



**The Domino Effect**

Denyse Bridger

(c) 2006

ISBN 1-59578-285-0

## **The Domino Effect**

Denyse Bridger

Published 2006

ISBN 1-59578-285-0

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2006, Denyse Bridger. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books  
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:  
[raven@LSbooks.com](mailto:raven@LSbooks.com)

Editor  
Vikky Bertling

Cover Artist  
April Martinez

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## Chapter 1

Daniella Renault watched in silence as Martin Fowler pulled on a lightweight jacket and made a grab for his car keys. The tension in the air was palpable and she no longer knew what to say to change it. Fowler had been getting edgier by the day, and the strain was starting to spill over into their relationship. Daniella pushed for answers Martin refused to give her, and they ended up walking around in the same rooms with no true contact. That had been the case since late the previous evening.

"I'm sorry," Daniella finally offered, unable to let Martin leave the apartment with this kind of anger separating them. She wanted to add something, but forced herself to wait for Martin's response to the cease fire.

Fowler had his back to the young woman when he heard the quietly spoken words, and he felt a painful twist deep in his chest. She was apologizing to him for something that had nothing to do with her, and everything to do with Martin's inability to rein in his reactions to what was going on around him. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing fine, dark brown strands off his forehead. He turned equally dark eyes to meet the shifting tide of blue that was his lover's gaze.

"You have no reason to be sorry, Daniella." When she gave him a confused shrug and turned to look out the window, Martin crossed the distance between them. He touched the golden silk of Daniella's hair and felt her slow exhalation of air easing some of the stiffness from her stance. Fowler dropped the keys into his pocket and stepped forward, standing at Daniella's side. "I'm the one who's sorry," he whispered. "This has nothing to do with you, honey."

"I want to help," Daniella murmured, facing Martin with an expression of unmistakable concern. "I know something is hurting you, and that hurts me, too, Martin. I hate it when you shut me out. It always feels like you think you can't trust me or count on me." She didn't bother adding that she frequently feared that the lack of openness from her handsome, worldly lover stemmed from the difference in their ages and experience. Daniella's twenty-one years had been spent sheltered and protected from the very life that made Fowler what he was. Daniella was a photographer and a drama student; her lover was considered to be one of the finest intelligence operatives in the world. Daniella's father, Andrew Renault, had been responsible for much of the agent's training. Martin, at forty, had lived through far more than most men his age—infinately more than Daniella ever would. Fowler and Renault had gone into business together a few years earlier, private investigation, and in typical fashion, they'd been successful from day one. But, their pasts were never far behind them, and she suspected that this was yet another example of that darkness swallowing the light in her world yet again. Martin had taken freelance assignments from his old boss recently, things he was eminently qualified for due to his past training. But, she was more afraid now than she'd ever been in her life. Each time the Agency took him from her, the risk of his never coming back grew more real.

"I trust you with my life, Daniella," Fowler replied without hesitation. "And, I count on you every day, even if you don't always realize it." He smiled, brushing a gentle touch across the smooth slope of her cheekbone. "You keep me sane."

“You always said I made you crazy,” Daniella pointed out with a weak grin. She slipped her arms around his waist and closed her eyes when Martin pulled her close, her head moving naturally to his broad shoulder.

“Just give me some time, Daniella,” Martin requested. “I have to sort out what’s going on at the Agency. Maybe then we’ll take off for the weekend?”

“Why won’t you talk to me?”

Fowler sighed and pushed down the flare of anger the words sparked. This particular question had preceded some rather loud arguments during the past couple of weeks; he was honestly tired of the dissension.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know,” Martin answered, pulling back so Daniella could meet his eyes. “As soon as I know what there is to tell you. Let it go for now, Dani, please.” She would have walked away from him if Martin hadn’t tightened his hold. The injured defiance Martin saw in the wide blue eyes was becoming a much too familiar expression. Fowler hesitated a moment, then bent his head to cover Daniella’s lips with a lingering, sensual kiss. Her initial resistance melted, and her tongue slipped into Martin’s mouth, deepening the caress until they were both gasping for breath. Martin stared into the beautiful young face and felt his entire body stirring with familiar passion. He dragged in a deep breath and eased away from the enticing feel of the slender body pressed against his.

“I’ll call if I have to be late,” he said, then leaned forward to claim the tempting mouth again. Daniella would have been molded to him a second time, but Martin broke the kiss with a regretful shake of his head and spun on his heel before he could change his mind about leaving.

\* \* \* \*

Daniella watched the gleaming, scarlet Corvette pull away from the curb, and she leaned forward in the window seat. Part of her was still annoyed at being put off another time, but at least there was some semblance of peace between them today. She hated the silences even more than the recent disagreements. She was used to Fowler being open and sharing with her; it had always been one of the most attractive things about him. But, Daniella was also perfectly aware that he wasn’t going to relent on this point; if he were going to, it would have happened by now. That meant Daniella had to find out herself what was happening.

How?

She unfolded herself from her uneasy slouch and went to the desk. A minute’s thought gave her a potential target for her questions, and she reached for the phone, a smile slowly transforming her features into an expression of satisfaction.

\* \* \* \*

Christian Baines opened the door and let his sharp gaze wander over his pretty friend. The expression in Daniella’s eyes warned him that she was on some kind of mission, and he suddenly felt like he’d been caught in a well-set trap. He stepped aside and gestured Daniella into the house.

“When are you supposed to be at the hospital?” Daniella asked, strolling into the spacious living room. She loved Baines’ house, she thought with a smile, looking around

appreciatively. Chris had a large, sprawling, ranch-style home, and the entire feel of the place was warm and relaxed—a direct reflection of the man who owned it. Baines' hobby was in evidence in a far corner of the room; paints, brushes and easel scattered in the work area specifically designed for them. Daniella dropped into a comfortable seat on the leather sofa and crossed her legs, revealing an enticing length of shapely limbs.

"I've got a couple of hours," Chris answered. "Want a beer, or coffee?"

"Coffee's fine," Daniella rose quickly. "I'll get it."

Before Chris could object, she had disappeared into the kitchen. *Shit!* Chris thought, a flare of annoyance creeping into his mood. Daniella was being too cheerful, and too solicitous—that meant she wanted something. Not that the young woman wasn't usually generous and good-natured, but there was something in Daniella's voice on the phone that had put Chris on his guard long before she had shown up.

"I need your help, Chris," Daniella said once she was seated across from Baines, coffee cup in hand. Her other hand was filled with a huge Asian pear, lifted from the fruit bowl on Baines' kitchen counter.

Daniella's idea of a well balanced breakfast, no doubt, Chris thought.

"That much I figured out, Dani," Baines commented dryly. The startled expression on her lovely features actually won a small laugh from the physician, and he leaned back in his chair and nodded. "Okay, what's goin' on?"

"It's Martin," Daniella told him after a brief pause and a huge bite from the piece of fruit she was holding.

"Now there's a surprise," Chris remarked, softening the quip with a grin that told Daniella she was being teased, nothing more.

"I'm not joking about this, Chris," Daniella said quietly. "There's something wrong, and I can't get him to talk to me. I know it's got something to do with work, but that's it. You're involved with the Agency..."

"So you want me to ask a few questions," Chris finished with a nod. "I don't work for the Director, Daniella. My connections are flimsy, at best. If he doesn't want me to know what's happening, nobody will talk to me. What about Johnson?"

"He'll say it's up to Martin," Daniella retorted, quickly realizing she wasn't getting very far with Baines, either.

"Maybe he's right," Chris suggested carefully, measuring Daniella's reaction to his gentle resistance. She frequently felt like she was out of his league, and Chris did his best not to treat her with the same over-protectiveness everybody else seemed compelled to exhibit when dealing with her. When the familiar line of stubbornness became more pronounced along her jaw, Chris sighed and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

"Listen, Daniella, this really is something that you and Martin have to work out yourselves. You're asking me to put myself in the middle of your relationship, and to be honest with you, Dani—I'm not wild about that particular position."

"I'm not asking you to do anything except ask a few questions," Daniella protested, anger flooding her features. "What if he's in trouble, Chris? I need to know what's wrong before I can help him."

"Then wait for him to tell you, Daniella. You sure as hell wouldn't want me in the middle if your situations were reversed, would you?"

"I don't push *him* away!"

“He’s doing what he thinks is best,” Chris observed, certain that was the case. “Just like you think it’s for the best that you should know what’s going on with him. Same instinct, same motivation. He loves you.”

Daniella stood up, nervous energy making her restless. She paced the living room before she dropped back into her seat on the couch. “I’m afraid for him, Chris.”

The genuine misery in the sapphire eyes almost changed Baines’ mind about a trip to the Agency, but he knew Fowler would be the one he’d have to deal with afterward. Martin wasn’t thrilled about Baines’ friendship with Daniella under the best of circumstances. If Fowler thought for a minute that she was using it to pry into his professional business, via Chris’s connections, he’d make life hell for Baines.

“Then tell him and accept his decision, Daniella,” Chris advised. “You and I both know that Martin’s not going to be pushed into anything.”

“Yeah,” Daniella muttered, irritation resurfacing. “He’s about as helpful as you are right now.” She didn’t wait for a response, simply rose and headed for the door. “Goodbye, Chris.”

Baines sighed heavily, as annoyed with himself as he was with Daniella. Why did saying ‘no’ to her always make him feel guilty? *Because Daniella so rarely asks for anything*, he answered in the next thought. Even now, the request hadn’t been made because of curiosity; it had been made out of love and worry. Maybe he shouldn’t have been so quick to say no. He was on his feet and headed for the door when he heard the sounds of a scuffle on his doorstep.

\* \* \* \*

Daniella was torn between frustration and anger when she swung the door shut and stepped onto the front steps outside Baines’ house. Damn it! She’d thought she could count on Chris to help her; in fact, she’d been *too* certain of it, she suddenly realized. She was just turning around to go back and apologize when a hand closed on her shoulder. She whirled and barely had time to see the man behind her before pain doubled her over. She clutched at her stomach, choking on the need to draw in air that refused to filter into her lungs. She would have slipped to the ground except the same man who’d landed the solid blow now kept her on her feet.

The world did another disorienting spin on her when she was turned around suddenly, and a gun placed at her left temple. Chris Baines stood staring at her from the open doorway, fear written vividly on his handsome face.

“I want you to come with us, Doctor Baines, quietly, and without a fuss, or your lovely friend will die.”

Chris nodded his understanding, shut the door to his house and allowed a second man to lead him toward the car waiting at the curb. Daniella was pushed into the vehicle ahead of him, and Baines climbed in and drew the shaking woman close to him. Daniella said nothing, and Chris suffered a moment of pain when he realized how often she had been placed in danger during her young life. There was a glaze of terror in the blue eyes, but beneath the panic was a sense of resigned hurt that was disconcerting and infuriating to Baines. Chris clenched his jaw and held her closer.

## Chapter 2

"How much longer am I gonna have to put up with this bullshit, Barton?" Martin's voice had risen to a shout as he paced the small office and grew increasingly irritated. He turned to glare at the two men with him, his eyes resting briefly on Andrew Renault before shifting to the Agency head, Winston K. Barton. "I am not responsible for these deaths!"

"We're perfectly aware of that, Martin," Andrew put in quietly, trying to draw some of the agent's wrath from his friend. "It's being looked into."

"Not fast enough, Renault!" Fowler retorted in fury. He whirled to face the older man, his partner and friend, and dark eyes narrowed as they glared into blue. "Every time I turn around I'm being dragged into some God damn briefing room to answer questions about things that were over years ago. I'm tired of it!"

"I've sent a request for back-ups of all files pertaining to your work, Martin. It's just a matter of waiting for the Pentagon to grant us access." The Agency chief straightened in his chair, fully anticipating a complete disinterest in his statement. It wasn't long coming, Martin glowered at him again.

"And what am I supposed to do in the meantime, Barton? Sit around and watch my life fall apart. I can't work, I can't leave the City, I can't even walk across the street without someone reporting on it," Fowler growled. He resumed his pacing, restless and agitated much more than he should have been. He'd been through this kind of shit before, hadn't he? They'd dug up every bad decision he'd ever made, every lapse in judgment, and every life that had been lost in his missions—all to help put him behind bars to cover up some fucking mess he'd had no part in, but for which they'd needed a likely scapegoat. He felt like it was starting to happen all over again. The dreams he'd had in prison were starting to plague him at night, and he was so frightened of having Daniella's name dragged into the mess that he was pushing her away. He wasn't ready to let that happen; he loved Daniella Renault more than anybody he'd ever known—but, he wasn't blind, he saw the strain growing between them. The fights were becoming a way of life, and Daniella's smile was appearing less and less frequently.

Renault watched the range of emotion playing across Martin's features, the rage that added a dangerous air to the panther-sleek stalk of Barton's office. He was fighting for his life, literally, and there was nothing to do but wait it out.

"How is Daniella?" Andrew asked, knowing how badly that particular question might be received.

"I'm driving her nuts, Renault," Fowler answered, making a deliberate effort to keep his voice down. "She keeps asking me what's wrong, and I keep pushing her away." As soon as Martin said the words out loud, he made a decision. "But, that's going to change, tonight."

"Fowler..."

"Shut-up, Barton," Martin warned, voice dropping to a low hiss of sound. "I'm not gonna lose her because of this, and she deserves to know. I owe her that out of love, if nothing else. If the Agency's monkey squad decides they have to question her, at least she'll know why."

As Fowler had known it would, that shifted the focus for Andrew. Renault turned icy eyes to Barton. "You would not allow my daughter to be dragged into this, Barty." It wasn't quite a question, but the Agency man accepted it as one.

"I've been doing everything in my power to make sure that doesn't happen, Andrew. This thing is falling down like a string of dominoes. We plug one hole and another turns up to take its place. The only thing we've got to go on is a possible grudge against Martin. You know his track record, Andrew. Like us, he's got more enemies than this city has homeless. It's going to take time," he repeated firmly.

"I'll be at home," Martin stated, reaching for the door knob.

"You're staying here," Barton countered. "There's another hearing scheduled in twenty minutes."

"And how many bodies am I going to have to account for this time?" Fowler snarled. He didn't wait for an answer. He yanked the door open and stormed out of the office.

Both Barton and Andrew knew he'd be in the conference room. The knowledge made neither man happy.

\* \* \* \*

Baines walked the floors as he waited for some hint of why they'd been taken. Daniella was sitting on the edge of a bed, staring at the wall like she was immune to what was happening around her. She shifted once in awhile, but Chris saw nothing in the huge eyes whenever their looks met, and that lack of expression worried him deeply.

"Daniella?" He finally crossed the room and dropped to his knees in front of her. "C'mon, talk to me."

"I'm so damn tired of this," Daniella said softly, startling the other man with her words.

"Tired of what?" Chris asked, not certain that he wanted an answer when he saw the hard edge come into Daniella's eyes.

"Being afraid!" She slammed her fists down on the mattress, the gesture a tiny release of the anger and fear that raged within her. "I feel like half my life is spent terrified of losing the people I love, or being used to hurt them. That's what this is about, Chris. They're gonna use me to get to Martin, or Dad."

Chris saw the glitter of tears well in her eyes and he slipped into a seat next to her. Daniella tried to turn away; Chris countered it with a gentle arm around the shaking shoulders and he drew Daniella back into his arms. As much as he wanted to deny her assumption, he knew it was very likely the truth. Instead of false comfort, Baines offered Daniella a shelter in which she could cry out her frustration and rage.

\* \* \* \*

"Well, well, isn't this cozy?"

Chris stirred from the light sleep he'd slipped into and he stared at the man standing near the bed. He felt Daniella move next to him and placed a gently restraining hand on the pretty blonde. Daniella rolled over to look at the man with them, then she shifted closer to Chris again, the move instinctive.

"What the hell do you want?" Baines demanded.

"I think that's something we need to discuss in private, Doctor," the stranger



answered.

Daniella's fingers knotted in the front of Baines' shirt, and Chris looked down at her, reading the undisguised fright in her face.

"I only want to talk, Baines. If you aren't willing to listen, I'm sure Daniella could be persuaded to entertain me."

Baines felt her tense and he automatically placed a hand over the one knotted in his shirt front. "Relax, Dani, I'm not gonna let anybody hurt you."

"That's precisely what I wish to discuss with you."

Chris ignored the words, his eyes locked intently with Daniella's as he waited for some indication of what she wanted him to do. When Daniella nodded and released her hold, Chris climbed off the bed and followed the stranger from the room. He didn't dare look back at her; he could feel the fear arcing across the room as the door shut quietly behind him.

\* \* \* \*

Baines dropped into the chair that his *host* indicated and waited. The man walked around the large, mahogany desk that dominated the study and settled into the cushioned seat of the chair behind it.

"My name is Steven Ayers, Doctor Baines, and unless you cooperate with me, you will be responsible for the death of Daniella Renault."

*Christ!* Baines thought, *that was direct and to the point, wasn't it?* He regulated his expression, careful to keep the depth of his concern from his face. He leaned back and nodded, the gesture speaking for itself.

"You're a very cautious man, Doctor," Ayers smiled, no warmth at all in the shift of expression. "And a reasonable one, I hope."

"Maybe you should just cut to the chase here, and tell me what the hell you want from me and Daniella."

"From Daniella, nothing," Steven said, anger settling into his green gaze. "She's merely the tool I am using."

"To what end, for Christ's sake?" Baines demanded, suddenly furious in the face of this eerie calm. He rose only to be immediately pushed back into his chair. He glanced over his shoulder, saw the man who'd been with Ayers when they were picked up, and he made a conscious decision to be more careful. The last thing they needed was for him to get heroic and have them shot for the effort. "She's just a scared young woman, Ayers. And one of the few truly decent ones I've ever met. If you want anything from me, you'd best leave her to hell alone!"

"I merely want you to do what I'm sure you've been wanting to do for some time now," Ayers replied with no trace of Baines' anger.

"You might want to explain that," Chris pointed out. "It's been a rough day, and I seem to be missing something."

"I simply want you to sleep with Martin Fowler's lover," Steven said softly, watching the brown eyes for reaction.

Laughter was the probably last thing the man had anticipated, yet Baines did precisely that; Chris shook his head at the absurdity of the idea and laughed in Ayers face.

"You're out of your mind if you think I have any intention of touching that girl for

your pleasure,” Chris decreed. The disbelief was rapidly being replaced by anger, and he eased back into his seat and waited.

“Would you rather I let one of my men enjoy her company?” Ayers asked, a hint of irritation creeping into his tone.

It didn’t take Chris long to realize that the man was being perfectly serious and he felt a tremor of apprehension working up his spine at the recognition. He’d seen only two other men since their arrival at this house outside the city limits, and he was sure neither of them would hesitate to do whatever Ayers wanted.

“Why?” he asked, sincerely wanting an answer. “What the hell will destroying Daniella accomplish for you.”

“It’s not Daniella’s destruction I want, Baines,” Steven said in a low voice. “I owe her lover a debt of blood—your cooperation will determine whether Fowler pays that price, or if it will be this child you both love so much.”

Chris felt an invisible trap springing shut, and panic lit a flame of urgency within him. There had to be more to it than he was being told, having him make love to Daniella wouldn’t hurt Martin, unless... *Jesus!* he thought, *they were going to take pictures, or something equally appealing.* Still, he hadn’t figured any other options available, yet.

“If I agree to this, what the hell makes you think Daniella will? She loves Fowler; she sure as hell won’t betray that willingly.”

“Well,” Steven laughed, satisfaction coloring the sound. “At least we know the idea isn’t altogether unattractive to you. She’s a beautiful woman, though, isn’t she? It would be a pity to have to change that.”

“She won’t go along with this,” Chris repeated, trying to keep the hint of despair from his tone. He could feel the noose tightening and knew he was losing the battle to keep Daniella safe.

“Then you’ll have to persuade her, won’t you?” Ayers told him, ice in the words. “You’re a doctor, Baines, I assume you can administer something that will make her more than willing to share your bed for us.”

“You want me to drug her, then betray her.” Chris closed his eyes and felt the sting of tears amid his rage. If he did this, and there was little choice but to do it, he’d be betraying something very precious to him, Daniella’s trust. It would be a bitter loss.

“The alternative is to give her to Eddie,” Steven said, his nod indicating the man standing at the door. “He really is very anxious to have you decline.”

*I’ll bet!* Chris thought in a wave of loathing. “I haven’t got anything to give her,” he stalled, knowing it would be futile.

“Tell me what you’ll need, and I’ll see that you have it once we arrange things.”

Baines said nothing, and when he stood up this time, he was allowed to leave the study. A hand on his arm pointed him back toward the room he’d left Daniella in earlier. He walked ahead of Eddie and tried to think of some way to refuse Ayers, a way that wouldn’t get Daniella killed, or raped by the imposing bulk presently following Chris’ every movement. He was stopped at the door. Eddie unlocked it, then flung Baines into the room. The slam of the door registered in the same instant as Daniella’s absence, and Chris launched himself at the closed exit.

He barely suppressed the enraged shout that rose in his throat, but he stumbled back and flopped onto the bed, refusing to voice his panic for their amusement. He shuddered into a tremor of impotent fury as the truth of his predicament sank in for perhaps the first

time. He was expected to seduce one of his closest friends, betray everything she held dear, and still hope that Daniella would understand if they both survived the mess.

Then there was Martin.

Chris collapsed on the bed and moaned softly in an agony that was pure emotional turmoil. It wouldn't matter if he survived this; the reprieve would be brief because if he did what they wanted of him, Fowler was certain to kill him.

### Chapter 3

Baines was left alone with his thoughts for a couple of hours before he heard the sound of a key in the lock. He stood up and waited for the door to open.

"We have everything you need, ready and waiting," Ayers informed him with a broad smile. "Come this way, Doctor, your 'patient' is waiting for you. She's getting anxious."

"If you've hurt her..." Chris murmured the words near Steven's ear as he passed, and the warning brought a glint of amused irritation to the other man's eyes.

"I assure you, Baines, I have no desire at all to touch young Miss Renault. Unlike Martin Fowler, I don't take what belongs to someone else. He'll soon understand what that kind of betrayal feels like, though, won't he?"

Chris whirled and swung at the smirking man's heavy face, his fist landing a solid blow to Steven's jaw. The other man slammed back against the wall and Baines' hands closed around the thick neck, searching out the throat to bury his thumbs in soft, yielding flesh. Ayers was gasping, and his face turning bright red by the time Chris was hauled away. Baines turned to meet the man trying to hold him and he reeled backward when he was kicked squarely in the stomach. He slid down the wall, choking on the pain and sudden lack of air.

"That was a very stupid thing to do, Baines," Steven sputtered. "I think it will cost your young friend some of her comfort."

"No!" Chris nearly retched at the plea he heard in his own voice, but fear was making him regret his actions already. "I'm the one who screwed up, don't take it out on Daniella."

"Ask nicely, Doctor?" Ayers requested, once again enjoying his control over the enraged physician.

"Please, leave her alone." Chris forced the words out from between tightly clenched teeth. He waited for some response, unconsciously preparing to make a second plea if it proved necessary.

"That's much better," Steven said quietly. "Now, if you get this right the first time, it should all be over very shortly."

Eddie jerked Chris to his feet and shoved him toward a closed door at the end of the hall.

"Eddie will be right outside the door, Doctor," Ayers warned. "You might want to remember that. If you can't win Daniella's agreement, I'll have to rely on someone who will."

That said, Chris was pushed through the door and heard it shut quietly behind him. Daniella looked up at him, eyes huge with fright, then she was off the bed and in his arms before Baines could take a single step toward her.

\* \* \* \*

Martin was about ready to hit the roof when Barton finally interrupted the interrogation. Fowler looked up, trying to read the Agency head's expression when

Barton dropped a bulging file on the conference table.

"Gentlemen," he addressed the assembled group. "This is the first part of the Pentagon files regarding Martin Fowler's career with us, and the other intelligence agencies he's worked for. Military Intelligence is still pulling their records, and we're expected to have them before the end of the day. I suggest you take the time to read this material. In the meantime, I think Mr. Fowler should be dismissed."

"We're by no means through with him," one of the men near the head of the table announced.

"I think you are, Steinman," Barton countered. He ignored the other man's protest and nodded in Fowler's direction. "Martin, how about a drink, in my office?"

"Best offer I've had all day," Fowler said with a smile. He rose and headed out of the room, waiting in the hall for the other man. Barton stayed in the conference room for several more minutes, then he, too, emerged. Martin didn't question the dark expression that dominated Barton's craggy features, but simply followed him back to his office.

\* \* \* \*

Chris pulled away from Daniella and led her back to a seat on the bed. He kept a gentle grip on her elbow and sat next to her.

"How are you feeling, Daniella?"

"What's going on, Chris? What do they want?"

"Relax, Dani," Baines murmured, pitching his tone soothing and gentle. "I told you I wasn't going to let them hurt you, and I won't. But, you have to trust me."

Daniella stared at him, confusion in her expressive features. It was an odd thing for Chris to say; the one thing that had always been unquestioned between them was the trust they had in each other. "Who are they really after?"

"Martin," Chris answered, with obvious reluctance. "They haven't made any move toward him, though. I don't know why, or what they think he's done." He forestalled the questions he felt forming in her mind. "I don't know anything right now, Daniella."

"You okay?" Daniella asked, only then noticing the lines of pain around Baines' dark eyes.

"Yeah." Chris shrugged carelessly. "Just a difference of opinion. You know me, don't know when to keep my mouth shut."

He heard the whisper of sound near the door and realized he'd better stop talking and start doing something before Ayers decided to send Eddie in. Chris eased away from Daniella and knelt before her, his hands resting on her silk stocking covered thighs. The contact lit a shiver of reaction deep inside him and he was immediately conscious of his response.

"Nothing's going to happen to hurt you, Daniella. I'm here, and I'm going to take care of you. I want to give you something to help you sleep for awhile, okay?"

"What?" Daniella's eyes narrowed and suspicion flared to life in their depths. "Are you nuts, Chris? We have to find a way to get out of here, not take a nap."

"You said you trusted me, Dani. I need you to accept this."

"Why?"

Chris felt his heart slip a little when he touched her face and forced the lie from his lips. "Because if you don't, they'll kill me, Daniella. And, then they'll kill you. I don't want to let that happen, Dani." The look of pure terror that lit in her vivid blue eyes made

Chris' stomach lurch. Nausea rose in his throat, crested there, then receded by sheer force of will.

Daniella nodded, fear and uncertainty keeping her silent. She reached out a shaky hand and touched the soft, wheat blonde head that was bowed before her.

"It's okay, Chris," She said, her voice thick with emotion. "Just tell me what you need me to do."

Chris felt tears flood his eyes and he looked up into Daniella's face, reading there all the innocent trust and love she could never hope to conceal from anybody. *I can't do this to you.* Even as the thought formed, Baines knew he had no choice, and he would do whatever Ayers asked of him if it meant keeping Daniella alive.

"They're taking me somewhere, aren't they?" Daniella asked in a hushed whisper.

"I don't..."

Daniella shrugged, wiped aside the stain of her own tears and began unbuttoning her blouse. Chris stared at her, guilt and fear warring within him. When Daniella extended her arm and looked away, Baines thought he'd pass out from the explosive, blinding rage that washed over him.

"Do it," Daniella whispered, the order little more than a hiss of expelled air.

Baines forced himself to move and he reached for the drawer in the nightstand, yanked it open, and checked the contents. His anger went up another notch when he noted the items there, the syringe, the tranquilizer he'd requested, and a bottle of alcohol. There was also an assortment of condoms. His hand shook when he pulled out the drug and the needle. He slammed the drawer shut, too violently, and looked up to see Daniella watching him closely.

"I'm sorry, Daniella," Chris told her, as he reluctantly prepared the injection.

"I know." Daniella closed her fingers around the physician's wrist when Chris reached for her arm, and when the brown eyes rose to meet hers, she smiled. "Don't let them hurt Martin, Chris. Promise me you'll help him."

Baines couldn't trust his voice, so he nodded. Daniella averted her gaze, and Chris remembered how much she hated needles. His hand shook when he swabbed the extended arm and inserted the metal tip into a vein.

Once he'd put the drug into Daniella's system, Chris flung the syringe aside with a violence that made her flinch. Baines forced himself to watch as Daniella's clear blue eyes almost immediately grew dazed and unnaturally bright. The tranquilizer was taking hold quickly, as he'd expected. Daniella swayed a little when Chris moved to a seat next to her on the bed, and she giggled, then grinned when she heard herself.

"This isn't so bad," she decided, her voice slurred.

"Dani." Chris said the name as an affectionate chide, his tone warm despite the circumstances. "C'mon, honey, lie down before you fall down." Daniella shrugged and fell back on the bed, offering no protest when Chris positioned her so that she was lying comfortably. Chris watched her relax into the pillow and he knew if he didn't do something, Daniella would be asleep in a few minutes.

Baines stretched out beside her and leaned over her, his hand drifting to the curve of Daniella's cheek. She was so beautiful, Chris thought, accepting his own feelings with real reluctance. He didn't want to admit, even to himself, that this was something he had thought about. During the past year, Chris had grown to love her, and in recent months he'd found his thoughts wandering to a more intimate relationship. He would never have

believed he could be attracted to another man's lover—it went against long held principles and his personal sense of honor. Plus, she was years younger than him, almost fifteen years, a kid... He smiled without humor; Fowler had probably felt the same way before he'd fallen for Daniella.

A click of sound caught Baines' attention and he felt a swell of rage when he realized Ayers had just turned his camera on. The show was underway, and Chris was now out of stall time. He let his fingertips wander over the smoothly contoured features and Daniella's eyes opened, curiosity working through the fuzziness.

"What are you doing?"

Chris wasn't sure what to say, so he smiled and leaned closer, his breath ruffling the golden silk of Daniella's hair. "I really do love you, Dani," he offered, almost afraid to say the words, especially under these circumstances.

"I know," Daniella murmured. "I love you, too, Chris, but..."

Baines cut her off when he touched her chin and tilted her head so that he could cover her lips in a gentle kiss. There was no response at all to the caress for a few seconds, then Daniella shook her head and pulled away. Confusion flooded her features and she tried to sit up; Chris placed a hand on her stomach and held her where she was.

"Don't, Daniella, please."

"Chris?" Daniella tried to shake off some of the sluggishness, and she pushed Baines' hand away from its gentle restraint. "I don't understand."

"I have to do this, Daniella," Chris told her, the truth coming naturally, despite his knowledge that it would only sound more puzzling to Daniella.

"Have to do what?" A faint thread of suspicion was working its way into Daniella's expression, and she tried again to draw away.

"They're going to hurt you if I don't this, Daniella," Baines admitted. "I can't let that happen."

"I don't care if they hurt me," Daniella protested, trying hard to get past the insistent buzzing in her mind. "I can't..."

Chris felt the tiny prickle of fear at the back of his neck and he knew, instinctively, that he was stretching his time too far. If he didn't get this situation under control, somebody else was going to be taking his place. He claimed her mouth a second time, tightening his hold on Daniella so she couldn't break away from the caress. Baines felt the gasp for air and when her lips parted to object, he slipped his tongue into the warmth of her mouth, drawing her unwillingly into the kiss. He was completely disconcerted when her body went rigid beneath him.

"Daniella," he whispered into her ear. "If you make this a battle of wills, it's going to end up costing you Martin's life." He hated himself for the tactic as soon as it had been employed, because he knew he'd just insured total cooperation. It wasn't a lie, he told himself in the moments it took for understanding to register in the huge sapphire gaze staring back at him.

"I love him," Daniella murmured, tears making the words a low rasp of sound.

"I know, Daniella." Chris tried to soothe her, "I know. I won't hurt you, Dani. I promise."

"I don't care."

Chris felt all the fight wash out of Daniella with the softly uttered declaration, and the blue eyes closed, resignation in every line of her beautiful face. Baines had just been

given permission to do whatever he damn well pleased, and it made him sick with hatred, for himself. In that wave of disgust came the silent vow that he would have Ayers' head for what he was forcing Chris to do.

Chris let his hand glide over the smooth contour of Daniella's breast, still encased in a lacy bra. His fingers tingled at the feel of silken skin beneath his touch as he brushed a caress over the upper part of her chest. He felt a pang of awareness, the sensation a shock that woke still more guilt. Somehow, he knew he should not enjoy any aspect of this encounter, but innate honesty told him he would. He bent his head to Daniella's neck, felt her turn her head to allow easier access to the curve, and his lips began a slow, sensuous discovery.

Daniella shivered, and Chris knew she'd see the reaction as a betrayal, but that is was probably beyond her conscious control. She did love him, but it had never been sexual. Chris could feel her fighting the urge to push him away, the threat to Martin keeping her still. He also knew she couldn't possibly understand why this would save Fowler's life, but she trusted Chris implicitly. If Baines said this was the only way to help Martin, Daniella would do whatever he asked.

Another tremor rippled through the curvaceous body of the woman pressed tightly against the mattress, and Chris let his mouth wander from the side of Daniella's neck. He could feel the tiny catch in his own breathing and he heard a gasp came from Daniella when he covered one of her nipples and sucked gently. Daniella's fingers tangled in his hair, and Chris wasn't sure if the response was rejection or acceptance. He raised his head and saw the glitter of tears in Daniella's eyes, then she threw him further off guard when she touched Chris' face and drew him into a delicate, tentative kiss.

Chris melted into the caress, his tongue probing and exploring with growing hunger as Daniella arched beneath him, the response natural and exciting. Baines' body settled firmly over Daniella's and he allowed himself to forget everything except the warm response of her arms slowly going around him. The hold was loose and lacked real passion, but Chris no longer noticed as he gave himself over to his own reactions to touching her.

Their kiss broke with a gasp, and Chris moved his mouth to the hollow of Daniella's throat as his hands reached around her to find the clasp of her bra. He unhooked it as she arched upward to permit him room to pull it away from her. He eased back enough to finish removing it, then he stared at her, savoring the flushed beauty of her skin, the soft swells of her breasts, and the rigid, thrusting nipples that crested them. His hands moved to her thighs and began to caress their curving lines, each sweeping brush taking him under her skirt and closer to the hidden warmth between her legs. She spread her thighs and gave him easier access to her. Chris' exploring hands encountered garters, and silky panties and he felt the involuntary twitch of response from her when his fingers smoothed over the soft mound of her abdomen, then dipped to the heat between her legs. She lifted her hips and Chris tugged at the waistband of her panties, pulling them slowly down the length of her legs. She unbuttoned her skirt, and stared into his eyes when he removed that final piece of clothing. She spread her thighs wide and he wanted not to look at her, but couldn't stop it. She was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever met, and it sprang from her soul as much as her body and face. Everything about her was soft, and alluring. He touched the golden tangle of her pubic hair with the backs of his fingers, then parted her soft folds, his fingers gentle as they probed into her hot flesh. She was wet and



so tight, and she whimpered weakly when he slid one finger deep into her and began to thrust in a slow rhythm. Her hips rose, answered the easy movements of his hand, and he leaned down to take one of her nipples into his mouth, licking and sucking repeatedly.

“Do this quickly, Chris,” she whispered. “Please. Before I can’t let you.”

His conscience reared and he reminded himself that this was a torture for Daniella, not a willingly shared pleasure. He drew back, met her wide eyes, then nodded and stood up.

Chris shivered unconsciously when Daniella’s hooded eyes followed every motion of his hands as Baines stripped off his own clothes. He stood beside the bed for a moment, embarrassed by the lack of reaction he could see in Daniella’s face. The thought struck him as absurd when he allowed the circumstances of this encounter to tweak at his mind. His own body was responding vividly to something he’d wanted for some time. His arousal was impossible to miss, but Daniella wasn’t anywhere near as excited. Daniella’s heart, so closely tied to her body’s passion, belonged completely to Martin. She couldn’t have been expected to show more enthusiasm than she was currently exhibiting. Gentle acceptance was the best that Chris could hope to have.

Baines wiped his mind clean of everything else as he climbed back on the bed and drew Daniella into his arms. She turned to him, and Chris felt a whispery kiss touch his shoulder before Daniella’s hands moved over his sides in a shy caress. She was trying desperately to accept what was happening, and somehow that made it seem all the worse to Chris.

Chris took Daniella’s hands in his and kissed each palm. Then he shifted back over her lush curves and captured trembling lips with his. He drank in the taste of her, feeling his body shivering in reactive passion when Daniella’s hands moved across his back and came to rest at his hips. Chris felt the ache growing in his body and he eased back, slipping lower in the bed to settle between Daniella’s legs. She closed her eyes and spread her legs further; the instinctive movement cost her some of her control and Chris heard the sharp intake of breath that covered a sob. He waited out the struggle for control.

“You’ve never done anything like this before, have you?” The question referred to betraying someone he loved, not sex, and Dani knew he’d understand the real nature of the query.

The words were so softly spoken Chris almost missed them entirely. He turned startled eyes to Daniella, who was now staring up at him, and shook his head. “No, I haven’t.”

“Have you thought about doing this? With me?”

Again, there was an eerie lack of emotion in the quiet words, making Chris wonder what Daniella was asking for in the gentle exchange. He opened his mouth to deny the question, and the lie lodged in his throat. He nodded, and remained silent.

Daniella felt the wash of confusion rise again and she dragged in a deep breath in an effort to clear her thoughts. She was trying desperately to make this as easy for both of them as she could. She thought of Martin, the reaction spurred by the soft, dark eyes staring down at her, expectancy in the brown depths. Chris’ eyes were so much like Martin’s, she thought absently. Fowler had been the most loving and gentle man Daniella had ever known, and she shuddered unconsciously when she remembered the first times they’d made love. She’d been a virgin before Martin, and in those first encounters, she’d been so awkward, and so afraid of doing everything wrong. It struck her as very odd that

she was seeing those same fears in the dark eyes watching her now.

“What do you want me to do?” She asked.

Baines thought for a moment he’d heard the words incorrectly. He also knew they were taking precious time from Daniella’s safety, but he refused to ignore her enquiry.

“I want you to not hate me,” Chris said, the words flowing from him without conscious thought.

“I don’t think I could, even if I did want to,” Daniella replied with a faint smile. She hesitated a moment longer, then reached for Chris, pulling him gentle toward her until he was settled between her legs, his cock poised at the entrance to her body. She reached between them, and guided him into her, hissing softly in reaction as her body accepted another man for the first time.

Chris thrust gently, moving deeper into her with each motion, until Daniella’s hips started to flow into the rhythm. Chris felt the seesaw of emotion and he pretended not to notice the shifting reactions. He was growing more and more excited with each push of his hips into Dani’s compliant heat. Daniella felt as wonderful as Baines’ imagination had intimated, and Chris began to lick teasing caresses over the smooth curve of her graceful neck as he concentrated on the orgasm that was building inside him.

Chris felt the pulse of her orgasm nearing and his hips answered the rising thrill, pumping faster against Daniella’s now-willing body. He heard her muffled cry against his shoulder and her release tightened the muscles of her body—the reaction was like a spasm of fire running the entire length of Baines’ tall form. With a final thrust of his hips, Chris reached his own climax, breathless and choking into Daniella’s shoulder. He clung to her, his head spinning with the last rush of passion as he fought for enough air to breathe.

Long, silent minutes passed before Chris became conscious of the warm trickle that wet his thighs. He was still held in the tight warmth of Daniella’s body, and with real reluctance, he eased away, his cock slipping free of her. Daniella curled into the pillow instantly and Chris saw the sobs that shook her. He wanted nothing more than to offer some kind of comfort to her, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t bear to see the betrayal and pain he knew would be in the huge blue eyes.

Chris collapsed back on the bed, his eyes closed, racked with a guilt he was certain would never leave him. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t have done anything differently; all his heart would recognize was the pain he’d inflicted on the gentle woman huddled next to him.

## Chapter 4

“What do you want done with them now?” Eddie asked, watching Ayers wrap the video cassette and address the padded envelope. He’d been genuinely surprised that the blonde doctor had gone through with the game, surprised and disappointed. Eddie had been looking forward to teaching the beautiful girl a few lessons of his own.

“Leave them,” Steven said sharply, reading the thoughts on the other face. “I told you and Jimmy what I want. Martin Fowler is the target, not this girl and their friend. Once I have no further use for them, you can do whatever you wish. Until then, leave them alone.”

“What the hell makes you think home movies are gonna get you any satisfaction from this guy?” Eddie demanded, knowing as he said the words that he was inviting one of Ayers’ wild flares of temper. The man was like a raving lunatic sometimes, his rage making Eddie and his partner uneasy and leery of Steven; then, most of the time, the man was too controlled.

“This is just a small part of the game Mr. Fowler is being forced to play. But, it may very well be the most important part of the plan.” Ayers let his mind drift for a moment, then he smiled, the expression devoid of any warmth. “You didn’t know my wife, of course. A beautiful woman, intelligent, vibrant, one of the best agents in Russia. Until Martin Fowler arrived. When he was through with her, she killed herself. I want him to know what it feels like to watch someone you love betray you. She left me for him, and he discarded her without thought. Now, he’s in love with this girl. Angelica wasn’t worthy of the illustrious Martin Fowler’s affection, but a mere child has taken the place she coveted more than her life!” Hatred blazed through him, blotting out reason for long, tension-laden minutes. Then, with extreme effort, Ayers pushed it all into the corner of his mind where he had reserved and nurtured his loathing for Fowler. He’d ruin every aspect of the agent’s life before he demanded the final price, and by that time, Martin might even welcome death.

\* \* \* \*

Chris started from the light sleep he’d fallen into and he felt a jolt of panic twist within him when memory fed him the reason for the strange surroundings. It all came back to him as he turned to stare at Daniella’s naked back. She was still turned away from him, the sheets tangled around her waist. The shaking had stopped, telling Baines that she’d fallen asleep after their lovemaking.

“Shit!” Chris whispered, the word a heartfelt sigh of regret. He started to climb off the bed to dress, then stayed where he was. He didn’t want to wake Daniella yet, and when she did stir, Chris didn’t want her to feel like she was at any sort of disadvantage. If Baines were dressed and watching over her, Daniella would feel doubly used. He settled back onto the pillow, and stared at the ceiling, fully prepared to wait for the drug to leave Daniella’s system.

“What do they want?”

Baines jumped at the soft query, and he turned to see Daniella staring at him. She

had hardly moved, only enough to face Chris, and Baines had missed the shift entirely.

"I don't honestly know, Daniella," he answered after a moment's hesitation. "He wants to hurt Martin, and he's using us to do it, but I really don't know anything more."

"This will destroy us," Daniella said, the words breaking as tears began again. "How can he ever trust me again?"

"Martin will understand. He's not going to blame you," Chris pleaded with her soul for understanding and acceptance. "He's going to blame me, like he should."

Daniella's blue gaze wandered over Chris, seeing the slender, well-defined contours of his body. She shivered, the reaction involuntary when she recalled the feel of Baines' body moving with hers, and the gentleness of his touch. The awareness made her cheeks flame scarlet with embarrassment and shame.

Chris saw the guilt pour over her features and he reached out to grab Dani's arm before she could turn away from him.

"This isn't your fault, Daniella!"

"I know that!" Daniella retorted, the words too sharp. She reined in her anger and met the even brown gaze Chris leveled at her. "It's not your fault, either. I just hate how I feel right now. I betrayed the person I love, Chris."

"Is that why you're angry, Daniella?" Baines held his breath as he waited for Daniella to answer him, not daring to admit, even to himself, why it was so important.

Daniella sat up and closed her eyes, letting her head fall back. She took several deep breaths, then turned to look at her friend.

"I love you, too," Daniella said after an awkward pause. "But, it's not the same, Chris. At least, I never thought it was."

"I'm sorry, Daniella," Chris offered weakly. "God! I'm sorry."

"I don't want him to hate me, Chris. I don't think I could stand it if Martin hated me."

Baines heard the pain and fear in her voice, the emotions bypassing everything else she could have been feeling. Chris reached out and pulled her head to his shoulder, his hand stroking the silk of Daniella's hair.

"Martin could never hate you, Daniella," he assured her. "No matter what happens, Martin loves you more than anything in the world. Nothing's gonna change that, Dani."

For a long time Chris simply held Daniella in his arms, offering his love as the only comfort he had in the face of her pain. The torrent of inconsolable tears seemed endless.

\* \* \* \*

It was nearly dark when Martin stumbled up the stairs to his apartment. He was weary beyond belief. He wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed with Daniella, curl into his lover's arms and sleep for the next week. The idea lit a shadow of smile across his features and he laughed as he inserted his key in the lock; a week in bed with Daniella probably wouldn't provide much sleep time. He was still grinning when he opened the door and his foot kicked a package that had been leaning against the sheet of wood. He bent to pick up the large, padded envelope and continued into the apartment.

He tossed the packet on the counter and headed for the bedroom. He'd been calling home for the past couple of hours, and hadn't gotten any answer other than the machine. Daniella usually wasn't late without leaving some kind of message. There hadn't been one, and Fowler assumed she would be here by now. He shrugged, figured she'd be home

any time, and decided to take a quick shower. He could use the relaxation it would provide, since Daniella's absence made more pleasant diversion out of the question.

\* \* \* \*

A half hour later, Fowler was wrapped in his heavy robe and settled into the cushioned comfort of the couch. He got up to pour a scotch and the envelope on the counter drew his attention. He picked up his drink and went to retrieve the package on his way back to the couch. He tossed back half his scotch, set the heavy crystal glass on the coffee table, and leaned back to open the envelope. An unmarked videotape fell into his lap and he looked into the envelope to see if there was any note. Nothing. He turned the tape over in his hand, a knot of tension settling into his shoulders again. He rubbed at the back of his neck, the gesture unconscious, then went to put the tape in the VCR.

Martin refilled his scotch and sat down again before he turned on the television and hit the playback on the tape. He almost choked on his drink when the screen came to life and he saw his young lover lying on a bed with Chris Baines. She had no shirt on, and Baines' fingers were smoothing over the planes of Daniella's face. Fowler felt a murderous swell of fury burning a trail throughout his body, and he wanted to look away from the television. Morbid, perverse fascination held his gaze locked on the scene he was being forced to witness. He saw Daniella's face through a blur of tears, and was surprised to recognize them as his own pain spilling out in silent grief. Her mouth moved, but there was only eerie silence, and he felt bile rise in his throat when Baines' lips covered Daniella's.

Tension pounded in Martin's temples and he wanted to be sick, a sensation that dissolved into blood lust when he watched Baines' fingers tugging at Daniella's underwear and skirt. She was naked and lying passively on the bed moments later when Baines' tall figure came back into view. The young physician settled his own naked form over Daniella's and Fowler felt a choking sob escape him when he saw Dani's body arch into the contact. She wasn't being raped, his mind told him; she wasn't being hurt, she was making love—to somebody else. Somebody Martin knew Daniella really did love.

Fowler thought the pain in his chest was going to make him pass out, but that mercy wasn't granted. The agony grew more intense with each moment of tape, and when he saw Baines' mouth close over the rosy tip of one breast, Martin wanted to scream his rage. He'd kill Chris for this, he decided. If it meant going to prison, it would be a small enough price to pay for this betrayal. Baines knew exactly how she felt about him, and he was clearly enjoying taking advantage of Daniella's feelings.

*Daniella's not fighting him, though, is she?*

Martin ignored the sound of his conscience, but forced himself to look closer at the tape, to watch Daniella, despite the rage that wanted to blot everything out of his mind. That was when it registered. Nobody knew Daniella more intimately than Martin, and he could usually feel her responses before Daniella herself did when they made love. He knew how she moved, how she reacted to every tiny touch; there was none of that incredible, sensual sharing in this encounter. Daniella was responding to Chris, but just barely, and she was making no genuine effort to return his caresses.

The realization hit him with the impact of a solid blow to his stomach, and Fowler forced his look to see Chris' features. The doctor was obviously enjoying his lover's company, but there was a sadness in the expressive features that told Martin it was not by

choice for them. Chris' touch was gentle, and Martin knew he was making it as easy for Daniella as the situation would allow. In a distant part of his soul, Martin thanked Chris for that, knowing instinctively that neither of them was to blame for the act he'd just been forced to witness. He waited out the end of the tape, the need spurred by the fear that if he didn't, he might not know if Daniella was still alive. When she shifted on to her side, Martin was given a brief glimpse of her face. Tears poured from the tightly closed blue eyes, and Fowler ached for the anguish he knew she was feeling.

When the screen turned to snow, Fowler knew it was over. His heart told him Daniella was safe—he had to believe it.

\* \* \* \*

It took several drinks to take some of the edge off Martin's rage, and he finally went to the phone to call Barton. In the darkness of his mind, he had begun piecing together the tape with everything else that had been going on in his life. The Agency man had used the right phrase when he'd described the mess as the domino effect. Piece by piece, somebody was taking Fowler's life apart, watching it fall down around him. The Pentagon records had gone a long way toward clearing Martin of the allegations against his professional record. One of the resident computer geniuses had been enlisted to find out who was planting the false information, and he was expected to have a place for them to start by morning. It had never occurred to Martin that whoever was doing this to him would find a way to destroy him personally, as well.

Martin was about to hang up when Barton answered the private line.

"Daniella's been taken," Fowler informed him, not bothering to dance around the reason for his call. "Chris Baines is with her."

"I'll be right over," Barton answered, and the line went dead.

Fowler dropped the receiver into place, walked over to the VCR, and yanked the tape from the machine. He looked at it for several moments, then hurled it into the fireplace, the force of the impact shattering the plastic casing. Brown, filmy tape spilled out of the dark void, and Martin went to the hearth. He considered the remains of the videotape for a few seconds, then he built a fire.

Long minutes later, he watched, enthralled in a macabre fashion, as the tape melted and sizzled amid the leaping tongues of flame. When he found the man responsible for the recent nightmare of his life, Martin fully intended to take out his revenge in blood. He let the thought settle in his mind, fan outward to encompass the rage he felt, then recede. Over and over again like the rise and fall of waves crashing onto a sandy beach.

\* \* \* \*

Chris paced the confines of the small bedroom he and Daniella had been left in since earlier in the day. A glance out the frosted window told him the day had stretched into night, and Baines was beginning to wonder how long it would be before they'd be visited again by Ayers or one of his goons. He passed the bed another time, and his gaze wandered over Daniella. They'd gotten dressed once her tears had subsided, neither of them daring to look at the other until they were fully covered. In the awkward silence that had followed, Daniella began to grow drowsy, the lingering effect of the tranquilizer making her sleepy. Chris had told her to sleep, knowing it was the fastest way to cleanse

her system of the narcotic.

While Daniella slept, Baines had too much time to think. Too much time to really look at everything, and measure the depth of his guilt. He stopped his pacing and went back to the bed. He settled on the spread, his back to the wall and watched over Daniella. The young face was smoothed out in sleep, no traces of the pain and tears that had stained the stunning features with grief. Chris reached out and touched a gentle caress over the thick fall of heavy golden hair.

"I wish I knew what to say to you, Daniella," he murmured to the silent room. *God!* There was so much that he should tell her, and none of it seemed as important as easing her pain about what had happened. *You told her it was to save Martin's life*, a tiny voice inside his head reminded him. *Was that true?* He knew the answer, in his heart. If that had been the case, it was an indirect truth, and the convenience of making Daniella passive with the administration of drugs now seemed a cruel trick to have played on her.

Ayers smirking face came to mind and Chris felt a real moment of murderous fury when he recalled Steven forcing him to apologize. His heart was easily read where Daniella was concerned, and the other man had taken full advantage, knowing exactly where to strike at Baines' only visible weakness. If it cost him his own life, Chris was going to make Ayers pay for what he'd done to both Baines and Daniella. Guilt ate at him again—what was Martin going to think when he saw the tape they'd made? Would Fowler be able to forgive Daniella? Would it matter that she'd endured the emotional betrayal because she loved Martin so much?

A slow smile stole over Baines' face; if Steven thought this would put an end to Martin Fowler's relationship, he knew nothing about the agent. Chris had seen, firsthand, the lengths Martin would go to where Daniella was concerned; Fowler wouldn't lose her at any cost. Somewhere inside him, Chris understood that whatever else happened, Daniella would be accepted by Martin, and cherished no less. The real problem would lie in getting Daniella to believe and accept that.

Looking down at the sleeping blonde, Chris felt an overwhelming surge of love for her. He ran a hand through his hair and realized that love was all he felt. No passion, no longing to kiss or caress her. He almost felt guilty for the understanding. *Shit!* Had he truly been just curious? Somehow that made him feel worse than if he did want her. But, his own honesty made him face the reality; he wasn't attracted to Daniella, as he'd feared. He'd been intrigued, fascinated by the mutual adoration he read in both Daniella's and Martin's faces when they were together, and he'd been sincerely curious about what it would feel like to hold Daniella. But, he wasn't genuinely, sexually attracted to the stunning blonde. He didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed with himself.

"What's gonna happen to us now?"

Baines almost jumped off the bed, the quiet voice startled him so badly. He looked down to see sleepy blue eyes watching him closely. He couldn't help wondering how long she had been awake, and how much of his thoughts had been obvious. He shook off the consideration and waited as Daniella pushed herself into a sitting position, the blankets still pooled at her waist.

"I don't know what they're gonna do now, Daniella," he finally answered. "I haven't heard a sound since they brought me in." He felt the prickle of uneasiness spreading throughout him when he realized he'd unintentionally drawn Daniella's thoughts back to the events of that afternoon.

Daniella saw the shift in Baines' expression and she read the sudden withdrawal correctly. Pushing aside her own fears, she reached out to touch her friend's shoulder. Brown eyes rose to meet her steady gaze.

"It's okay, Chris, really," she offered softly. "I know you did what you had to do, and I'm not blaming you. This is..." She hesitated for a moment, uncertain of her intentions, then she shrugged. "I don't know what the hell this is, but we're both being used. Martin would understand that. He knows I'd never do anything to hurt him. Doesn't he?"

The need for reassurance was almost a tangible presence in the room with them, and Chris smiled.

"If he doesn't know that, he's not real bright, Daniella."

Daniella was silent for a moment, then a smile slowly lit her features. She sighed and rubbed her eyes, the residue of her earlier tears making them feel sticky.

"We've been fighting so much lately," Daniella said, irritated as a new flood of emotion blurred her vision.

"Why?"

"Because I don't know when to back off," Daniella said with a shrug. "I know it's got something to do with the Agency, and I should just leave it alone, but I can't."

"He's got his reasons, Daniella. Sometimes you just have to trust the person you love."

"I might never get the chance to tell him how much I love him," Daniella whispered, fear giving her voice a haunted quality.

"You will, Dani," Baines countered quickly. "I'm gonna find a way to get you out of this, honey. I don't know how, but we're gonna get out of this mess."

"I feel like he doesn't trust me with things that are important to him," Daniella continued, her thoughts preoccupied with Fowler to the point that she hardly heard Baines' words. "I want to help him, and be there, but he doesn't seem to think I can help him the way he does me. I know things are wrong at the Agency, but he won't tell me what's going on. I feel like he doesn't really need me." Her voice dipped to a frightened whisper.

"Daniella, listen to me," Chris asked quietly. "I knew Martin long before I met you. I didn't know him well, but I did know him. He was different then, brash, arrogant, irritating as hell, and he didn't give a damn about anything, or anyone. Loving you changed a lot of that shit. You give him something to believe in, a reason to put up with all the junk that goes with this business. You prove there's more to it than lies and deceptions. He needs you, desperately, because when no one gives a damn about Martin Fowler, you prove the whole world wrong about him."

"I want him to trust me, Chris."

"He trusts you with his life, Daniella. You're confusing trust with something else. He locks you out of shit because he wants to keep you apart from that madness. He doesn't want it to change you, or the way you look at him. I don't blame him, I'd do the same thing," he admitted quietly. "It hasn't got anything to do with trust. It's protecting the thing you love most, and in Martin's case, that means you."

"What am I gonna say to him, if we ever get away from here?"

Chris heard the note of desperation in the soft question, and he answered from his heart.



“You’re gonna tell him you love him,” he said softly. “That’s the only thing that’s gonna matter to Martin.”

Silence settled between them for awhile, then Daniella snuggled down into the bed again. Darkness had crept into the room, telling them that evening had given way to night. There wasn’t a whole lot to do except sleep, and wait. Chris started to climb off the bed but was stopped when Daniella’s hand closed around his wrist. Huge, tear-bright sapphire eyes locked with the deep brown of Chris’ gaze as he looked down at her.

Daniella nodded, and waited, then relaxed when she saw Chris return the nod and stretch out on the bed. Baines’ arm drew her close, and Daniella curled into his side. She was asleep in a few minutes.

## Chapter 5

By the time Barton reached Martin's apartment, the agent was dressed again and pacing the living room. A single glance at Fowler's features warned the older man that the situation had gotten dramatically worse than it had been when Martin left the Agency earlier in the evening. Fowler was pale and restless, tension marking every line of his body.

"What kind of contact was made?" Barton asked, coming into the living room, but not sitting down.

"How the hell did Baines end up in the middle of this?" Fowler fumed, hardly noticing Barton's presence. His mind was filled with the memory of the videotape, and Baines' hands exploring Daniella's body, then taking possession of the most important thing in Martin's life. Even now, despite the instinct that told him Chris wasn't the enemy, Martin wanted to kill the doctor.

Barton watched the expression of rage progress to lethal levels, and he waited. His look shifted, drawn to the dull orange embers of the dying fire. The glimmer of shining tape caught his eyes and he walked over to the hearth. He nudged at the slivers of plastic melted on the stone, and the gooey mess of half-melted tape near the edge of the grill.

"What was on the tape, Martin?"

Fowler looked startled for a moment, then he let his look follow the line of Barton's sight, and anger poured over him another time.

"Proof that they have Daniella and Baines," he answered with deceptive softness.

The fact that the proof had been destroyed implied there was a lot more than that on the tape, but Barton wasn't going to push. Some inner voice warned him that in this instance, maybe he really didn't want a more detailed answer.

"Noah was still working on your records an hour ago. Why don't we see if he's come up with anything we can use?"

Fowler accepted the diversion with a nod of gratitude. He knew the subject of the tape had been closed. "You want to take my car, or yours?" he asked, pulling on his jacket.

"The limo is downstairs. Why don't you come with me?"

Martin nodded and they left the apartment.

\* \* \* \*

Several hours passed in near silence, only the sound of Noah's fingers tapping at keys breaking the oppressive atmosphere. Barton lounged in a worn chair, while Martin prowled the room like a caged tiger. The computer whiz had turned to cast angry glares at Fowler a couple of times, then quickly decided against any comments when Martin's dark eyes bored into him.

He was about to plead exhaustion when a glitch showed up in the search pattern he was running. He sat up straighter in his chair and his fingers started to fly over the keyboard. The change in his tempo brought the other men immediately to his side.

"What have you found?"

“This is the Agency copy of one of the Pentagon files,” he explained in a rush of excitement. “All these records are coded so that every time someone screens a file, they have to log in an access and user password. This file was inactive for several years. It was reopened about a week and a half ago.”

“Any way to determine who the user was?” Barton asked.

“I can get the time, and maybe trace the user, but it might not be enough.”

“Do it,” Fowler growled. “It’s more than we had a few minutes ago. If someone’s got access to this kind of information, we may have discovered a leak, at the very least.”

Barton looked decidedly unhappy at that announcement, but it was a logical assumption to make.

\* \* \* \*

The next half-hour was endless, while Martin stalked the room, Barton brooded, and Noah tapped keys.

“Where’s Renault, anyway?” Noah asked as he worked, his tone absent.

“Home in bed, I assume,” Barton answered. Leaving Andrew out of their confidence hadn’t been an easy decision for either of the men. But, as Fowler pointed out, it would hardly do Andrew any good to be involved in a mission that might entail picking up his only child’s body. Until they knew for certain if Daniella was alive, or not, the best thing they could do was leave Renault out of it.

Noah looked startled, but didn’t question it further.

“I’ve got it!” he announced a few minutes later. He stared at the code flashing on his screen, then turned confused eyes to Barton. “This says the information was planted from one of your computers.”

“What?”

Barton glanced up at the disbelief he heard in Fowler’s voice.

“Agency code, terminal location, HQ,” Noah repeated, staring at the screen as if looking at it would change the data.

“Which terminal?” Barton demanded.

“Two-B-nine-seven,” Noah supplied, “the code’s a high level security clearance.”

Barton nodded, certain he already knew who had inserted the false information. He grabbed Martin by the arm and propelled the agent toward the door.

“Thanks, Noah,” Fowler tossed back, then they were headed for the waiting limousine.

\* \* \* \*

“How do you want to play this, Barton?” Martin asked.

The Agency Chief shrugged and gave Fowler a tiny, humorless smile. “I’ll wait here, and see that you’re not disturbed. Handle it any way you choose, Martin.”

For a second, Fowler stared at the other man, his surprise obvious. Then, he pushed open the office door and went inside.

The office was like most others in the huge Agency building, comfortable, non-descript, and impersonal. The large, metal and glass desk dominated the room, and off to one side was a computer terminal. This one was lit and in use.

“Planting more surprises?” Martin asked, his voice pitched low but carrying clearly

across the near silence.

“Fowler!”

Martin was across the room in the space of a heartbeat, his motion so smooth that he was looming over the computer before the other man could back up. Fowler reached down and hauled him to his feet, a solid push sending the smaller man tumbling back against the desk.

“All right, Steinman, I want to know who’s behind this bullshit, and why?”

“You are joking, Fowler,” Steinman replied with a bitter laugh. “You’ve been walking a fine line for years, and I’ll be more than happy to watch you lose your balance.”

“Really,” Martin said with feigned thoughtfulness. “I didn’t realize you had such a high regard for me.”

“You should have been left in prison, Fowler. Guys like you think you can do anything and get away with it.”

“You’re about to find out exactly what I can get away with,” Fowler promised, advancing on the other man. Steinman scurried behind the desk and pulled open a drawer. By the time he raised the gun, Martin’s fingers were closing on his wrist.

Fowler tightened his grip, gradually increasing the pressure. When Steinman dropped the gun, Martin picked it up from the open drawer, and he rested the barrel on the bridge of Steinman’s nose. A twist of his wrist was followed by the distinct snap of breaking bones, and a stifled scream from Steinman. Martin didn’t let go of the shattered wrist.

“The next words out of your mouth are going to be your last if they’re the wrong ones,” he warned, his sincerity no longer in doubt. “Who is holding Daniella Renault?” He punctuated his query with another squeezing shift of his fingers on the broken wrist. Pain widened the other man’s eyes, making them tear; Martin waited, eyes narrowed dangerously.

“You’re willing to risk another prison term to find Renault’s daughter?” Steinman shook his head in disbelief. “You really are a fool, Fowler.”

Martin shifted the aim of Steinman’s gun, the gesture so swift the other man didn’t see it coming. Fowler fired, the sound of the shot exploding within the small room. Steinman swayed in his grasp, moaning in agony, clutching at the flowing wound in his thigh.

“Last chance,” Fowler murmured softly, “then I take you apart one piece at a time. You’ll enjoy it, I’m an expert. I can keep you conscious for a long time. You’d be surprised how much a man can bleed before he finally dies.” He let his glance wander over the shaking man, selected a new target zone, and resighted.

“Ayers,” Steinman gasped, seeing the agent’s finger starting to squeeze the trigger again. “Steven Ayers. I don’t know where he is, though.” Now that the words had started, he couldn’t seem to stop. “He was with the Agency years ago, then he disappeared in Leningrad. He got married to a Russian agent, and stayed with the KGB afterward.”

“You shouldn’t have let him have Daniella,” Martin told the terrified man, his expression grim and unforgiving. He raised the gun again. Steinman’s scream was drowned by the second roar of gunfire. Martin dropped the body back into the desk chair, watching with almost clinical detachment as Steinman’s head lolled to one side, barely staying attached to his body. Fowler’s shot had torn his throat open, the close range

almost decapitating Steinman.

Martin turned on his heel and walked to the door, closing it quietly behind him. He handed Barton the gun, watched it disappear into the Agency Chief's pocket, and they walked down the corridor to the elevator.

"Steven Ayers," Fowler told him once they were enroute to Barton's office on the upper floor. "We need to pull everything out of the files. We have to find out if he's got any aliases, or any contacts in the city."

\* \* \* \*

"This is cozy, ain't it, Jim?" Eddie's mocking voice jolted Chris out of sleep, and Daniella stirred next to him.

"Yeah, real cozy," Jimmy agreed. "Hope you slept well, kids," he drawled, sounding stoned out of his mind—an assessment not entirely inaccurate. "Time to party now."

Before Baines could get a handle on what was happening, he felt Daniella being dragged from the bed. She made a desperate clutch for Chris, but he was already out of reach. Baines would have been off the bed and reaching for her if Jimmy hadn't halted him with a gun in his ribs.

"We're gonna go down to the studio now," Eddie said, holding Daniella's wrists behind her back. She squirmed in the grasp, then choked on a cry of pain when Eddie tightened his hold. "Don't get cute, Daniella, or we'll have to get nasty."

"Bring the doc, Jimmy," Eddie laughed. "We don't want him feelin' left out."

\* \* \* \*

"Is there any way to be sure we've got the right place?" Martin asked, knowing as he made the enquiry that there were no certainties. Barton's hand on his shoulder was firm, the gesture a silent statement that offered comfort, as well as understanding. Fowler nodded and turned to stare out the window. The car wasn't moving fast enough to alleviate the growing knot of panic in his stomach.

\* \* \* \*

"It's good to see you again, Doctor," Ayers greeted, once Eddie and Jimmy had brought them down to the lower level of the house.

Baines looked around at the array of equipment in the large, sprawling room. Video cameras were present, lights, a huge bed in the center of a pool of stark illumination. He felt his stomach roll wildly when he considered what was going on; they weren't going to make a second tape, his objecting mind insisted.

"What the hell is going on?" Daniella's voice sounded more puzzled than worried at that moment, and her eyes were flitting over everything in open bewilderment.

"We're going to make the second part of our feature, Daniella," Steven said, eliciting lewd laughter from the two men who held the physician and the young woman. "I'm sure Martin has had plenty of time to enjoy your earlier performance with the good doctor."

"What?" The word was an expelled breath, and Daniella felt the room weave wildly when she considered the man's words. Fowler had been given a tape of her afternoon with Chris? She turned wide eyes to her friend, searching for some denial of what Ayers

said; the look of pure panic in Baines' eyes confirmed what Daniella didn't want to believe.

"You bastard!" Rage coursed through her body, igniting a strength that shocked her, and the man struggling to keep a hold on her. She broke free of Eddie's grip and launched herself at Ayers. Daniella tumbled to the floor, her momentum taking the man with her, and she rolled until she was on top of Ayers. Her fist rammed into the man's face, blood gushed out in a froth of gore from Ayers' injured nose. The flow of scarlet seemed to ignite Daniella's fury and she hauled back for a second strike. The punch was deflected this time and she was hauled off Steven. She kicked out when the other man jerked her away from Ayers, and the blow connected solidly with the lower part of Steven's back.

Daniella didn't hear Ayers' yelp of pain; it was lost in her own anguished cry when Eddie grabbed her shoulders and slammed her back against the concrete floor. The room did a lurching spin when the back of Daniella's head impacted with the floor. Before she could adjust to that, she was struck squarely across the face, bare knuckles scraping across her high cheekbone with brutal force. Daniella gagged, her empty stomach roiling painfully.

"That's enough!"

To Daniella's utter amazement, it was Ayers who gave the order. Eddie pulled back and hauled her to her feet, his look promising there'd be more violence if Daniella was stupid enough to try anything a second time.

"You really are such a fool, Daniella," Steven said, daubing at the blood that stained his face. "Martin Fowler is hardly worth dying for."

"You don't know anything about him," Daniella spat, resisting the desire to fly at this man a second time. A glance in Baines' direction had shown her that Chris was firmly held by Jimmy, his arms yanked painfully behind him. The strain was written in the tension around Baines' mouth, and Daniella had no desire to do anything that would cause him more hurt.

"He had an affair with my wife," Ayers snarled. "Does your precious lover ever tell you about the women he had before you? He used her, and when he was through, he walked away without a second thought. She killed herself, over the likes of him."

Daniella was shaking in spite of not wanting to hear the raw pain in the other man's voice. She did know some of Fowler's past, knew it involved a great number of meaningless liaisons. Martin had told her often during their time together that she was the first person he'd ever truly loved. It was one of the things that bound them together so completely, because Daniella had never loved anybody the way she did Martin.

"What she did is not his fault," Daniella said softly, the words like ice. "If she was your wife, what was she doing sleeping with someone else, anyway?"

"Maybe you should ask your friend Baines about that one," Ayers retorted. "After all, he was very cooperative when we told him about our plans to send Fowler a present. Now Martin can wonder why someone he loves is sleeping with another man."

Daniella wasn't listening; she was too stunned by the knowledge that Baines had knowingly participated in the making of the tape they'd sent to Martin. The tape that would destroy Fowler's love for her.

"You knew."

It wasn't a question, it was an accusation, and Chris felt new hatred burst to life inside him.

Daniella lunged again, catching everybody off guard as she flung herself forward. She broke Eddie's grasp, and was attempting to reach Ayers when Eddie's tackle carried her down to the floor again. She started to squirm and kick, no longer caring if she put up enough struggle to get herself killed. To Daniella's mind, she had nothing left to lose.

\*

Chris took advantage of the moment of surprise, and when he felt Jimmy's grip slacken, he jerked free and spun to face the man. A solid punch sent the thug reeling back, crashing over camera equipment. Baines continued forward and grabbed the other man again.

\*

Daniella felt herself being lifted and tossed onto the bed, but she was unable to fight the movement. The crash to the floor with Eddie's considerable bulk on top of her had taken her breath away and she was still struggling against the suffocating pain in her chest. She felt her clothes being ripped away and sheer panic gave her the strength to strike out against the hands that seemed to be all over her suddenly. She saw the grin on Eddie's face and her fear escalated; the hazel eyes were filled with unmistakable lust. Eddie had been waiting for this moment since Ayers had first sent them to collect her. He was going to enjoy taking the fight out of the gorgeous young blonde.

Once he had gotten her separated from the last of her clothes, Eddie hauled a pair of handcuffs from the back of his belt and caught one slim wrist in the metal restraint. He straddled the straining young body and attached the other end of the cuffs to the upper corner of the bed, the stretch weakening his hold on Daniella. She bucked beneath him and started kicking, long legs flailing wildly, searching for a way to connect with solid flesh.

Daniella felt the man on top of her shifting and another stinging slap blurred her focus for a moment as pain exploded through her head. She choked in a ragged gasp of air and tried to block out the sensation of rough hands stroking over her hips and fondling her breasts. When she felt the groping fingers dip lower to explore between her legs, Daniella was sure she was going to be sick.

\*

Baines noticed the instant Ayers fled the room, the unexpected violence erupting around him apparently making him think twice about remaining to watch. Chris would have followed, but Jimmy was already coming toward him, clearly ready to tear Baines apart if he could hold him long enough to do it.

Chris rolled, using the momentum of Jimmy's weight and easily tossed the other man over his head as he dropped to the floor. Baines rolled into a crouch and was ready when his opponent came charging back at him.

\*

Daniella was twisting beneath the heavyset man straddling her thighs, shaking uncontrollably as Eddie started to shove his cock into Daniella's mouth. She closed her eyes and tried to scream her protest, only to find the sound engulfed in the louder eruption of a gun going off.

## Chapter 6

Martin and Barton had gone through the house in record time, then headed downstairs when the Agency man discovered the hidden doorway in the kitchen. The sounds of fighting and things breaking had led them into the middle of a bizarre tableau of violence and confusion. Fowler came through the door first, and his eyes fell immediately to Daniella's writhing form. The man sitting on top of Martin's young lover never knew what happened. Fowler raised his gun, the aim pure instinct, and he fired. Eddie took the shot in his right temple, the force of the bullet hurling him off the bed and into a wall. He crumpled, dead before his body settled on the stone floor.

He was dimly aware of Barton and Chris Baines taking the second man out. For an instant, Martin was shaky with relief, then he crossed the room and sat on the bed next to Daniella. Her dazed eyes were still filled with terror, and her free hand swung out at the man beside her. Martin caught the hand, curled his fingers around Daniella's and bent to kiss her forehead. He heard the sound of a lock springing, saw Chris freeing Daniella's trapped hand from the cuffs, and he scooped her into his arms, rocking her gently.

"Martin?"

Daniella's voice was muffled against Fowler's shoulder and she clung to him, the hold desperate and frightened.

"Take it easy, Daniella," Martin whispered in her ear. "I'm not gonna let you go. I love you, Dani." He repeated the words countless times before he felt some of the tension ease from the young woman in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

"Where's Ayers?" Barton asked, his eyes never leaving Fowler and the trembling woman in the agent's arms.

"He flew outta here when things went ballistic," Baines snapped, with enough rage to effectively pull the older man's curious gaze to him.

"Why don't we see if he's still around?" Barton suggested, uncertain whether the proposal was made to give Chris something to do, or if it was to give Martin a few minutes alone with Dani.

Chris nodded toward the door and they headed in that direction. The exit led into a makeshift control room, and Baines felt a wild surge of nausea when he saw the video equipment had been activated. Apparently, Steven's goons were going to make another film for Fowler's collection—this one being Daniella's death, no doubt. He would have started smashing things, but Barton's quiet order prevented any reaction.

"Check out the upper floor. I'll be right behind you." He handed Baines his .38, and turned to the bank of recording equipment. When he heard Chris leave, Barton sought out the switch that would turn everything off. He pulled the tape from the machine, then looked around the room. He spotted another, unmarked, and pocketed it with the one he'd just removed. This would be the master of the one sent to Fowler, some inner voice told him.

Barton was about to leave the room when his look was drawn to the monitors. Martin



and Daniella were clearly visible from various angles, and he felt a twinge of guilt when he realized he was witnessing a very personal moment between them. Still, his gaze refused to leave the beautiful young face that stared up at Fowler. Daniella's face was streaked with tears, and her struggle to calm her sobs was obvious in the shuddering breaths she was drawing. Martin stroked the soft, blonde hair and whatever words he was offering slowly put a smile on her face. When Fowler wrapped her in a blanket and picked her up, Barton felt relief wash over him. Daniella's arms went around Martin's neck and she snuggled closer to the agent.

"The place is clean, Barton," Baines announced when he returned to the room.

Barton nodded and they went back to join Martin and Daniella.

"The limo's outside, Daniella," Barton told the frightened girl. "We'll have you home in no time."

\* \* \* \*

Andrew sat silently on the couch in his daughter's home, his eyes wandering absently around the room. His appearance reflected a facade of composure. He'd gone to the Agency that morning, fully expecting to find Martin and Barton ensconced in the latest round of hearings. The Agency offices were in chaos; Derek Steinman's body was just being removed—the official reports were calling it a suicide—and there was no sign of Barton.

Renault's frequent attempts to contact his daughter, or Fowler, had gone unanswered. Their machine was on, but there was no evidence of either of them having been at the apartment for hours. Daniella wasn't in rehearsals, and Martin was, for all intents and purposes, missing. Fear had mushroomed within Andrew when he had come to that conclusion, because somewhere inside him, he knew the only thing that would have taken Fowler away from these hearings was a threat to Daniella.

The whirlwind of his thoughts was brought to an abrupt end when the apartment door swung inward. Andrew was on his feet, his heart in his throat when he saw Martin. Daniella was wrapped in a rough, grey blanket, clearly the only thing covering her slender body, and she was clinging to Fowler. Her face was turned from him, but Andrew could see the marks of violence that discolored her pale features.

"Daniella?"

Daniella turned at the sound of her father voice, surprise and fright in her expression. She saw her own emotions mirrored in the blue eyes that stared back at her, and she felt another sob rise in her throat. She shook her head and turned back into Martin's neck with an audible, choked gasp.

"I'll be right out, Andrew," Fowler whispered, his own expression a study in misery.

Renault watched him leave the room, carrying the young woman they both loved. He felt the bitter sting of tears teasing at the corners of his eyes, and he subdued the emotion—the swell of rage was much easier to grasp.

"Andrew," Barton said softly, by way of greeting. He went to the bar and hauled out a fresh bottle of scotch.

Baines shut the door with a light push, then came into the room. He didn't look much better than Daniella, nor did he meet Andrew's eyes directly when he passed the retired agent.

\* \* \* \*

Martin set Daniella down on the wide bed and dropped to sit beside her. He ran a hand through the tangle of golden hair, then bent to place a loving kiss on the parted lips. Daniella's response was shaky, and Martin felt a real moment of panic when he eased away to look into her huge sapphire eyes.

"Why don't you get some rest, Daniella," he suggested, his voice thick and hoarse.

"No," Daniella murmured, surprising them both with the strength of the objection. "I want to take a shower, then I'll go to bed, Martin."

It wasn't really a statement, it had all the inflection of a plea, really, and Martin nodded. He held out his hand and drew her into the bathroom that adjoined their bedroom. He set the water temperature and turned back to her.

"It's gonna be okay, Daniella," he said, drawing her into a close embrace. "We'll talk about this later, but it is going to be all right, I promise."

Daniella nodded, tightened her hold for a second, then slipped away. She kept her back to Martin when she stepped into the warm cascade of the shower, tears already spilling from her eyes to vanish beneath the cloak of the soothing spray.

\* \* \* \*

Fowler hesitated a moment, then he left the bathroom, his heart heavy with regrets, pain, and a host of emotions he couldn't sort through, let alone define. He was just entering the room when Barton passed Chris a healthy dose of scotch. Fowler plucked the glass from Baines' hand as the other man lifted it to his lips.

"Thanks," Martin remarked. "She's in the shower. Do you think you could take care of her for me, Chris?" Fowler used the physician's first name casually and easily, nothing ulterior in the request—only a trust he genuinely felt. Daniella needed medical attention, and Martin knew Chris needed the reassurance his offer implied. The uncertainty was obvious in the dark eyes, then it dissolved into gratitude.

Baines nodded, then turned on his heel. Fowler's acceptance had come as surprise, and a tremendous relief. Now, would Daniella be as willing to forgive him?

\* \* \* \*

Fowler had just dropped into an armchair and closed his eyes when tension arced through him. Andrew's voice, quiet and unnaturally calm, felt like the jaws of a steel trap springing shut.

"Do you think one of you might explain to me what the bloody hell has happened to my daughter?" Renault hissed softly, his fury contained, just barely.

Martin finished the last of his scotch, deposited the crystal glass on the low coffee table and met Andrew's chilling gaze.

"Steven Ayers," he answered with a sigh. "The son-of-a-bitch responsible for the Agency's investigation of me."

"What?" Andrew breathed, disbelief in the single word.

"He grabbed Daniella and Chris sometime yesterday. I got a tape last night..."

"You've known about this since last night!"

Martin looked confused, then realized the statement hadn't been directed at him.

Barton looked tired, but unsurprised.

"Fowler called me late, and we spent the night with Noah, tracking down Ayers' name and location," the Agency man admitted quietly.

"Did it ever occur to you to tell me that my daughter had been kidnapped?" Andrew resisted the temptation to shout in his enraged frustration.

"Yes, Andrew," the other man answered, with maddening calm. "It did occur to me. It also occurred to me that if we did find Ayers' location, our 'rescue' might be nothing more than a pick up of Daniella's body. I didn't think we needed to risk putting you through that."

"That wasn't your choice to make, Barton!" Renault shouted, this time allowing his voice to rise in volume. Fear sharpened his voice, and he rose, pacing the room aimlessly.

"It wasn't my choice either, Andrew," Martin put in. "But, I agreed. I don't know what I would have done if she hadn't been alive when we found her. I didn't want to put you through it, too. This way, we have her back, and we can get over it together."

"What is there to 'get over', Martin?" Renault demanded, his fury no less intense, despite his understanding of their logic. "What did that bastard do to her?" It never occurred to Andrew to blame Fowler for what had happened to Daniella, despite the obvious connection to Martin's present problems. Daniella had been used against them both in the past, and had told them repeatedly that it was her choice to accept the risks involved in loving them.

Fowler dragged in a heavy sigh of air and ran his hands through his hair. "I don't know, Andrew. She's been smacked around, but I don't think she's been more seriously hurt than that. We're not gonna know for sure until she wants to talk about it."

"And if she doesn't want to talk about it?" Renault challenged, unsure of why he was pressing an issue that clearly caused everybody anxiety.

"Then, I'm not gonna be the one pushing her, Andrew," Martin stated flatly. "I got to her as fast as I could. I'll do whatever I have to make this bearable for her. Don't ask me for more than that."

Guilt colored the words, and an anger Andrew easily understood. He also knew that some of what was happening was no longer his business; it didn't make acceptance any easier to swallow.

"I have to go, Martin," Barton said when there was a lull in the conversation. Years of friendship told him Andrew was starting to think rationally, even if he wasn't yet in agreement with their decision. "There are a few loose ends to be tied up at the office."

"Yes," Andrew interjected coldly. "Steinman's 'suicide', for example?"

Barton and Fowler exchanged a thoughtful look, then Barton shrugged, the gesture slight and contemplative. "That'll work," he said to Martin.

Fowler shook his head, the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Brown eyes rose to meet the Agency Chief's steady gaze. "Thanks, Barton."

Barton patted his shoulder on the way to the door. "I'll call you later, Andrew."

\* \* \* \*

The shower was soothing, warm water washing away traces of too many things Daniella wanted as far in the past as she could push them. She shivered, despite the steam rising around her, and her eyes suddenly swam with tears she hadn't realized she was holding back. Her mind filled with Martin's image, and the love that had stared back her

when he'd found her. She couldn't hide from the sense of her own betrayal; Martin loved her, in spite of what she'd allowed to happen to her.

The hint of Baines' presence in her life throughout the past day reminded her of something else. Rage flooded over her when her mind went back to the dingy basement room—and Ayers' last surprise announcement. Christian Baines, Daniella's closest friend, had known all along that their lovemaking was being filmed. Pain knifed through her and she clenched her fists, almost choking on the swell of emotion. Chris had known what they were going to do to Martin. The blur of drugs and persuasive words began to filter through the haze of Daniella's memory, until she felt like she'd start screaming against the hatred. It came as no real surprise to her to understand that the loathing was directed at herself, and had very little to do with Chris.

The fury continued to batter at Daniella's conscience, rising in waves of guilt, only to ebb on the weakness of despair. What was Martin going to say to her once they were alone? Would his assurances of love become words of bitterness and contempt? The questions seemed as endless as her tears, and equally draining.

Daniella tried to dismiss the thoughts from her mind, and she finally reached for the soap. Countless times she scrubbed until her skin tingled and felt too sensitive to her touch. She didn't want to stop; she wanted to scrub until she stopped feeling so damn dirty. She recognized the futility of the desire and eventually forced herself to cut the stream of water and step onto the plush carpeting. She groped until she found a towel, dried off, then wrapped the rich blue terrycloth around her body.

The last thing Daniella expected to see when she walked into her bedroom was Chris sitting on the edge of the bed. Anger rose in her throat, and Daniella made no attempt to subdue it when she glared at him.

"What the hell do you want now, Chris?" she snapped, sarcasm and icy anger in the words. "I don't do repeat performances."

"You don't do logic real well, either," Baines retorted, surprised by her tone, but edgy enough himself to match her annoyance without much effort.

"So I've heard. Get out of my bedroom, Chris!"

"We have to talk, Daniella."

"I don't have anything to say to you anymore," Daniella said, her voice deceptively calm.

"Then you can listen, for a change," Chris stated firmly.

"I asked you to leave," Daniella reminded his friend. "If you like, I'll ask Martin to join us. Maybe he can persuade you to go." The words were meant as a challenge, and Daniella fully expected them to be effective. The last thing she anticipated was Baines' smile, and the physician's softly worded reply.

"Martin's the one who sent me in here, Dani."

Daniella bit her lip and walked to the window, only then becoming conscious of her near nakedness. She suffered a moment of real bitterness when she reflected on the foolishness of the thought—as if she had anything left to hide from this man.

"I still don't want to talk to you, Chris," she whispered, knowing full well he wouldn't miss a single word.

"Why?"

"You know damn well why! I trusted you!" Daniella turned, the action involuntary. "You know how much he means to me. That's the reason I went to see you in the first

place. You knew what they were going to do. You knew that, and you drugged me, then fucked me—all so they could show Martin what kind of..." Daniella's voice trailed off as the words faded into a soft gasp for air.

"What the hell did you think it would accomplish if they hadn't taken pictures or taped it?" Chris almost shouted the query in his own sudden wrath. "Jesus! You can be so damn naive sometimes, I wonder how you've managed to survive this long. What would it have accomplished to just tell Fowler? He wasn't likely to believe them, was he? They would have killed you, Daniella! God damn it! What did you expect me to do?"

"I didn't expect you to betray me!" Daniella returned, her rage easily matching Baines'. "I thought you were my friend, Chris. I turned to you, and I loved you. How could you do this to me? You've ruined the most important thing in my life."

"I kept you alive, Dani," Chris stated, his tone slowly dropping to a chilling hiss of sound. "I did what they asked me to do, so I wouldn't have to explain to Martin that I'd let you die! Would that have been better, Daniella? Was that the choice I should have made?"

"I wish to hell you had," Daniella snapped quietly.

Baines watched her for a few minutes, felt the fear and the pain radiating from her. For the first time since he'd met Daniella, Chris didn't give a shit how she was coping with her confusion. He rose and went to stand eye to eye with Daniella.

"I thought you loved Martin more than that, Dani."

"You don't know anything about me and Martin." Daniella tried to turn away, only to be stopped by Baines' vise-like grip on her upper arm.

"Do you really think you're the only person who's ever loved someone, Daniella?" he snarled. "What makes you think you're so fuckin' special?" The words came before he could think, and Chris understood as soon as he'd said them that it wasn't Daniella's opinion that was being questioned—Chris was the one who thought she was special. So special that Baines would've done anything Ayers asked to keep Daniella alive. He backed off, releasing his hold on her so suddenly that Daniella actually stumbled back a step. Bewildered hurt filled the huge, ocean blue eyes, and Chris didn't have a clue how to make the pain go away.

"I don't want to lose him, Chris."

The words were hardly more than a shaken whisper, and Baines whirled away from them. Daniella's hand on his arm, gentle but firm, forced brown eyes to meet blue again.

"I don't want to lose you, either."

It was the truth, simple and honest with the love Chris read in Daniella's eyes. He nodded, felt his own tears begin and wasn't at all surprised when Daniella's arms went around him and drew him close.

## Chapter 7

Fowler had heard the raised voices drifting out to him after Andrew and Barton were gone. For a tense moment, he'd almost gone into the bedroom, then he'd backed off to wait. Daniella needed Chris Baines, whether she was willing to admit it or not, and Martin needed to know they were going to be able to continue loving each other. Daniella's friendship with Baines had caused him more than one moment of sheer jealous rage in the past, but he'd grown to count on the doctor's love for Daniella. His lover would always be able to lean on Baines, and Chris accepted the responsibility as naturally as everybody else in Daniella's life. For exactly the same reason—he loved Daniella, too.

The rise in volume lasted a few seconds, then faded to soft murmurs again. Fowler rose from his slouch in an armchair, fixed two drinks, and finally went into the bedroom.

Daniella was seated, cross-legged in the center of the bed, sheets gathered around her waist. Chris was on the foot of the bed, one leg resting on the mattress, his hand on the ankle in front of him while his other foot was firmly planted on the floor. Fowler couldn't resist the smile when he registered the position; Chris looked like he was poised to run if it proved necessary.

"Relax, Chris," Martin laughed and handed him the second drink in his hand. "I have no intention of killing you."

"Thanks," Chris muttered, accepting the bourbon Martin had poured for him. Fowler clearly remembered his aversion to scotch, and the concession was thoughtful as well as being a subtle assurance that things were okay.

"How you feelin', Dani?" Martin asked, sitting next to her, his hip touching hers. He ran his free hand through the damp tangle of golden hair, then leaned forward to place a gentle kiss on her temple.

"She's fine, Martin," Chris answered. "Just a few bruises, nothing more serious than that."

Fowler glanced at Chris, nodded, then looked back into Daniella's eyes. She averted her gaze immediately, and Martin exchanged a look of confusion with Baines.

"I think I'll be goin'," Chris stated. "If you need anything, either of you..." He let it go at that, knowing nothing further was necessary.

"Thanks." Martin barely noticed the physician's departure. Daniella watched Chris go, then kept her gaze locked on the swirling pattern of the bedspread.

"I'm kinda tired," Martin whispered. "How about you?"

Daniella nodded, but refused to look at him.

"Why don't we get some sleep?"

Daniella finally looked up, saw nothing ulterior in Martin's steady eyes, and she smiled. She opened her arms and drew Fowler close, her head nestling naturally into his neck.

"I love you, Dani," Fowler whispered, smiling when her arms tightened around him. He stayed as he was until Daniella eased away to lie down, then he stood up, shed his clothes, and climbed into bed next to her. He curled around her, spooning their bodies together, and breathed a heavy sigh of relief at having her safe in his arms again. Sleep claimed him quickly.

\* \* \* \*

Martin didn't know what it was that pulled him too soon from his sleep, then the fuzziness faded and he knew. Daniella was no longer beside him. Panic flared, then receded. She was still in the apartment; Martin could sense her close by. He tossed back the bedclothes and stood up. He found his robe, hauled it on, and headed out to the living room.

Daniella looked up when Martin entered the room, and Fowler held his silence. He walked over to stand behind her, then dropped into a seat behind her. His eyes moved to the fireplace and the sight that was holding her intent gaze. Remnants of the videotape peeked from the ashes, melted film scarring the pale grey stones of the hearth, and pools of ebony plastic stood out against the traces of the fire.

"Do you want to talk?" Martin whispered, the words like a breath of soft air between them. The tension in her body was unmistakable, and Fowler wondered if giving her the opening would help ease some of the pain he felt in her. Daniella shook her head, a quick jerky movement that told Martin she was near tears. Fowler shifted closer, his arms encircling the slender waist to pull Daniella back against his chest. He felt some of the resistance melt, then shudders began to fan outward. Martin didn't utter a sound, merely held Daniella a little tighter, until he felt her hands clutching his. He loosened the hold, and waited for Daniella to shift. She turned into him and her head came to rest beneath Martin's chin.

The storm of tears lasted a long time, and Martin shed a few of his own as he listened to the soft sobs. When she was quiet, Fowler wondered if she'd fallen asleep. He eased back just enough to look into her face. Blue eyes stared back at him, swollen and red from crying, but filled with unabashed love. Martin's eyes dropped lower to the parted lips and he leaned into a kiss that began as a light caress of reassurance, only to become a sensual probe into her mouth.

Daniella's arms shifted to encircle Fowler's neck and she hung on as Martin lowered her to the soft carpeting, then stretched out next to her. They hadn't broken the kiss, and her body arched into a more intimate contact when Martin broke away with a gasp, then reclaimed the kiss, this time sucking her tongue deeply into his mouth to trace it lightly.

Martin could feel his head reeling with the intensity of the passion that was sweeping through him, and it took him a few moments to recognize her uncharacteristic, passive responses. She should have been coiled around him and urging with her usual gentle demand; the woman in his arms was simply hanging on, riding the waves of his desire. Martin felt a sharp, stinging pain in his chest and he withdrew to stare into sapphire eyes.

"Dani?"

When she remained quiet, and stared up at him with a look of dazed confusion, Martin brushed a fingertip across the bruised cheekbone.

"Are you afraid of me, Dani?"

Panic lit her huge eyes and Martin regretted the impulsive words when her eyes filled with tears again. Daniella shook her head, swallowed hard, and forced her voice to work past the lump lodged firmly in her throat.

"I don't know what I'm afraid of, Martin. I just know how much I love you."

Fowler smiled at the shaky words, and his lips touched the corner of one glistening eye, tasting the warm saltiness of a tear as it escaped.

"We don't have to do anything you don't want to do, Daniella. The only thing that's

important to me is that you're safe, and here with me. That's all that matters, Dani," he murmured into her ear.

Daniella watched the shift of emotion on Martin's face, the gratitude he felt at having her back, the undisguised love, and the pain she understood only too well, the ache of seeing someone you loved hurt and confused. She could do something about that particular pain, and she drew his dark head down to meet her kiss.

Martin moaned softly when Daniella's tongue slid into his mouth, the hunger in the caress familiar and exciting. She arched beneath him, molding her body to Martin's in wordless demand. He moved to settle himself over her, hips merging into hers as their kiss deepened. He shivered when her hands began tugging at the robe, pushing it aside so she could run gentle hands over the broad expanse of his chest.

Daniella pulled away from the kiss with a gasp for air and she laughed softly when she tried to yank at the belt on her own robe, only to get tangled up in the loose folds of Martin's. He grinned at her and crawled back to sit on his heels. Daniella opened her robe and trembled when Martin's eyes wandered over her with unconcealed longing, caressing every inch of her body with the intensity of his gaze.

Martin saw the tremor and he shrugged out of his own robe as Daniella's legs shifted, spread, and came to rest on either side of him. He touched the long limbs and raised them, his fingers teasing at the sensitive skin behind the bent knees. He moved into a lower position and touched the inner part of her knee with his tongue, smiling at the twitch of response. His smile turned to a grin when he recognized the suppressed giggle; he'd just found a ticklish spot he hadn't known about. His tongue darted out again and he laughed when Daniella jerked back.

She wasn't so quick to pull away a second time when Martin's exploring tongue began to trek upward, licking at the smooth, inner thighs.

"Martin..." It felt *so* good to be with Martin this way, to have his hands on her, loving her. Her entire body shook with the combined pleasure of his touch and the soul-deep love that welled up and spread to every part of her. This man was her life, the very thing that gave it meaning and purpose. She adored him.

His name faded into a sigh when Martin's questing lips found the soft, slick slit between her thighs and he began to flick light, whispery caresses over the hypersensitive area. Her hips rose and he cupped her firm ass in his hands, positioning them both more comfortably. Strong fingers kneaded the smooth roundness of her butt while Martin's tongue probed more intimately.

Daniella groaned and clutched at his shoulders when Martin's tongue gently probed into her body, and her hips rose against the teasing sensation. When he pulled back to look at her, Daniella had to bite back a gasp of protest, then her body was wracked by another, stronger shudder when his mouth descended again and his tongue stroked her clitoris before he began to suck softly. Martin's tongue licked and teased, driving Daniella's writhing body into throes of passion and her orgasm began to tighten her muscles. Martin's fingers thrust into her wetness, his rhythm quick and sure, tumbling her into a release that left her choking for air and limp on the carpet.

Martin finally drew away from her and leaned back to stare down at Daniella. Her eyes were drowsy and filled with enough love to effectively evoke a shiver from the agent. He leaned forward, slowly stretching out on top of her as her legs wrapped around his waist and pulled him closer.



Before Fowler could speak, his mouth was filled with Daniella's tongue, and he lost himself to the mounting desire in the caress. She pushed against him, hips molding to Martin's as she began to move restlessly under him. Martin rolled with his lover when Daniella shifted their positions, and he moaned low in his throat when she straddled him and eased away from the kiss.

Daniella's hands moved over Martin, massaging gentle touches over smooth, contoured muscles. Fingers whispered over hard nipples, brushing at the responsive tips, then circling to tease. She bent to catch one of the hardened buds between her teeth and tugged softly before her tongue swirled around the tip. When the nipple glistened with wetness, Daniella began to suck. Her hands continued their exploration, one slipping down to brush over the rigid length of his cock, while her free hand found Martin's other nipple and began to tug with exquisite tenderness. She could feel the struggle in his breathing and drew back to stare into the blackness of Martin's gaze.

Daniella smiled with loving indulgence when she traced the head of his cock with a featherlike touch, and saw the ripple of pleasure transforming his features. She withdrew her touch from the agent's chest, and the fingertips of both hands began to trace the straining cock. Martin's hips rose, and her hands closed on the rigid shaft, held it, and she lowered her head to flick at the pulsing cock, her tongue dipping into the tiny slit to lick at the seeping moisture there. Martin thrust upward again and Daniella ran her lips down the smooth shaft, still denying the contact she knew he wanted. She licked at the throbbing cock, eliciting soft groans from her lover.

Daniella's fingers dipped lower, cupping Martin's balls into the warmth of her hand. She squeezed gently and increased the pressure when Martin's hips rose in response to the caress. Then she withdrew again, wet her fingertips and reached behind the tight balls, her slick fingers smoothing over the satiny strip of skin before moving further to tease at the tight entrance to her lover's body. She felt Martin's body tightening with tension and she slipped her index finger between the lean cheeks of Fowler's ass, probing into his body.

Martin shuddered when Daniella's finger slid into him, the flicking touch intensely arousing, creating an even stronger fire within him. He reached down and closed his fingers around his aching shaft, stroking several times before he caught her head and guided her mouth to his painfully erect cock. He slipped into the welcoming heat, and Daniella's fingers thrust deeper in direct response, catching Martin in a spasm of passion that threatened to push him into his release much sooner than he wanted. When Daniella started sucking hard on him, Martin gave himself over to the thrill of his orgasm, only to have the encompassing heat withdrawn seconds later.

Trembling with thwarted passion, Martin stared up into the hypnotic intensity of Daniella's eyes. Her breathing was easily as hoarse as Martin's, and he reached for her, pulling her down to him. Daniella settled on top of him, and Fowler reached up to cup her breasts in his hands. She leaned closer and he started kissing the satiny globes of her flesh, his tongue swirling around one nipple, then the other, sucking intently, then blowing cool air on the wet buds. She was squirming over him in minutes. When he released her breasts but continued to suckle her nipples, his hand slipped between them again, seeking the wet heat between her thighs. Daniella's hips pushed forward to give his hand full access to her, and she shivered, pushing her hips into the stroking hand, building a rhythm quickly. Fowler continued the sensuous stroking until her body

tightened and the threat of another orgasm became obvious.

Daniella shifted off Martin and stretched out beside the agent as he moved and molded their bodies together. Martin lifted her leg then guided his cock to her weeping entrance, very gently penetrating her body. A careful thrust had him completely engulfed within her silken, slick heat. He held her tightly to his chest and their rhythm built swiftly, bodies blending together with easy familiarity, moving with growing urgency.

Martin groaned against Daniella's shoulder as his delayed orgasm burst from him, spilling warmth into Daniella's straining body. She tensed against him, and Fowler's hand moved quicker on her clit, stroking carefully until a second shudder of ecstasy poured through her and left her gasping in his arms. The clenching of Daniella's muscles stirred another shudder from him and he closed his eyes as his body began to relax, warmth spreading through him as he held her trembling against him. It was a long time before they could both breathe normally again.

"I love you," Daniella murmured, the sound like a sleepy sigh. She smiled when the whisper of a kiss touched his shoulder, and Martin's throaty voice repeated the words. Maybe things would be all right, after all.

"Would you like to go back to bed?" Daniella asked eventually.

Martin stirred from his sated slumbering, and he nodded, only then realizing their bodies were still joined. He eased away, feeling the stickiness of their lovemaking against his thighs. "Shower first, I think, Dani," he mumbled, laughing with her when she nodded and threw her arms around Martin in a loving hug.

## Chapter 8

The next few days were spent almost exclusively in their apartment, and Daniella's mood improved dramatically for the time together. Andrew came by several times, each visit reassuring him that his daughter was, indeed, safe. Martin understood the need, and, for once, Daniella didn't object to the attention. Barton called; they'd been unable to locate Ayers so far, but it was simply a question of time. Fowler was content to accept that. The only person who remained conspicuously absent was Christian Baines. Daniella had been trying to reach the doctor for two days, only to have her messages ignored.

"There's something wrong, Martin," Daniella decided once she'd dropped the receiver into place. She wandered back into the dining room and dropped into a chair, facing Martin across the table. "You don't think they took him again, do you?"

Martin dropped the newspaper he'd been attempting to read, and picked up his coffee mug. It was empty. He made a face at the cup and set it down again.

"Chris is perfectly capable of taking care of himself, Daniella. He is a doctor; maybe he's just been busy." Even as he made the suggestion, Martin felt some inner voice warning him.

"He would have called me back, Martin," Daniella insisted. "You know that as well as I do."

"Ayers wouldn't grab him again, Dani," Fowler reassured. "Taking Chris wouldn't serve any purpose now."

"Chris fought with him, Martin," Daniella whispered.

Fowler measured the words, and the concern in Daniella's wide blue eyes. He nodded slowly, offering the troubled young woman a loving smile. "I'll find him, Daniella. I think we need to talk, anyway."

That put a flicker of alarm in her eyes, then it faded in the face of Martin's calm, neutral expression. Before Daniella could make any kind of statement, the doorbell drew their attention. Fowler rose immediately.

Daniella was still sitting at the table when Martin returned, followed by Andrew.

"Hi, Dad," Daniella greeted him with a smile and a kiss. "Want some coffee?" When Andrew nodded, she picked up Martin's mug and headed to the kitchen. She was back a few minutes later with two cups, and handed them to the men before heading back to the bedroom to get dressed.

\* \* \* \*

"What's going on, Andrew?" Martin asked when they were seated in the living room.

"Barton's people have located Ayers," Renault informed the agent without preamble.

"Where?"

Andrew's eyes narrowed at the demand, then he shrugged. "I haven't asked him, to be honest with you, Martin. It may be best to allow his people to handle the situation from here."

"You're joking, Renault!" Martin uttered in outright disbelief. "After what that

bastard did to me? What he did to Daniella? You want me to just let someone else handle this?"

"That's precisely why I think you should let Barton deal with it, Martin," Andrew stated calmly. "Haven't you and my daughter been hurt enough by this man? Let it go."

"He's right," Daniella said quietly.

Fowler and Andrew looked over at her where she stood framed in the entryway. She was dressed casually in black jeans and a white sweatshirt, wearing equally snowy tennis shoes. All Martin could see was the purple bruising that distorted the otherwise perfect features, and the reminder infuriated him.

"He's not right, Daniella. This is something I intend to deal with personally."

"Why?"

"How can you ask me something so ridiculous?"

"Because I want to know," Daniella snapped. "I'd like to hear how you justify ignoring me for this vengeance hunt."

"For Christ's sake, Dani..."

"Don't try to push me into backing down, Martin," Daniella interrupted quietly.

"You're choosing the Agency over me again, and it really isn't any more complicated than that. I don't want this bastard to have a second chance at taking you away from me, and you're going to tell me it won't happen. The problem is, it might!"

Andrew barely managed to suppress the smile hovering on his lips as he watched his lovely young daughter maneuver Fowler into an invisible corner. The agent was furious; it was written in every line of the tense jaw.

"Why can't you understand..."

"Because I love you, and I don't have to be any more logical than that." Daniella leaned against the wall and waited for some response. For a long time, Martin simply stared back at her, waiting for a change of heart Daniella had no intention of allowing.

"Jesus!" Martin fumed, standing up abruptly. He paced the living room for a few moments, then ran his hands through his hair in a gesture of surrender. "Okay, Daniella, have it your way."

Renault saw the lie instantly, and he stayed out of the disagreement. They'd have to work it out themselves.

"Dad?"

Andrew pulled his steady gaze away from Martin and met the question in his daughter's eyes.

"Martin's going to find Chris, would you mind staying with me while he's gone?"

"Certainly, Daniella. I'd love to stay," Renault smiled, delighted at the invitation.

Fowler glowered at her for a moment, then he hauled his jacket off the back of the armchair as he headed for the door. Once it slammed shut, Daniella turned her sharp gaze to her father.

"I want to see Barton," she said softly.

"Why?" Andrew couldn't resist the question, his surprise evident in the tone of his voice.

"Because he just lied to me," Daniella whispered, her look still fixed on the closed door.

\* \* \* \*

It took Martin a couple of hours to locate Baines' snow white Ferrari, and during that time, Fowler plotted his course of action. Once he'd dealt with Chris and had him in tow, they'd drop by Agency Headquarters and get Ayers' location—then they'd put an end to this particular nightmare, once and for all. Fowler figured Baines would be the best man to back him up; he had no illusions about Chris wanting to settle a few things of his own with Ayers.

*Belle's* was a nightclub/bar located about half a mile from Baines' sprawling ranch house, and Martin shook his head as he walked into the shadowy, smoke-filled atmosphere. He couldn't believe Chris was actually hanging out in this dive, but, under the circumstances, maybe it wasn't such a stretch. He could easily imagine the guilt eating away at the physician.

Once his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, Martin ordered a scotch and peered into the fog around him. It took a minute, but he finally located Baines' unmistakable halo of blonde hair, and he headed for the table tucked into a corner at the back of the bar. He dropped into a seat across from the doctor and stared at the other man for several, speculative moments.

"You look like shit, man," Martin decided after he'd completed his assessment.

"Fuck off, Fowler!" Chris growled, drunk enough not to give a damn about provoking the agent.

Martin raised an eyebrow and leaned back in his chair.

"Daniella's worried about you," he offered quietly, his tone oddly gentle. "We're both worried about you, Chris."

Baines shook his head, denying the concern as much as he wanted to clutch at it. "Martin, that's so much bullshit, and we both know it. You should be celebratin'. You get Dani and I get shit. Sounds about the right balance, all things considered."

"Y'know, Baines," Fowler said softly, anger edging into the tone, "I may not like you at times, but the one thing I've always admired about you is the fact that you're not an asshole. Why the hell are you behavin' like one now?"

Chris ignored the agent and poured himself another drink, then downed it in a couple of swallows. He was going to repeat the action when Fowler's fingers closed on his wrist like a steel band.

"You're gonna talk to me, Chris," he warned, deceptively gentle with his tone. "And, you're gonna stay sober enough to understand me."

"I have nothing to say to you, Fowler!" Chris snarled in fury. "Now, will you just stay the fuck outta my face!"

"Would you rather talk to Daniella?" Fowler snapped. "I can bring her by and let her watch you crawl into a bottle, if you'd prefer that to the way she usually feels about you."

"Daniella is too damn stupid to accept the truth about..."

Fowler tightened his hold on Baines' wrist until the other man winced in pain and halted his words.

"Don't you ever mistake that girl's love for stupidity, Chris, or I really will hurt you." Martin made a conscious effort to back off, and he released Baines' wrist, then picked up his scotch.

"She should hate me for what I did to her," Chris said softly, meeting the dark brown eyes that were so much like his own.

"She should hate you for keeping her alive and safe? That's a bit odd, wouldn't you

say?”

“I can’t believe you can be so calm about this, Martin. You saw the tape, you know what happened.” Chris blurted the words out, uncertain even now why he was determined to provoke Fowler’s wrath.

“I saw the tape,” Martin agreed. “And what I saw was two people I care about being forced to hurt themselves and each other. Daniella loves you, man. I accepted that a long time ago. You’re letting guilt tear you apart for no reason, Chris. She understands what happened, so do I, why is it so hard for you to accept that?”

Baines turned away, the words lodging in his throat. He felt the sting of tears threatening, and he tried to stand. As before, Fowler refused to let him leave. When he stared back at the agent, he saw something in the other man’s face that he’d never taken the time to see before—the incredible compassion Daniella always credited her lover with. Martin’s smile was sad, and the dark gaze compelling with its own hint of tears.

“I don’t blame you for loving her, Chris,” Martin whispered, pinpointing more accurately the real source of Baines’ guilt. “Just like I’d never question why you were curious about her. Every time I look at Daniella, I want to touch her, and make love to her. I sometimes wonder why she sees the same thing when she looks back at me, but I’m too grateful for it to question it too strongly. She’s special, and she touches everyone she loves with it. Why should you be any more immune than the rest of us?” he finished with a smile.

“How long have you known?” Chris asked, genuinely curious despite the dangerous ground they were treading.

“That you were curious?” Fowler tossed back in his memory, then grinned in spite of himself. “Probably long before you knew it yourself, Baines.”

“I didn’t know what else to do, Martin. Ayers would have turned her over to one of his men.” Despite the days that had passed, the fear came swiftly, and Chris closed his eyes against the despair washing over him.

“You did what you had to do.” Martin waited for the other man’s eyes to open, then he rested a steadying hand on the blonde’s forearm. “Because it was you, she wasn’t raped. Do you have any idea how grateful I am for that? I *can* live with this. I don’t think I could live with you allowing her to be terrorized and abused.”

“I feel like I let her down, Martin. She accused me of betraying the most important thing in her life.”

“Daniella is safe and she’s where she belongs. You didn’t betray anything, including her love for you. Let it go at that, okay? She understands, I promise.”

“She sent you after me?” Chris asked, going back to the beginning of the exchange.

Martin laughed. “What do you think? I wouldn’t be in this dive willingly, man.”

Chris scrubbed at his eyes, grimacing at the burning sensation. He pushed aside the bottle of bourbon he’d been working his way through, and tossed back unruly strands of pale hair.

“Baines?”

Something in the tone drew Chris’ eyes back into steady contact with Martin’s intent look.

“Let’s understand one thing, before we bring this little chat to a close. I’m glad you kept Daniella from being hurt, but if you ever attempt to crawl into bed with her again, I will seriously damage any plans you might have for progeny.”

For a moment the words hung between them, then Fowler's face split into a grin and the agent threw back his head and laughed heartily. Chris simply shook his head in open wonder, understanding just a little bit more clearly why Daniella did love this man so intensely.

"Tell her I'll drop by later, Martin."

"Why, you got plans for the moment?"

"No, why do you ask?" Chris wondered, suspicion coloring his tone.

"Well, if you can drag your sorry ass outta the bourbon, I could use some back-up."

"On what?"

"I thought you might like a piece of Steven Ayers," Martin said with a thoughtful look.

"What are we waitin' for?" Chris stated, standing up a little too quickly and swaying for the effort.

Fowler sighed, resigned himself to sobering up his friend, and stood to catch Baines in his steady grasp. He propelled the wobbly physician toward the door, barely noticing the curious looks he drew from the bartender and waitresses who'd been serving the handsome doctor.

\* \* \* \*

"Fowler!" Chris roared the agent's name in fury as he was dunked under the icy spray of his shower for the third time in ten minutes. Martin's hand on the back of his neck didn't relent, however, and Baines sputtered in an effort to say something else. He coughed, choking on the stream of water, and gave up the attempt to vent his irritation.

Martin sensed the resignation in Baines and he withdrew, shaking water off his upper body. He grabbed a towel and dried off, then picked up his shirt. He was pulling it on when Chris reached for the knob in the shower, readjusted the temperature, and began stripping out of his drenched clothes. Satisfied that the man would be fine on his own, Martin left the bathroom to head into the kitchen. Strong coffee wouldn't sober Baines any quicker, but it would help take the chill out of him after his impromptu cold shower.

\* \* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, Chris joined Martin in the living room. He was shaved, and dressed in jeans and a burgundy colored shirt that made his fair hair look even blonder. Fowler handed him a mug and watched the other man ease his long body into a comfortable slouch on the leather sofa.

"Have you got a location?" Chris asked after several appreciative sips of coffee.

"We just have to make a brief stop at Agency, and we can be on our way," Martin replied.

"I want this bastard, too," Baines murmured, more to himself than to the agent. His thoughts drifted back to Ayers, and the man's pleasure at humiliating him. He felt no regrets at his reasons for playing Ayers' game, but it still galled him that he'd apologized to the man, would have begged if it meant saving Daniella further pain. Chris wasn't accustomed to bowing to anyone's will; he had too damn much of his own.

Fowler saw the play of emotions on the angular features and he nodded, prepared to get underway, when the doorbell held him where he was. He glanced at Baines, who

looked as puzzled by the sound as Martin was. The doctor rose and went to answer the summons.



## Chapter 9

Andrew and Daniella entered the room with Chris a few moments later. Instead of the seat Fowler expected her to take next to him, Daniella crossed to the massive fireplace and turned to stare at them.

"I'm glad I found you," she said, her look shifting from Martin to Chris, then back again.

The hint of challenge in Daniella's manner was impossible to miss, and Martin rose to stand eye to eye with her when she tilted her head back and refused to back down from the subtle, intimidating stance he presented.

"Why do I know there's more to it than that?"

"You lied to me," Daniella noted softly, her tone cold with anger. "You weren't going to let this go, were you?"

"Daniella, you're just going to have to stay out of it now."

"No. It's over!"

Something in her tone alerted Martin and he glared at her, then turned to Andrew. "What the hell is she talking about?"

"Barton's men picked up Steven Ayers thirty minutes ago. He's in custody and will remain so until a hearing is scheduled to deal with the problem," Andrew informed them.

"What?"

"I asked him to do it," Daniella announced, drawing Fowler's dark stare back to her. She reached out to touch his cheek, the caress soft and loving. "I couldn't risk losing you. This way it wasn't possible."

Fowler was stunned.

"You shouldn't have done that, Daniella," Chris put in with his own share of annoyance texturing the statement.

"Why?" Daniella snapped. "Because only you and Martin can make that kind of decision? I did what *I* had to do this time, and you can both live with it!"

"You haven't given us a whole lot of choice, have you, Daniella?" Martin remarked quietly, his surprise still evident in his voice.

"No, I haven't. I'm not going to lose you, Martin. Not to someone like him. I love you. *Both* of you," she added with a glance at Baines.

Fowler nodded and drew her into his arms, shaking his head at the effectiveness of the ploy. Daniella's head went to his shoulder and he knew she had made the only choice her heart would allow. "I love you, too, Dani," he whispered, holding her tighter. He was mildly surprised to note that he wasn't nearly as pissed off as he expected to be, something he saw reflected in Baines' dark gaze.

Andrew felt the mood settle into one of warm acceptance, and he was intensely relieved. He hadn't been entirely sure he was doing the right thing in allowing Daniella to coerce Barton into taking this away from Fowler. But, the smile on his daughter's face when she stared at Martin confirmed exactly how right that decision had been for all of them.

It was over. At least for now.

## The End

### About the Author:

Denysé is a native of Atlantic Canada, born in the country's Easternmost province, Newfoundland, and raised in Nova Scotia. A lifelong dreamer, she began writing at an early age and can't recall a time when she wasn't creating in some artistic form. An active interest in the American West, and to a lesser extent the American Civil War, has been a lifelong obsession. Cowboys have been a love affair that began at the tender age of three, and eventually expanded to encompass an equally timeless passion for pirates, Greek Gods, and Ancient Egypt. The other side of the Old West intrigue is an affinity for Victorian England, particularly the 1885-1895 part of the century. As a result of her love of Greek Mythology, Canadian publishing house Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy, has just bought the novel *As Fate Decrees*, a time-spanning fantasy epic that may, in future, include several sequels.

At this point in her career, Denysé has had published in the vicinity of 400 stories and novellas, in almost any genre you can name. "The only thing I haven't tried yet is hard-core science fiction, and horror. Since I don't consider vampires as I write them to be the fodder of horror, I classify those stories as Dark Fantasy." Many of her vampire stories have appeared in Margaret L. Carter's anthology, *The Vampire's Crypt*, and *Night To Dawn*, published and edited by Dawn Callahan for the first two years, and now published by author/editor Barbara A. Custer.

Denysé's poetry has been published internationally, as well. She has also been the recipient of numerous awards, most notably the Fan Quality Award, which is given annually for excellence in fan-written fictions based on film and television. As of May 2004, there are four awards in her collection, and no less than a dozen nominations to her credit.

Also in 2004, Denysé was chosen as a winner in the Amber Heat Wave, an annual contest held by Amber Quill Press. Since then, AQP has published, or have on their "coming soon" pages, no less than two dozen Erotic Romance short stories, novellas, and novels in various genres. One of these novellas, *Mirage*, is included in the AmberPax collection *Suits, Ties, and the Water Cooler*, which was nominated for the EPPIE, a prestigious award given for excellence in electronic publishing.

More recently, Denysé has formed a partnership with actor/producer/singer Branscombe Richmond to create and write a serial best described as a modern-day western. (Think motorcycles in place of horses!) Installments of the book will begin appearing on websites initially, and hopefully in paperback in a year or so. The first episode appeared in April 2006.

Other projects include a new Historical/Western romance, an adventure/fantasy, and possibly a sequel to *As Fate Decrees* in the near future.

To stay current with all these projects, or to just say hello, please feel free to visit Denysé on the web at: [www.denysebridger.com](http://www.denysebridger.com)

**Meet LSB Authors At The House Of Sin  
Lsbooks.NET**

**We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books**

LSbooks.com  
for other exciting erotic romances.

**MOLTEN Silver**

Edgier, naughtier – from Summer 2006

**Featured Series:**

**The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors**

Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

**The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan**

Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

**Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron**

Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

**The Max Series by JB Skully**

Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!