah," she snorted the word. "I bet you do. Fine. Keep your secrets. Two guys. Two big guys with guns. I couldn't tell you what they looked like because they had ski masks on. I can tell you the one jerk-off slugged me in the face. I slugged him back and ran. I forgot my gun in my purse back in my room. I know, I know. Don't say a word. It was stupid, but I was just getting ice when I saw them trying to sneak into Miss Northern Lights' room. That's all I have."

"No visible identifying marks on their hands? Clothing?"

"His hand came at me so fast I didn't have time to look. They were pretty average. Walmart supplied tennis shoes and probably the same goes for their clothing."

"Any identifying fragrances? Scents?"

Jane shook her head. "I don't have your nose, Secret Agent Werewolf."

"That right there is one of the reasons I'm sure Thor doesn't tell anyone about us."

"Yeah. Then you can conveniently slink on off to your doggie bed and use your supernatural powers as a handy excuse to hide from reality, and the people who care for you are left behind without so much as a word."

Estes rose from the bed, staring down at her with eyes that were as empty as a sale rack at Filene's Basement. "I'm not hiding at all, Jane. I knew what you wanted in Rome. You wanted a marriage proposal. I couldn't give that to you, and it doesn't just have to do with the fact that I'm a werewolf. Though that certainly would give someone pause if the discussion of marriage came up. I'll live for centuries. You won't. You'll die unless I bite you. I'm not sure hairy is in your color wheel. That doesn't have as much to do with why I left as one very important detail in all this. You want a family. I can't give you a family because I can't have children. Ever. I won't reproduce and bring a child into this world that will end up like me. Not on purpose anyway."

He turned and left her on the bed with the cruel reality of those words between them.

That reasoning -- whether there were alternatives to that or not -- just might beat the werewolf mind reading problem hands down.

## Chapter Ten

Jane woke on the last day of the competition with a lump on her jaw and a heavy heart. They still had nothing. Absolutely nada, and it left her queasy with anxious anticipation.

There were undercover agents everywhere, but the eerie tomb of silence from the threats left them all shaking their heads.

She toyed with the blow dryer Sheldon had so proudly handed her and wondered if it really did shoot laser beams. Plugging it in, she was just about to test that theory when she heard Estes call her from outside the door.

“Jane?”

Estes poked his head into the bathroom where she was putting the finishing touches on her pitiful cover up job. The bruise to her jaw was ugly and purple, spreading under her chin. “What’s up?”

He touched the spot with a gentle finger. “Hurt much?”

“Nah, not much. I’m fine.”

“We have to go. It’s almost eight.”

“Let’s do it then.”

“Have your gun this time?”

“Right here.” She pulled the lipstick case from between her breasts.

“Ear piece?”

Jane lifted her long hair and nodded, revealing the small device nestled in her ear canal.

“She’s going to end up in the top five, isn’t she?” His question was grim.

Looking at the scores from the other judges, thus far it seemed that way. Miss Northern Lights was hovering at the very top of the heap while Miss Cassiopeia ran a

very close second. All of the judges concurred that it was a tough choice. However, for whatever reason, she lacked something no one could identify, but nonetheless was missing. Jane was convinced Autumn didn't compete for her own personal joy, but for her mother's. The drive to win wasn't there because it wasn't hers. To have made it to this level of competition with so little love of the kill made Jane shake her head in wonder. You had to want it. Autumn didn't, but she'd managed to stay on Miss Northern Lights' butt for over two years' worth of pageants. "It looks that way. Though we shouldn't be too hasty. Anything can happen. I'm proof of that."

"Oh, yeah. You came out of nowhere in Miss USA, right?"

"That was me. Some duct tape, Vaseline, an evening gown and a dream," she said with a fond chuckle. It had been some night.

"Then you nailed Miss Universe. Not an easy feat, coming from behind like you did, huh?"

"Luck of the draw? An exceptionally good answer to a question that made us all raise our eyebrows and a hellafino pair of heels."

"You're beautiful, Jane. The judges saw that. I see it." His low rumbling voice left her heart aching.

"Well, now I'm old and no one remembers Miss Universe 1988 but me."

"I remember. I'll always remember." The accent that only grew thick when Estes was serious punctuated his words.

She looked at him for a moment, softening her gaze with a tilt of her head and letting a small smile of reminiscence pass over her lips. "Thanks, Alejandro. That's nice to hear all these years later."

The moment passed and his face changed again. "You ready?"

"Yeah. As I'll ever be, anyway."

His smile, while rare, was genuine. "Let's roll."

While they made their way down to the large auditorium the rush of contestants and their entourages buzzed by. Racks of dresses labeled with the contestants' names flew past them and the excited giggle of fifty or so contestants surrounded them.

"This is where we part, *cara*," he said at the entrance to the booth for the judges. The endearment he used made her heart clench. He pressed a quick kiss to the corner of her mouth. "Stay safe. I'll be watching." Watching his broad back exit, she sighed again. There was too much she had to stay focused on to have time to gnaw on what would happen with them. He had a secret he'd never been willing to even consider she'd listen to, and after a long phone conversation with Thor this morning she had a little better understanding of Alejandro's unwillingness to share.

Even at NSU, the other agents were bound to be very weary of a near omnipotent fellow agent. It was daunting and made your own skills seem far less adequate, no matter how valuable they really were.

God, what a mess.

Jane slipped into the booth and found her seat while the camera crew did sound checks. The long wait tested her patience.

The ache of her bladder nagged at her. Damn, she should have used the facilities before she'd settled in. And if that wasn't bad enough, she was wrapped up in this damned gown like a sausage in a casing.

"I need to use the ladies room," she said to the judge on her left. "Let them know I'll be right back."

"You'd better hurry. We've only got ten until we're live."

"I'm running," she said over her shoulder, making her way back out the door.

"Agent Blonde?" the harsh whisper in her ear crackled. It was Estes. "If you can't answer cough."

Jane coughed, fighting her way past the crowd of contestants' parents who'd also decided they needed to relieve themselves before show time.

"Miss Northern Lights is missing. I'm in her room now and she's nowhere to be found."

Oh fuck.

Pressing a finger to her ear, she said, "I'm on it."

Jane's heart raced while she pushed her way through the crowd to the elevator. The ride up was painfully slow, but when the doors popped open, Jane flew through them in a cloud of pastel pink silk gown.

The hallways were virtually empty when she raced to Miss Northern Lights' room to find Estes.

"Did anyone see her?"

"I've got every man we have questioning anyone they can touch. No one has seen her since early morning dress rehearsal. Not even her roommate."

Jane had just seen her roommate, Miss Virgo, downstairs, lining up to take her place on the stage.

"Bag anything that even remotely looks like evidence," she said to Estes. "We need every inch of this hotel searched. I've got an idea. I'll catch you downstairs."

He nodded and Jane left him to head toward the other end of the corridor for the elevator. Connie Willows' tall, lean form appeared when the doors popped open. She was with Miss Big Dipper's mother. Never a more suited pair, if you asked Jane.

Connie gave her a nod and continued her conversation with Miss Big Dipper's mother. "I hear you. It's a lot of work. You wouldn't believe the invitations I sent out for this competition to just the press alone. I would have had to have my tongue removed from my head if I'd had to lick all of those envelopes."

She remembered Thor's words about the perpetrator using a sponge to seal the envelopes with the death threats.

Connie Willows didn't like to lick envelopes...

Jane whipped around and yelled, "It was *you*!"

Both of the women stopped mid-stride when she raced after them, grabbing an astonished Connie by the arm. "It was me what?" she asked coolly, frowning at the grip Jane had on her.

"Come with me, Miss Willows," she directed. If nothing else, she could interrogate her. Mother Big Dipper took a discreet leave, scurrying away down the corridor.

"Where do you think you're taking me?" she asked, her voice growing panicked. "I have to be downstairs now, Jane. My daughter needs me."

"Your daughter needs you like she needs a hole in the head." Pulling her room key out of her cleavage, she jammed it in her door and pushed Connie into the room.

Her outrage was evident when she turned to face Jane. Her face mottled with rage and her fists clenched into tight balls. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Jane ignored her and pressed the earpiece with a finger to let Estes know she'd apprehended Connie for questioning. "Estes?"

"Jane? Where are you?"

"In our room. Get up here *now*."

Nothing emitted from the earpiece but static. Well fuck.

Rooting between her breasts, Jane dug out her faux lipstick and flicked the button to release the gun, aiming it at Connie.

"What is that? And who are you talking to?"

"It's a gun and I'd suggest you pop a squat."

"The hell I will. My daughter is competing in the most important pageant of her life, and you're waving a lipstick at me? Have you lost your mind?" she screeched, backing up against the small sofa in the suite.

Jane moved with a quick step to hover over her. "Where is Miss Northern Lights, Connie?"

The flicker of fear that crossed her face didn't escape Jane. It was ingrained in the lines around her mouth, now a tight line. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she responded indignantly.

"So you don't know anything about the death threats sent to your daughter's direct rival?"

"My daughter doesn't have a rival. No one compares to Autumn."

Jane waved the lipstick at her and snickered. "Ahhh, I think you're wrong there. Miss Northern Lights does. In fact she's swept every pageant they've competed in

together, hasn't she? Miss Northern Lights is unbeatable these days, Connie, and that kinda pisses you off, huh?"

She squirmed in her seat, her perfect face not so perfect anymore. Her breathing became rapid and her eyes narrow.

Jane decided to shove her a little further. "In fact, Autumn has come in second in every pageant they've competed in together. Every single one. And we both know how you feel about *second place* don't we?" Jane baited, using a superior tone.

Her expression changed and she snarled, "I might not have won Miss Idaho, but at least I didn't end up a dried up divorcée. I got a beautiful daughter out of it. You got some tires..."

If ever there were words she should adhere to now, they would be the ones that involved not allowing the interrogated to lure you. If only she could justify a tactic that required her to sit on the washed up bitch and stick bamboo under her nails, she'd use it. "But you were never Miss Universe, were you? You weren't much after the Miss Idaho scandal. However, your daughter has some real promise. At least as long as you're pushing her to do something she doesn't really want to do, that is."

Connie stuck her neck out and replied with another defensive statement. "I do *not* make Autumn do anything she doesn't want to do! Autumn loves competing."

"But it's you who cares if she wins. It's you who wants her to win enough to sabotage Miss Northern Lights. You knew if she competed against Autumn in this pageant she'd win. Just like she did all the rest of them. Miss Northern Lights will win the car, the scholarship money, the cash and all the prestige that goes with being Miss Galaxy. That means you," Jane pointed the gun under her nose, "get to live vicariously through her. In fact, I think Autumn will probably enjoy the fruits of her labor far less than you will."

"That's a lie!" she yelped.

"No, I don't think so, Connie. I think Autumn winning would be some twisted sort of satisfaction for you. Her winning would be the final payback for the Miss Idaho



catastrophe. You do remember that, don't you? You know the pageant you lost after you accused the winner of sleeping with a judge?"

"She was a whore! She didn't deserve to win," Connie screeched, rising up from the chair.

"Sit down, Connie, or I'll be forced to use this," Jane threatened, widening her stance.

"What the hell is *that* anyway?"

Her question caught Jane off guard. "What?" she asked, looking down at Connie's finger, and the split second she did she knew she'd regret it, but she did it anyway.

Connie knocked the faux lipstick out of her hand and attacked with a primal scream. Her nails drawn and her fists flying, she knocked Jane in her already sore jaw with a hard uppercut that also sent her earpiece flying.

Goddamn it, she'd have to have it wired shut if this kept up.

Jane reacted by kicking her with one -- impressive if she did say so herself -- swift kick to the shins, catching her with enough force to bring her to her knees.

Grabbing her by the hair, Jane dragged her across the carpet, straddling her thin body. Connie's heavy breathing rattling on its way out meshed with the rustle of Jane's gown.

Which of course turned into a problem. It masked the sound Connie made when she lifted her gown and bit the meaty part of her thigh just above her knee.

"Argggggggggghhhhhhhh!" she screamed at the stinging bite that made her eyes tear up.

It gave Connie enough time to scramble from the floor and run for the door, but Jane was right behind her, reaching for a length of her hair. She pulled her back with the yank of a lifetime, watching Connie's reed thin body bow backward like that of a gymnast.

With a quick snap, she cracked the back of Connie's head with her knee and watched while she crumpled to the floor. Her eyes rolled back in her head and the slump in her form made Jane grateful that she didn't have to kick any more ass.

It was killing her, for crap's sake.

Each ragged breath she took seared her lungs, but she'd apprehended the assailant now, hadn't she? Score one for the out of shape, pathetically winded ex-international spy. Bending over at the waist, Jane pushed air into her lungs and tried to remember where her cell phone was.

And where the hell was Estes?

Jane fell against the bathroom door and took more deep breaths in search of her cell phone so she could locate Estes.

Oh, if only she could remember all of the spy commandments she'd been taught, she would have thought to restrain Connie Willows *before* going to the bathroom to find her purse.

Jane thought that just when the crack of the door against her back took the wind out of her and Connie lunged for her. God, that hurt like hell. She'd easily broken a rib if not two.

Son of a bitch. It flitted through her mind that she had forgotten how painful it was to be a secret agent, and then it occurred to her that Connie Willows wanted blood.

Hers.

And if she didn't stop her, Connie would have Miss Northern Lights' too.

Jane whipped around and grabbed the first potential weapon she could touch.

The blow dryer.

It was still plugged in, and she could only hope Sheldon had tested it before so casually giving it to her.

"Don't move, Connie!" she yelled, wincing at the pain in her ribs and aiming the end of the blow dryer at her.

Her motion seemed to stop all at once. She looked at Jane as if she'd gone utterly out of her mind. "You can't be serious."

"You have no idea how serious I really am. Now don't fucking move."

"Jane?"

"Yes?"

"You have a blow dryer. Are you going to diffuse me to death?"

"Don't make me use this," she threatened, hoping Sheldon wouldn't fail her now.

Connie moved toward her with a precise step, her words eerily calm. Yet when spoken, they were laced with a raw, maniacal quality. "I don't know what all these silly little gadgets are, Jane, but you're a judge in a beauty pageant, not some kind of law enforcement. You need to stop sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong! I'll see you dead before I let you mess this up for Autumn!" She spoke the words while moving closer, and then she charged Jane again.

It happened so fast even Jane had a hard time believing it really worked. The laser beam that shot from the end of the blow dryer was a thin stream of sizzling red and it grazed Connie Willows' shoulder before really wreaking some havoc on the wall outside of the bathroom.

Jane stood startled for a moment.

So did Connie Willows.

Who would have ever thunk it?

A blow dryer that shot laser beams.

It really *did* work.

Very, very cool.

## Chapter Eleven

Estes crashed through the door to the hotel room just as Jane finished restraining Connie. Catching his tall frame from the corner of her eye, she ticked off a thank you to as many gods as she could list that he'd finally shown up.

It meant she could sit the hell down.

Jesus, she'd forgotten how hard it was to be a spy.

"Jane! Are you all right?" he asked while glancing over his shoulder at the now tied up Connie Willows. His face was lined with concern and that caught Jane off guard.

"No, I'm fucking not all right. I think she cracked my ribs and, damn it all, she hit me in the jaw again. I'm going to need dentures if this keeps up."

"You tied her up with nylons, Jane?" he asked, disbelief written all over his darkly handsome face.

She held her ribs and took shallow breaths. "Look, I didn't have anything else, okay? Those are some of my best support hose."

"Did she tell you where Miss Northern Lights is?"

"With the two assholes that hit me the first time."

"And you've seen to her safety?"

Jane grimaced and tried to unzip her gown, rolling her eyes at him. "No, I let them have their way with her." She gave an exasperated sigh for emphasis. "Of course I did. Two of the guys from downstairs are on it. What happened to the pageant?"

Estes knelt in front of her and cupped her burning jaw. "They've called it off."

Damn. All of those young women were going to be in torture without an end to the pageant in sight. Not to mention Autumn, who would probably be disqualified for her mother's misdeeds.

His finger traced her bruised lip, growing more swollen by the moment. His eyes drank in hers with subtle messages Jane couldn't read. "Did she give it up?"

She snorted. "Oh, in spades. I still don't think I quite get that kind of animosity over a beauty pageant, but she obviously was living vicariously through Autumn."

"Well, sort of..."

Jane pulled back from him and chose to keep this business. She wasn't ready to forgive him just yet. "Gimme whatcha got," she said, kicking off her shoes and wiggling her toes.

"Do you know who Miss Northern Lights is?"

"Um, no. Wait. She's really Miss Aurora Borealis, right?" she joked.

"She's the daughter of Miss Idaho 1988."

Connie Willows sobbed then, her mouth puffing out around the nylons that Jane had stuffed in between her lips.

Holy shit. "You're kidding me? Well, then it all makes sense doesn't it? She's been holding a grudge for something that Autumn had no chance against. Assuming Autumn didn't know what her mother was doing. She sure as hell doesn't want to compete in beauty pageants. She wants to get the hell away from her lunatic mother. How did you find this out?"

His grin of satisfaction was evident. "It was in the trivia part of the bios for the contestants."

"How could they have not told us something so important?"

"We had nothing on anyone, Jane. They didn't know that it would have mattered much. I didn't see it until they handed out the programs for the pageant tonight."

Jane turned to Connie and narrowed her gaze in her direction. "Wow, Connie. All over losing Miss Idaho? How pathetic. And to push Autumn into doing something she clearly doesn't want to do so you could have the glory you thought you missed out on? And you called me pathetic because I settled for some tires in a divorce? Hellloooo? Do you have any idea where you're headed? Not to mention the charges that will be brought against you? Like kidnapping? Conspiracy to commit? If Autumn hoped to

have a career without your constant pressure, I'd say that's over now. She'll forever be branded damaged goods and controversy will swirl around her."

"That's okay, Miss Blonde," the lovely young woman said upon entering the hotel room. "I never wanted a career in beauty pageants, but the pageants made Mother happy."

Tears streamed down Connie's face. Her luminous brown eyes were red with defeat. Autumn approached her with a slow glide, kneeling before her mother. "God, Mom... they told me downstairs what you did. How could you? Why? To win some money and a car?" Autumn's grief was apparent, but her bond with her mother was obviously stronger than her anger. She pushed back the hair from Connie's eyes and looked at her slightly scorched shoulder. "Can we get someone to look at this?" she asked Jane with a tremble in her voice.

She softened at the young girl's request. "Of course we can, sweetie. I'm sorry, Autumn." Jane meant it. There was nothing worse than a mother like Connie in the pageant business.

"I know you are and I know you were just doing your job. You and Mr. Estes."

"You need someone to look at you too, Jane." Estes let his hand graze her waist and she winced.

"What I need is an overhaul. Christ, I'm out of shape," she moaned when a flurry of paramedics finally showed up and rushed to help her to her feet.

"You need a stretcher, Miss Blonde," the paramedic quipped.

Estes rose with her and with a gentle hand pulled her to him. "I have to do the paperwork on this and fill Thor in."

Looking up at him, Jane swallowed a sharp retort. Of course he had paperwork to do. It meant he could hide and then up and disappear again.

Biting back her internal thoughts, she smiled. His solid frame near hers made her hands tremble. This was another goodbye.

Tilting her head up she sought his eyes. So dark and troubled. "You do that, Alejandro. Take care," she said before squeezing his arm and pressing a quick kiss to his mouth.

"Miss Blonde? How about that stretcher?"

Jane waved him away. "Oh, bullshit. I can walk. Just give me a ride to the hospital." She limped out into the hall with the aid of an emergency tech and left Estes to deal with the paperwork.

It gave her just a bit of smug satisfaction to do the leaving.

Especially if it meant leaving him with the tedious chore of paperwork.

No matter how much it tore her heart out to do it.

What was one more organ in light of some cracked ribs and a busted up jaw anyway?

\* \* \*

Thor eased Jane onto her couch in her apartment with a smile. "Are you comfortable?"

"Thor? I'm fine. Stop babying me. My ribs are almost healed and I'll be back in the saddle again." She'd had a month to heal her body.

Her heart remained sketchy.

The Miss Galaxy pageant had gone on without her and Miss Northern Lights had won as anticipated. Connie Willows was going to serve a hefty jail sentence and Autumn was attending an undisclosed university, vowing never to do another pageant again.

"But will you be back in NSU's saddle?"

Jane had given that a great deal of thought with her month-long recuperation. She loved being an agent. She'd seen the world. Had some pretty cool adventures. She'd forgotten how cool. She'd also forgotten how painful they could be. "Yeah, I think I might, Thor. I love having my ribs cracked and bite marks in my thigh. There's nothing I'd love more than to come back to NSU full-time. Maybe I can lose an organ next."

His laugh was genuine. "I think some training is in order for you, Agent Blonde. You may be rusty, but that's nothing a few weeks with Estes won't cure."

Her stomach lurched. Estes? "Didn't he go back to London?"

"Oh no. Quite the opposite. He's chosen to stay in the states."

Then she just might have to reconsider her acceptance of Thor's offer. If there was anything she didn't want to do it was to see Estes over and over. That would be like rubbing salt in a wound that felt like it would never heal. "I see," was all she could muster.

"No, I don't think you do, Jane. Agent Estes is an incredibly valuable part of NSU. That he's chosen to work with us is an honor given his abilities."

"Is this gonna be the good versus evil spiel, Thor? So he can do some kooky shit we humans can't. So he chose our side and we should count ourselves lucky. Am I supposed to be grateful that he works with us, not against us?" *Or that he boffs like a champ and dumps me every time I turn around?*

"That's the attitude I'd hoped to avoid in such a competitive field, Jane. It's the reason I leave it up to the agent to disclose. Jealousy is rampant, and sometimes dealing with all of you is like organizing a group of toddlers." Thor's quiet reprimand made Jane cringe.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I'm just -- well, I'm --"

"Angry with him because he didn't tell you before he had no choice."

Oy, Thor knew about them. "Yeah. Yeah, I am angry. It didn't have to be the epic catastrophe he made it into."

"Why don't you tell him that yourself?"

*Why don't you shove it up your stuffy British ass? I'd rather be publicly flayed.* Jane remained silent. It wasn't Thor's fault Estes kept his secrets so ridiculously hidden. They were spies. She'd seen plenty of crazy crap in her time. What was one more crazy - - albeit a little box office movie-like -- thing?

"You know, I think I'll let *you* tell him." Thor looked at his watch and pressed a button. "Estes, come up here."



"No! Don't do that. I don't want to see him," she shouted. "Get back on your watch and tell him to go away. Speaking of that watch, why didn't I get one of those?"

The knock at her door interrupted Thor's potential explanation. His crisp suit rustled while he went to get the door, marking the thick silence of her anger.

"Sir?" Estes nodded his head at Thor and rocked back on his heels.

"Agent Blonde would like a moment alone with you," he said, passing him and taking his leave.

She scooted to the end of the couch and took her first glance at him in a month. His crisp white, button down shirt accentuated his dark skin and his jeans hugged his thick thighs. He looked as incredible as ever and it made her angry. He wasn't allowed to look good when she'd suffered. "I do not want a moment alone with you. You lunar lover. I'm really mad at you, and there's nothing you can say to make up for being the shit you are. Go back to London and leave us mere mortals alone."

Standing in front of her, he smiled with a rather ironic twist of his lips. "Yes, you do. You want to give me a boatload of shit for leaving you in Rome, and then you'll top that off by letting me know I added insult to injury because I didn't call during your recuperation." His tone held amusement. Like this was some big joke.

Jane shook her head. "No. No, I really don't," was her stubborn response. Okay, so she really did want to go up one side of him and down the other. However, he looked so good she wasn't sure if she wanted to rage at him or do him.

And that was always where they ended up. Not this time. No sirree, Bob. She wasn't giving him the satisfaction of getting her all warmed up, knowing full well he was going to disappear. If not today, then sometime soon. It was what Estes did. He ran away.

Nudging her over on the couch, he wiggled in between her and the armrest, grazing his knuckles across her cheek. "Yes you do, and I'd deserve it. I didn't come to see you because Thor said to let you be. I can't do that anymore. I bulldozed him into bringing me here, and I'm not leaving until we settle this."

Jane shrugged him off. "You know how to leave me alone, Estes. You're very good at it."

His jaw clenched. "I've never really left you, Jane. I've always known where you were. How you were. What the Michelin Man did to you in the end."

Nice. It was always nice to know her humiliation was a shared event. "Yeah, well, good on you."

"Look, I was wrong to assume you'd be disgusted by me, but you have to admit you really want a family, Jane. I can't ever give that to you. Try imagining my position in all of this."

Why was he so hung up on a stupid comment she'd made so long ago? Yes, she wanted a family. If he hated children that would be one thing, but that wasn't the case. Not from what she remembered. He just didn't want to marry anyone period. "Well, thanks for sparing me. You done good. Now go back to whatever it is you do when you dump me."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm not leaving until we fix this."

"In order to fix something, Estes, there has to be something broken. We have nothing. So therefore we have nothing broken to fix."

"You know that's not true, Jane," he pressed, his eyes serious. "We had something seven years ago and we have something now. We've always had something, and it wasn't just the sex." His accent was thickening with each word and it would suck her in if she let it.

She had to hold her grudge -- er, ground. "Really? Well then why don't you tell me what that was, Mr. Brazil? Because I remember it differently. I remember just as we were getting close you ran away."

"I did, but I did it because I thought I was protecting you. I can't offer you a family. You talked about it, Jane. I know that's what you want. I know that's why you married the tire guy."

"How do you know I even meant *you*? Maybe I was just talking about the future in general, and you weren't even in the grand scheme of things. That's a pretty arrogant assumption on your part, Julio."

Estes barked a laugh of disbelief. "Now honey, you know that's not true." He smiled with condescension. "You know you love me. I know you love me."

Weren't we the know it all? "It doesn't change the fact that you didn't trust me enough to make my own choices about *my* life."

"Does that mean you would have married me knowing I don't want to create children? At least not the kind I'd spawn? I couldn't do it, Jane. I don't hate what I am, but I do sometimes despise that it makes me very different. It's a lot to ask of someone. A lot to ask of someone I'll watch eventually die. Would you have been open to that?"

Jane lifted her shoulders again in indifference. "I might have."

His smile turned warm. "See? You do love me."

"That was a long time ago."

"No, that's right now. You're forgetting one small detail. I can read some of your thoughts."

*Fuck.*

With a nod of agreement, he smiled. "I'd like to."

"Get out of my head, Estes."

"I don't want to. It's warm and cozy in here. I'm sitting on the brain cell that says you love me. You're choosing to ignore it." He moved closer to her again and tugged the stray strands of hair around her face. "You love me. Just say it, and then we can move onto the part we're really good at." He whispered this against her ear, sending the shiver that would start it all over again down her spine.

"No, no, no," she muttered when he nibbled her earlobe and let his hand trace the outline of her breast.

To which her traitorous nipple responded with a sharp tug.

This wasn't someone she knew. All of a sudden the very silent, intense Estes had become a real Chatty Cathy.

"Agent Blonde?"

"What?"

"You don't mean that."

"I *do* mean that," she said. Yet she found herself arching into his hard body, curving to his solid planes and relishing the rough stubble of his chin on her cheek.

His lips grazed her mouth while his dark, sultry eyes captured hers. "I'll say this once more. I love you, Jane Blonde. I have from the moment I first met you, and if we do nothing else, I say you marry me just so we can get rid of that ridiculous last name you acquired marrying the *wrong* man."

Jane's heart thumped erratically. "Well, he did *ask* me. You didn't." She was clinging to her grudge.

"Ah, but he obviously didn't mean it the way I do."

His roving hands were making it hard to think while they unbuttoned her blouse and slid up her skirt. Long, lightly callused fingers skimmed the edges of her panties, making her twist against him. Her thighs trembled and her pussy ached with need.

"How are your ribs, *cara*? Do they hurt anymore?"

"Not that --" His finger slipped under the silk triangle of her panties and stroked the nub of her clit. "Not that you cared enough to --" Ohhhhh, God the incredible stroke and glide of his thumb. "Check on me to fiiiinddd out..."

"I was wrong, Miss America," he said against her neck, licking and nibbling the tender flesh. "How can I make it up to you?"

Jane sat up and turned, pushing him down on the couch and unzipping his jeans. "It was Miss Universe." She pulled his pants down over his hips and unbuttoned his shirt. Jane stood and shimmied out of her panties, throwing them at him and straddling his waist. She placed his cock hard and ready between the lips of her cunt, rubbing it over her clit.

Estes' hands were immediately on her hips, gripping them with hard fingers as he mumbled her name. She loved the control she was taking. Mentally, it was a high like no other. "I don't know if you can make it up to me..." she teased, smiling down at

him and rolling her hips provocatively. Lifting her hips only to slide along the hot, thick length of his shaft again.

"I can. I swear," he said through clenched teeth.

"How can you make up for treating me like I wasn't worthy of your confidences?" she taunted, groaning when he slipped a finger between the flesh of her pussy and moved with her slow grind.

"Christ, woman," he growled thickly. "How about a lifetime of sucking up?" His hands slipped beneath her blouse and pushed her bra aside, cupping her breasts.

"Why should I believe you?"

His hips thrust upward and Jane poised over his cock, letting it graze her entrance. "Because you love me."

"I haven't confirmed that." With an agonizingly slow glide, she slid onto his cock, taking him in delicious inches.

He moaned and arched into her, driving upward and pinning her to him. Staring at her with an intensity that threatened her breath. "It doesn't matter. You don't ever have to say it. I know it."

Leaning back, Jane placed her hands on his hard chest. "I might forgive you if you let me see you all hairy. Waxing won't be nearly as important for me anymore."

His chuckle was followed by a sharp intake of breath. "I promise to let you see me when I shift."

Rising up and stroking back downward, Jane gasped in pleasure. She was tight around him, her channel slick with the need for him. "Then I might be willing. Might. That's not a definite. I want candy and flowers and all sorts of feminine shit. I want to be wooed in the style to which I'm accustooooomed..." she said on a sigh when his cock hit the spot in her that triggered a flash of heat.

"I'll woowooooo," he rasped, meeting her now fervent thrusts.

"Woo you will," she assured him, groaning in exquisite agony, clenching the muscles of his chest and rocking against him.

Sweat formed on his brow and he cupped her jaw, bringing her down to meet his lips. "See me woo," he muttered thickly.

And woo he did, until they came in a sweet cry of completion, his seed spilling into her and their hips thrashing together.

Jane nestled herself against the protective shelter of his wide chest and smiled.

His arms closed around her and held her tight. "I love you, Miss Universe."

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

His chuckle vibrated against her cheek. "Ahem. I said I love *you*."

"I didn't hear that. Once more please."

"I love you."

"Very faint, but I think I heard you. Maybe just once more. I am old, you know. *A lot* older than I was seven years ago."

"This is the wooing part, huh?" he joked, lifting her chin so he could look at her.

"Yeah? You tired already?"

"Never. I love you."

"That was much better. You willing to compromise on the kid thing?"

"I am. Now tell me you love me too."

"Look at how good you're getting at this. Nice job, Agent Estes."

He swiped her lips with a brief kiss. "You *can* teach an old dog new tricks."

Jane snorted. "And with you, that's kinda the case. Have you been de-flea-d?"

"Jane," he warned.

"Okay. Fine. I love you too, but that doesn't mean you're off the hook."

"I'd have never guessed."

Jane giggled and kissed his jaw. "Hey, do you like dry or canned dog food?"

"Jaaaaaaannne," was the last warning he gave before laying his lips on hers and kissing her speechless.

**The End**

## **Dakota Cassidy**

Dakota Cassidy has given her life over as a sacrifice to her boss, Margaret Riley. She no longer is allowed to communicate with the outside world, or via any cyber connections. If you wish to get in touch with the enslaved, downtrodden, glued to her keyboard Ms. Cassidy, please send all inquires to the Beast Master, um... [www.changelingpress.com](http://www.changelingpress.com).