



Adventures of a Private Jane: Vindication

By Lyric James © 2006

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Lyric James

Dedication

To my mom, for giving me my first romance book to read.

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Chapter One

There's nothing like hot sex in the afternoon, Karyn Harris thought. She raced into her apartment, threw her purse and keys on the corner table, and glanced at her watch.

"Twenty-minutes," she muttered.

More than enough time for a quick shower so she could jump into the new black teddy she'd purchased last week.

She left a pile of clothes from the hallway to the bathroom as she undressed, tripping over her own two feet along the way. Inside, she grabbed her toothbrush and applied toothpaste, turned on the shower, and began to brush her teeth.

Karyn was surprised she could be this happy. Of course, she and Zechariah were not a couple...not officially. If you wanted to be technical about it, they were just sex buddies. For over a year they'd enjoyed an occasional mid-afternoon sexcapade, midnight booty call, even an early morning rendezvous. But they weren't a couple. She liked him. She really did, and would never admit to anyone that she was almost halfway in love with him.

Their respective careers kept them too busy for her to consider anything else. He was a rich boy law student. She was a private investigator with a new firm and two employees to manage.

To think about work, though, made her feel remorseful about giving up. For the last year she'd worked on her own to find out who'd framed her sister, and then killed her.

Lyric James

But a year of failed leads had left her feeling broken and guilty. Guilty because she hadn't yet found her sister's killer or cleared her name.

As she slathered on her favorite peach scented lotion, she remembered how meeting Zechariah had helped to ease some of her pain.

She thought of him now, his magnificent bronze body, that six-foot-two-inch frame, and those eyes. Chocolate brown, with lashes any sane woman would kill for. And let's not forget his nine-inch dick.

In her walk-in closet she turned from side to side in front of the full-length mirror. "Perfect. This will definitely drive him wild."

A knock at the door put a quick smile on her face. She called out, "Coming," and giggled.

She took a deep breath and opened the door, sliding her knee up its side.

Zechariah Washington knew he'd need all the help he could get when Karyn opened the door. *God in heaven.*

"Well, hello stranger." She issued the greeting in that low, sexy voice that always conjured up a vision of her sensuous body wrapped around his.

Swallowing hard, he let his gaze roam from the top of her pedicured feet to her delicate calves. Those thighs were nature's gift to men everywhere and what lay between—*Oh my*. He couldn't wait to sink himself into her.

He lifted his gaze to her face. This woman was the sable-haired, coffee-eyed embodiment of sex.

"Come on in."

The sultry tone she used reeked of "let's have down and dirty hot sex. Now."

After she shut the door, he backed her against the wall and kissed her delicate, warm skin and marveled at how just touching her affected him. It was always this way. A rush of need. Heat sizzling through his body like a fast moving forest fire. A similar reply reflected in her eyes.

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He lingered over her lips, not quite kissing her, but bringing their awareness of each other to a boiling point. She always outdid herself when they met. Always one outrageous fantasy after another.

But he had to admit it wasn't just the sex. Sure, it was what had brought them together. A year of getting to know each other, sharing their hopes and fears, dreams and aspirations, somehow he'd slipped and fallen in love with her. Did he have the courage to tell her?

Reaching out to stroke her cheek, he grazed his fingers along her soft skin, more than aroused at the thought of being with her.

Karyn reached out with her tongue and licked his lips, something she knew really turned him on, and Zechariah emitted a harsh growl of masculine satisfaction.

"Follow me," she said, crooking her finger.

When she turned her back, he could've melted right on the spot. The teddy she wore dipped so low in the back it revealed the top of the sweetest ass he'd ever come across. Blindsided, he had to shake off the feeling just so he could follow her and not fall on his face with lust.

She led him to her bedroom. With the taste of her peach flavored skin still lingering on his lips, he spun her around and leaned in to kiss her. A kiss that was unhurried and enduring. A kiss that swept him away with possibilities and so much promise. He pushed his hips against her so that his erection settled on her stomach.

She wound her arms around his neck, pulling his head down forcefully, her hunger matching his own. Their tongues tangled and swept over each other with pulsing heat. Karyn had become more than an addiction, and the idea of self-preservation had him pulling away from her.

Maybe he should end it right now and run as far away from her as his thoughts could carry him. Although, it wouldn't be far. The need in her eyes and the idea of leaving triggered something so compelling in him, he swept her into another kiss.

He growled into her mouth, to seek more of what she always was so ready to give.

Lyric James

Her hands caught in his still-buttoned shirt. "You're not getting undressed."

Moved by the urgency of her words, he quickly freed himself from his shirt and tie, unbuckled his belt, and kicked off his shoes and pants. His socks and underwear quickly followed. He was ready, waiting, and naked as she slinked backward across the bed. Zechariah followed. He gripped her by the hips and hauled her to him, removing her teddy in one swift motion.

When she finally lay in front of him wearing nothing at all, his patience snapped. He had to have her. *Now.*

Zechariah captured a nipple between his teeth and began to nibble it. He nuzzled her breasts, and dipped his tongue into her cleavage. With a low moan, he took the other engorged tip into his mouth and worked it hungrily against his tongue and sucked it. Sensation after sensation pounded his body, shooting a direct arrow into his cock.

Her slender hands ran down his back, over his butt. She licked his neck and pressed her pussy full against him.

"Touch me."

His gaze locked with hers and he slid a finger inside her, teasing her, tempting her. He withdrew it, and slowly circled it around her swollen clit. "Like this?"

"Yes." Her fingers dug into his shoulders and her hips jerked upward against his hand. "Oh, yes," she gasped out.

Her hips pulsed feverishly as he slipped his finger in and out of her. Over and over. Then he buried his finger deep inside her and kissed her, a wet, greedy kiss. Her body arched upwards and begged him for release.

Karyn moaned softly as he slid down the length of her body, pressed her legs to her chest, and opened her. She didn't hold back the shocked cry of pleasure when his tongue slid over her clit.

He took her ruthlessly. Sucking and licking at her, deliberately intensifying her need as she twisted under his unrelenting mouth.

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As he whipped his tongue around her hard bud, she gripped the headboard so hard he thought she might break it in two. She spasmed against his mouth as the waves of her climax ripped through her.

"Oh my, God. Yes. Oh, yes!"

Zechariah mounted her then, settling his dick into her hot wet pussy. Karyn arched and her eyes flew open as he filled her, pushing inside her until he couldn't go any farther.

"Hold on to me, baby. Karyn. *Shit*. Hold on."

Every time he was inside her was like the first time all over again. It never failed to amaze him how much he wanted her, every second, every hour of every day.

In the beginning it had been easy to convince himself it was just sex. Now he was a slave to it. To her. Dear Lord, what this woman did to him.

Zechariah grasped her hips as she bucked against him. He pushed inside her with one seamless thrust after the next. His whole body clenched and he lifted her up and wrapped her legs around his waist. He buried his fingers within her satiny hair and kissed her.

Her hips urged him to move. He stroked her again and again, long, hard, and deep, and his ability to think stopped altogether. A moan gathered in the back of his throat. And after several more long heart-pounding moments, his orgasm burst forth like a released dam.

How could every time get better and better?

Karyn fell back against the bed; her body sated, and pleasure still careening through her veins. How'd he do it? How'd he manage to do it every time? No one had ever made her feel this way before. No one but him. Zechariah.

He twisted and lay down beside her. "That was incredible. I don't know if I can go back to work after that."

She leaned over and caressed his leg with her knee and thigh. She tweaked a nipple. "Me either. And I have to stay up late tonight to follow some deadbeat cheating husband."

Zechariah shifted so they were lying face to face. "You could always send one of your associates to do it."

Lyric James

"I know, but I promised Jade and Nicole I'd give them the night off."

"An all woman PI firm. I don't know if I'll ever get used to it. But you ladies sure have cornered the market the last few months. Everybody's talking about you."

She laughed and straddled him, "Well, it does help that we're all beautiful and sexy."

He grabbed her by the waist and switched their positions. "Oh, is that what it is?" he asked as he began to tickle her.

Laughter bubbled up her throat. "Yeah. The ladies like the idea of letting a woman stick it to their man and the guys just like to look at us. Aaah! Stop! Not the knee. Not the knee."

Karyn reached for his hand to try and stop him.

"You know you like it," he chuckled, fending her off.

Her buzzing cell phone interrupted them. "Hey! Stop. I gotta get that," she insisted. "Come on, Zechariah."

"No you don't," he said, grabbing her by the leg when she tried to get away.

"Uh huh. It might be important. Quit, you maniac," she said with a smile, kicking at him with her feet.

She snatched up the phone. "Karyn Harris."

"Um, yeah." A deep, low male voice spoke. "I have some information about your sister, Jessica."

"What? Who is this? How'd you get this number?"

"Meet me tonight. Three a.m. The Charter Club on Main Street."

"Look, I don't know who this is, but—."

Zechariah reached out to grab her hand for support.

"Hey lady, I'm doing you a big favor. If you want to clear your sister's name, be there."

"How do I know this isn't a trick?"

"You don't, but you won't know unless you come. Three a.m. If you're not there by Three-Oh-One, I'm out. Meet me in the back, in the men's restroom."

"But I—"

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Click.

Silence.

Leg numbness sent her crumpling to the edge of her bed.

Zechariah came around to kneel in front of her. "What the hell was that all about?"

"My—" She couldn't utter the words. Her stomach began to churn with uneasiness. She'd finally come to terms with her sister's mysterious death. At least she thought she had, until that phone call. It was a set up. Someone was going to try and kill her, too.

But what if it wasn't? What if the man's information helped her to finally put her sister's memory at peace?

Zechariah shook her. "Karyn, what is it?"

Her eyes refocused and she looked at him. "My sister. Some man just called and said he had some information about her. Something that could clear her name."

She stood, walked to her dresser, and gripped its front, her eyes closed. "He wants me to meet him tonight at The Charter Club on Main Street. Three a.m."

Zechariah thundered to his feet. "Hell no! You are *not* going to that seedy ass club at three o'clock in the morning. It's dangerous."

She swung around to face him. "I have to. Don't you see? He might have the information I need."

"Maybe." Reaching out, he grabbed her hands. "But it could also be a trap. I remember what happened four months ago. I still don't believe that hit and run was an accident. Someone was trying to kill you."

"I know," she said, jerking away. "But I still have to go. This could be it."

"Well, then. I'm coming with you."

"What? No, you're not."

"Yes I am, damn it. I will not allow you to go down there alone."

"Now wait just one freaking minute. Who the hell do you think you are? *Allow* me?" she said on a sputter, stepping into her closet to find a pair of jeans.

Lyric James

"Only hookers, crackheads, and murderers hang out there that late at night. You can't go by yourself."

He stood in the door, blocking her exit.

"This is just another part of my job."

"No, this isn't your job. It's different. It's personal."

"I'll have protection," she said sharply. She strapped her nine-millimeter to her back and shoved him out of the way to walk back into her bedroom.

"Karyn, be reasonable."

"I'm going."

"Fine. I'm coming with you."

She swung around to face him, and the word, "no," died on her lips when she saw his expression. The deep set of his eyes, his clenched fists, and his heaving chest. He was determined to go with her. "Fine. Whatever. But stay out of the way."

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Chapter Two

An ice-cold shiver ran down the back of Karyn's neck as she stepped through the door of the dimly lit bar. She told herself she wasn't afraid. The nine-millimeter fit snugly in the small of her back, and the knife hugging her thigh brought a certain amount of comfort.

She'd been a private investigator for more than three years, and she now owned her own firm. She shouldn't be afraid. *Then why the hell are you quaking inside?*

Karyn gritted her teeth and refused to acknowledge the question. Her eyes slanted in the darkness. Her contact told her he'd meet her in the back, in the men's restroom, but something told her that scenario was most likely a set up. But she couldn't pass on the chance to clear her sister's name.

The bar was a dive, in the seedier part of the east end of town. Dark and gritty, it smelled of beer and sweat. There weren't many people inside. Of course, it was still early. If you considered three o'clock in the morning early. A hooker and her john sat in a booth. A drunk guzzled whiskey at the bar. An old jukebox in the back belted out *Love and Happiness* by Al Green. There was barely enough light for her to see her way back to the restroom she was sure would reek of urine and vomit.

Zechariah had promised to wait outside in the car. "Five minutes," he'd said. "That's all I'm giving you before I come in."

Ooh, that man could be such a pain.

Lyric James

She went into the men's restroom and entered the middle stall. She hugged herself against the stench of filth, trying her best not to touch anything. If she weren't so desperate to exonerate her sister's name, she'd walk out in a heartbeat. But she needed the guy's information. Whatever it was.

Jessica Harris had spent ten years of her life as a cop, then homicide detective for the Memphis Police Department. She'd been a highly decorated, fiercely loyal member of the force in the city she loved. Then a year ago, a case she was working went belly up and Jessica was killed in the line of duty.

The Internal Affairs investigation revealed that Jessica had been a dirty cop. But Karyn knew her sister wasn't dirty. She wasn't that type of person. She loved her job too much, the law too much.

When a criminal she arrested went to prison, it gave her extreme satisfaction. So Karen knew without a shadow of a doubt her sister had been framed. She was sure of it. If it was the last thing she ever did, she'd restore her sister's good name. Even if it took her the rest of her life.

She'd worked hard up until about four months ago, gathering information, using her contacts in the police department. Then she began to receive threatening phone calls ordering her to back off or she'd end up like her sister. She knew then she was getting close. She was stepping on someone's toes, and instead of getting off, she'd wanted to break them.

But then someone ran her off the road and almost killed her. So, she stopped. Decided to give it some time, maybe even let it go. But here she was, back at it once more, hoping and praying this man's information would be enough.

She glanced at her watch again. Two-fifty-six. She would soon know the identity of her anonymous caller. If she were really lucky, he'd provide her with what she needed to bring Jessica's killer to justice.

The door's soft whoosh echoed through the room, letting her know someone had just walked in. Karyn straightened and reached for her gun. Adrenaline sent her senses to a higher level. She heard a zipper, then urine hitting the side of the toilet. "Crap," she mouthed to herself.

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She sheathed her weapon and waited. Soon, she heard the door open and close again and a familiar, light, musky scent filled her nostrils. The sound of soft-soled shoes stepped into the stall next to her. Fabric rustled.

Her gaze jerked below and she saw a pair of elegant men's dress shoes. But something told her a man wearing expensive shoes wouldn't frequent this establishment this early in the morning, unless he was trying to hide something.

Damn it!

Zechariah.

She'd told his ass to stay in the car. He hadn't even given her five minutes.

An eerie quietness filled the air. A pale glow of light from a window illuminated the room as the silence thickened. The door opened again, and someone stepped into the last stall.

She couldn't deal with Zechariah now. Yet somehow, his presence reassured her. Her respiration quickened. She struggled to ignore her beating pulse, and focused hard on the last man to enter, who stood on the other side of the wall.

Realization dawned. He knew he wasn't alone. He knew she was there. So, why didn't he say anything?

For about half a second, she considered calling out. But what if he wasn't her contact, what if he were the same person who'd murdered her sister?

As she gripped her gun, he said, "Miss Harris, I think I have some information you need."

A relieved whoosh escaped her lungs. The deep male voice startled her. But a jolt of new determination obliterated her fear at the creepy sound of his voice. Her weapon in hand, she stepped out of the stall, reached for the door handle on his stall, and yanked it open.

He whipped around, surprise lighting his eyes. He lifted one dark eyebrow. "You brought a gun?"

"It's like my American Express card. I never leave home without it."

Lyric James

"I want to help you, not get shot. So, the way I see it, I can either give you my information, or you can shoot me."

Karyn looked at the man, really looked at him. He was older than she expected. Handsome, too. The way he stood, loose-limbed and confident, and the self-assured look on his face reminded her of a lawman.

"You're a cop."

"Ex-cop."

She cocked her weapon, and the sound reverberated around them. "The way *I* see it, you could be the man who killed my sister. I'm damned sure it was another officer who framed her. So, you can either give me the information you *claim* to have, or I'll be more than happy to put a bullet between your eyes."

"I hope you have a permit to carry that weapon."

"Even if I didn't, the law couldn't protect you now, could it?"

She really didn't want to shoot him. Unexpected company was the last thing they needed, and people would come from everywhere if a gunshot rang out. She wanted him to relay his information to her quickly so they'd both get out of there alive. The more time she spent in this puke-infested bathroom, the sicker she became.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice elevated and head cocked to one side.

"I don't think giving you my name is a good idea. I'd hoped to tell you what I know and leave without your ever seeing my face."

"It doesn't work that way." She gripped the gun tighter. "Give me your name. Now."

"Look, if anyone finds out I was here, I'll be ruined. Why don't I just give you the information I have, then go?"

Zechariah stood stock-still and looked through the crack in the stall door. Fury danced across Karyn's gorgeous face. He watched in morose interest as the elegant curve of her jaw hardened and her full mouth turned into a thin line. Beads of sweat popped out on her honey brown skin.

"Last time I'm gonna ask. What is your name?"

He'd never seen her in action before. This lady was serious.

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"Mike Tucker."

She didn't bat an eye, but the twitch in her jaw let him know she recognized the name.

"Tell me, Mr. Tucker, what information do you have regarding the death of my sister?"

Her thick mane of sable hair was tied up in a ponytail. When she worked, she never wasted time with frivolous grooming. But on that rare occasion when he was able to pull it loose, it felt like silk against his fingers.

"I found some files."

"What kind of files?"

She was tenacious. He had to give her that. Since her weapon was still pointed in the man's direction, he really didn't have any choice but to cooperate with her.

"Some files that I think were meant to be shredded, but it never happened."

"Where are they?"

"I have them stored in a safe place."

A flare of impatience flickered in her eyes. "Why the heck did you bring me down here if you didn't have anything to show me? Your *words* mean nothing."

"Look. As long as those files are safely hidden, you and I won't end up like your sister."

Pain swept across her face. Her gun lowered a fraction.

"Damn."

Zechariah wanted to exit the stall and comfort her, but knew she'd be pissed as hell if he did. She was already aware he was standing there watching.

It seemed Mr. Tucker had the same idea, because he reached out to touch her. "Look, I'm sorry."

She stepped back, lifted her firearm, and blinked back tears. "Don't touch me. Just finish your story."

Lyric James

The brief reflection of pain that lit her eyes touched something deep inside Zechariah. He understood how it felt to lose someone close, and he wanted to console her.

"Where did you find the files?"

Back to business. "I'm a contractor now. I was doing some work on a house, and I found the file and hid it. I remembered your sister. We'd met once."

Zechariah knew Karyn looked a lot like her sister from the pictures she kept around her home. She had the same honey-brown skin, hair, and chocolate brown eyes, but that's where the resemblance ended. Her exotic features captivated him.

Impatience radiated her stance. "What was in the file?"

"Why don't I take you to where the file is hidden and let you see the information yourself? Then you can determine if it will help you clear your sister's name."

The shock that flitted across Karyn's features let Zechariah know she hadn't expected that.

"You'd do that?"

"Yeah. And I'd appreciate it if you lowered your gun."

She looked him squarely in the eye, and lowered her weapon. "Lead the way. But if this is a trick, you're going to meet your maker, sooner rather than later."

"You can ask Mr. Washington to come out of the other stall now."

Zechariah reared back in shock. How'd he know who was there?

In answer to his unspoken question, Mr. Tucker stated, "I smelled men's cologne the minute I walked into the room, and I know the two of you have been dating. I knew she'd be smart enough not to come to this club alone at this time of night."

They stepped out of the restroom with Mr. Tucker in front, his police instincts making him look up and down the hallway before proceeding. When Karyn fell in step beside him, she paused and touched his arm. "Wait. Let's go out the back. I suddenly feel very uneasy."

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They unhinged the back door. A resounding creak echoed in the air as they stepped out into the alley behind the bar. The pungent stench of trash assaulted her. She wrinkled her nose and looked around.

The moon peaked over the horizon.

A soft thud echoed from the other end of the alley. Karyn squinted thru the minimal light. Nothing moved, as far as she could see. But a prickly sensation along the back of her spine sent her pulse racing.

"Something doesn't feel right," she said.

"I feel it, too," Mr. Tucker agreed as he bent down to retrieve the gun strapped to his leg.

"What do you mean?"

A burst of gunfire from the far end of the alley interrupted Karyn's ability to answer Zechariah's question.

A bullet whizzed by her head.

Zechariah jerked. "Somebody's shooting at us."

"You think? Get down," she shouted.

She aimed her gun toward where the gunfire had originated and began shooting.

Mr. Tucker did the same. However, as she watched in horrified shock, he wasn't as lucky as she. One minute he was standing beside her and the next, he was slumped over on the ground.

Taking a deep, bolstering breath, Karyn made a dash for the large trash Dumpster a few feet away. She couldn't stop and grieve for him now, or she and Zechariah would end up dead in this filthy alley, too. So she grabbed Zechariah by his expensive tailored suit jacket and yanked him behind her. "Stay with me. Obviously, someone knew Tucker was coming. And now, he or she wants us all dead."

The instant she reached the Dumpster, she ducked behind it. Bullets continued to fly. "Stay put," she commanded.

Karyn peaked around the container, returning fire. She ducked back behind the trash and pressed a button near the trigger. The empty magazine fell to the ground with a tell-tale clatter. Immediately, she slapped another one in place and released the slide, ready to fire again.

Lyric James

Thank god, she'd parked close to the alley. "If we can just make it back to my car, I might be able to save us both."

She heard the shooter say, "Damn. I'm jammed."

She gripped Zechariah by the arm and screamed. "Move. Now!"

They hugged the wall and raced through the alley to her car. Behind them, she heard the shooter's footfalls.

"He's chasing us!" she yelled. "Hurry!"

Zechariah swore loudly.

Bullets whizzed by them and a sharp pain wrenched her arm. She reached into her pocket, pulled out her keys, and pressed the button to automatically unlock the door. They jumped in. She started the engine, slammed her foot on the accelerator, and raced away down Fourteenth Street.

"I didn't know coming with you was going to get me shot at," Zechariah said.

Karyn kept her eyes on the road. She made a sharp turn on Cross Street, sending dust in the air. "I don't make getting shot at a habit."

When they were a safe distance away and she was sure they weren't being followed, Karyn blew out a sigh of relief. She glanced at Zechariah. He didn't seem too worse for the wear.

"Shit. Shit!" A new worry hit her. "I don't think we should go back to my place."

"Then let's go to mine."

She clenched her jaw against the flurry of butterflies the thought of being at his home elicited. They rarely met at his place, and she liked it that way. It kept her in control of the relationship. "Seeing as though whoever shot at us knew Mr. Tucker was meeting me, I don't think that's such a good idea. I'm sure they saw you, too. So, I don't suggest we go to your place either."

Think, Karyn. Think.

A thought occurred to her. The last place she wanted to go was probably the safest.

Several agonizing minutes later, Karyn pulled up in the driveway of a small white house. Seconds ticked by.

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“Nice place. Where are we?”

In a monotone voice, she answered, “Jessica’s house.”

Chapter Three

The little house was tiny, but in a great neighborhood. Zechariah watched Karyn step out of the car with a haunted expression on her face. Realization dawned. "You haven't been here since she died, have you?"

"No," she stated quietly.

A glance in her direction told him she was morosely uncomfortable. It was a place she should have felt at home, and happy. But the untimely death of her sister had wrenched that contentment away.

Following her into the house, he stepped into a quaint kitchen with white cabinets and yellow curtains on the window. It was clean and smelled of pine. He watched her as she quickly shed the soft black leather jacket that hugged her torso and laid it over a barstool. Underneath she wore a plain white T-shirt. His gaze was so focused on her perfectly arched breasts he missed the red stain on her back until she turned around.

An arrow of fear hit him. "Shit, you're bleeding."

She looked at him and shrugged. "It's just a flesh wound."

"It still needs to be cleaned."

Fire flashed in her eyes, as she swung around to face him. "Look. I'm fine."

He knew she wasn't telling the truth, because she stumbled as she walked toward him.

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Rounding the center island, Zechariah reached for her before she fell. "Christ. Where's the bathroom?"

She cocked her head to the right. "Down the hall."

He put his arm around her waist and maneuvered them both down the narrow hallway. In the bathroom, he gestured toward the toilet seat. "Sit down."

Karyn shot him a drop-dead look before she sat. He rummaged around in the cabinets until he found antiseptic, cotton balls, and bandages.

As he got ready to clean her injury, he realized she'd have to take off her shirt for him to get to her wound. "Um...you're going to have to take off your shirt."

Her gaze shot to his, and narrowed. She turned around and winced as she lifted the shirt up, and over her head. For several heartbeats, he stood looking at her bare back, and then he eased toward her. He wet several cotton balls with the medicine and closed his eyes. He could do this. They'd almost been killed, for goodness sake, and here he was, lusting after her back.

He forced himself to concentrate on the broken skin and discolored flesh. "This may hurt."

He heard her sharp intake of breath as he applied pressure, and admired her. Most women he knew would run screaming to an emergency room at the sight of blood. But she'd taken a gunshot to the back and literally hadn't made a sound. Something he knew he wouldn't have been able to do. Karyn Harris wanted to ignore it and keep on moving.

Zechariah finished cleaning the wound, applied antiseptic, and covered it with a bandage. "You really should see a doctor."

She stood and yanked her shirt back on over her head. "We don't have time for that," she said as she walked out of the bathroom. She didn't even look in the mirror. Amazing. She was so unlike any woman he'd ever met, and yet, even in this tense situation, he couldn't help but want her. Even now, after almost being killed.

Lyric James

He followed her back into the kitchen and watched as she pulled open cabinet after cabinet, looking until she found a box. Lifting out a tea bag by its string, she stood there, silent, with it in her hand. Her shoulders slumped.

"Are you okay?"

She heaved a big sigh and straightened her spine. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"You're thinking of her."

She grabbed a mug out of a different cabinet and filled it with water. Her back was still to him. "Jessica liked coffee. But she always kept a box of tea in the house for me because I don't drink the hard stuff."

"That was very thoughtful of her."

"She always did things like that. Tea for me. Cola for Dad. Oatmeal cookies for Mom. Everyone's favorites."

As she crossed the room to the microwave, he could see a fine sheen in her eyes. But he knew if he tried to comfort her, she wouldn't allow it.

"What the hell?"

He looked down at her hands, and saw she had picked up a thick manila envelope. She put down her cup and opened it. "This is it. This is what Jessica was working on. All her notes."

"Where'd you find that?"

"In the microwave."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. Think about it. If you were worried about someone searching your house, where's one of the least likely places they'd look? Inside an appliance you use every day."

"I guess you're right."

Zechariah got up, stood beside her, and looked down at the papers as she flipped through page after page of her sister's notes.

"She's incriminating some pretty important people," he said.

"Wow."

"I know. No wonder it got her killed. If the press got wind of this, their careers would be over. And the jail time they'd receive—" She slapped the folder shut. "She had this, but she didn't have any real proof."

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He could see her features lighting up, the excitement flair in her eyes.

"We have to find out what information Mr. Tucker had." Karyn glanced down at her watch. "It just might be the extra proof we need."

Zechariah knew how important this was to her. Proving her sister's innocence had consumed her life for the last year.

She reached for the phone on the wall and dialed a number. "Hey, Jade. I need a favor."

"Karyn, it's four o'clock in the morning, and I just finished tailing that deadbeat husband for you. Can't this wait?"

"No. I need an address, and I need it quick."

"Okay, okay. Hold on. Who's is it?"

"Mike Tucker. He used to be a cop. Can you get in touch with your contact at the telephone company?"

"I'm sure I can, but it's four a.m. Give me a couple of hours, okay?"

"All right. Thanks. Call me on my cell," Karyn said, and she hung up.

"You can't possibly be thinking about doing what I think you're doing."

"Why not? Where else could the files be? I have to check his house."

"We. *We* have to check his house."

"No, Zechariah. Not *we*. Didn't what happened an hour ago teach you a lesson?"

"Me?" he asked incredulously. "Did it teach *you* a lesson? We saw a man get killed. You got shot. Maybe you need to call the cops. I mean, we walked away from a crime scene."

"And when I find the information Tucker had, we'll be able to prove my sister's innocence and explain what happened to Tucker."

"You're just a crime spree waiting to happen, aren't you?"

Karyn's adrenaline pumped overtime. She was so close. She could feel it. Spasms of guilt had plagued her for months after she stopped looking for proof about her sister's frame up. But now, she felt like she sat on the precipice of closure.

Lyric James

Zechariah looked at her like she was a total nut case for wanting to break into Tucker's house. But she had to do it. She watched him take off his tailored suit jacket and loosen his tie. Even at four o'clock in the morning, after running through a rat-infested alley and almost getting shot, he looked poised and distinguished.

Damn, but he was fine.

And it might seem crazy, but since they had nothing else to do but wait, she wanted him. Needed him to help her take off the edge, especially if she was going to end up breaking into someone's house tonight.

He didn't know it, but every time she was close to ending a case or finalizing one, she craved sex. But only with him. It was on those rare occasions that she picked up the phone first and called him.

She rounded the center island and stepped between his legs.

"What are you—?"

After placing her finger over his lips, she lowered herself to the floor and reached for his pants.

"Karyn, I don't think now's the time for this."

She yanked his belt loose. The only sound in the room was his zipper coming loose. Within seconds his long, thick cock filled her palms, while his trousers were sent to jumble around his ankles.

She explored every millimeter of him and enjoyed feeling his arousal in her hands.

"Karyn, you can't be serious—Ahh!"

The shallow dip of her tongue moved over the top, then down the shaft. She smiled, then took him deeply into her mouth and applied suction. Hearing the grown man nearly cry at her expert attention sent desire pooling in her pussy.

She gently squeezed his hair-covered sacs, finding them swollen and hard. Pulling back some, she fit her mouth over the tip of the head and followed the small, narrow opening with the tip of her tongue and sucked.

Zechariah's hips automatically bucked forward. She ran her fingers up his shaft, then back down again. The base of his arousal fit snug against the inside of her cheek as she swirled her tongue as far around it

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as she could, then moved him to the other side, as she licked and enveloped him whole into her mouth.

His tortured groan filled her ears and made heat explode over her clit. She could taste the sweet evidence of his seed coat her tongue as she closed her lips around him. She moved back and forth with easy, smooth strokes.

The sound of his rapid, irregular breathing told her he was ready. His hands moved from the side of the counter to grip her head. She increased the rhythm of her mouth and squeezed his sac and his shaft, then halted her movements. Her own body was close to climax, but she wanted to feel it happen inside her pussy, not her mouth.

When she pulled back, he jerked her up and began to tear at her clothes. The white T-shirt stained with her blood went flying across the room, as did her shoes and pants. Her gun and holster clattered to the floor along with her knife.

With her panties removed, he gripped her by the waist to hoist her on top of the kitchen counter. He lifted her legs above his shoulders and plunged into her deeply.

She cried out. His cock throbbed and pulsed inside her. The corner of his mouth quirked and he gritted his teeth as he took her closer and closer to orgasm.

Trapped between him and the cabinets, she couldn't move. She could only feel. The sensation of it almost had her coming undone. His fingers dug into the muscles of her ass as he increased his speed.

The tendons and veins in his face stood out as he strained upward with each thrust. It was too much. Her sex had never felt so full. With every increased bit of friction of his dick against her swollen clit, she lost the ability to think.

Then the orgasm hit her, and it became the center of her world. She shuddered and cried out, digging her fingers into his arms as the climax enveloped her. And he followed her over that passionate abyss.

He released her legs and shuddered against her.

"I love you."

Lyric James

Still shivering, she glanced up, caught unguarded by the emotion brimming in his eyes.

"Zechariah, I—"

Her cell phone began to buzz. She clamored down off the counter and found her pants, flipped her phone open, and saw it was Jade, calling her back.

"Hey, Jade. You got that address for me?"

"Yes. It's—"

"Hold on. Let me get a pen."

She moved around Zechariah and avoided looking into his eyes. Because if she did, she knew she'd come apart. And she didn't have time for that now.

"Okay, Jade. Go ahead."

"It's 4123 Jackson Place."

"Got it. Thanks."

Slowly, she shut her phone, keeping her back to him as she reached down to gather her clothes.

"Karyn?" he asked, with a heavy voice.

Not now. She couldn't deal with this. She couldn't stop and have a heart to heart with Zechariah and discuss how she felt. Too much was at stake. She was so close, so close now to exonerating her sister.

"Jade got the address. Let's get dressed and go. The sooner we get that information, the better."

"So, you're just going to stand there and ignore what I just said?"

Tying up her shoes, she swung her gaze to meet his. "This isn't a good time for a talk."

"Forty-five minutes ago wasn't a good time for a blow-job either, but you did it."

"I didn't hear you complaining." She swept down to pick up her gun and holster. "Zechariah, please. Can't we do this later?"

"You can't take one minute to tell me you love me? Or is that not it?"

The stricken look that crossed his face didn't go unnoticed. But Karyn didn't know what to say to him. Why now? Why'd he have to tell

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her now? Why not later, when they were in bed celebrating or somewhere out to dinner at one of his favorite fancy restaurants?

She grabbed her jacket off the chair, put it on, and picked up the file she found in the microwave. "Let's go. The sooner we get those files, the sooner I can clear my sister's name."

Lyric James

Chapter Four

"I *cannot* believe I'm doing this," Zechariah said as he slinked beside her to the side of Mike Tucker's house. "I'm a law student and a respected member of the community and I'm about to break into someone's house."

Karyn rolled her eyes and hunched her body lower to the ground. "I told you that you didn't have to come with me."

"Yeah, well...shit, get down."

Karyn crouched behind an azalea bush as a neighbor stepped out of his house to get the morning paper. The day still smelled fresh. Someone had cut his or her grass yesterday, and coffee brewed in the house next door. One of Karyn's favorite radio stations blasted from an upstairs window.

In the distance, she could just see the sun peaking over the horizon.

"Hopefully we can find an open window. If not, I'll try to pick the lock on the back door."

"Pick the lock? What the hell? Who in the heck am I involved with?"

"Like you said, I'm a crime spree waiting to happen." She turned to smile at him. "Come on." Karyn squatted and hugged the side of the house as they moved along, feeling each window to see if it was open. Zechariah couldn't believe what *he* was doing. Well, neither could she. It was highly likely that Mr. Tucker had an alarm system. If he did, here she

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was slinking around, risking imprisonment, and dirtying up her favorite pair of jeans for nothing.

She reached the window closest to the back of the house and when she pushed, it gave. Inside she screamed with joy, but at the same time, she held still, waiting for an alarm to sound. "We need to wait thirty seconds. Thirty seconds. That's how long it takes most alarms to go off."

Zechariah didn't move.

When one minute passed, Karyn slowly released a deep breath. "Okay. No alarm. Help me push it all the way open."

He gave her a boost as she crawled through the window, and came in behind her a few seconds later.

"This looks like the den. Let's go see if he has an office somewhere."

Karyn crept silently around a deep brown leather chair, her footsteps quiet on the carpet. She listened for any noise in the house. All she heard was the chirp chirp of crickets outside.

Zechariah followed close behind her as she looked from room to room. A bedroom, a bathroom, another bedroom, and the living room. "Please have an office."

"Look, there's a door."

"Let's go," she said quietly pulling him by the arm. It was an office.

Once inside the room, they started searching. "Check that filing cabinet over there," she said, as she pointed to the corner. "I'll check his desk."

For several minutes, the only sound was the rustling of papers and the rumble of drawers opening and closing.

"I don't see anything."

"Shit. Shit. Me either. Wait! This drawer is locked. It has to be in here."

Karyn pulled and pulled, but she couldn't get the drawer open. "I need a knife or something."

"I'll get you one from the kitchen."

Lyric James

But as soon as Zechariah reached the door, they heard glass shatter in another room.

Her eyes widened. "Oh crap. Someone else is breaking in. We gotta hide."

Zechariah's gaze swung around the room. "Where?"

She nodded toward another door, on the opposite side of the room. "The closet."

They quietly slipped inside and closed the door, leaving it open a crack.

A man in dark silhouette, dressed all in black came in. They watched as he first checked the filing cabinet, throwing paper and files on the floor.

"I bet he's looking for the same thing we are," she whispered to Zechariah. "I can't see his face."

He walked toward the closet, but stopped at the desk and began pulling out drawers and rifling through their contents. When he got to the locked drawer, he cursed. Then he pulled a knife out of his pocket and went to work on prying it loose. It took him a couple of seconds, but the drawer finally popped open with a thud.

Karyn gripped Zechariah's arm. "Noooo. He's going to get the proof."

The man pulled out a thick envelope and placed it on the desk. He used his knife to slice it open and the papers slid out onto the desk. He reached back to pull up the chair and sit down. It squeaked when he did so.

He reached inside his pocket and took out his cell phone and dialed a number. "I think I found it."

He rifled through the papers. "Yes. It's all here."

The man stood, slid the papers back inside the folder, and placed it under his arm. "Where do you want me to meet you?"

He kicked the drawer closed with his foot and glanced at his watch. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Karyn watched in horror as he left the room. She murmured to Zechariah. "I can't let him leave with those papers."

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She reached for the door handle, but he stopped her.

"What are you going to do, tackle him? Besides, he's meeting someone and that someone is probably the person behind this entire thing. *That's* who you really want."

She slid back against the boxes in the closet. "You're right, but we can't let him get away. We have to follow him." Karyn reached for the door again.

"Wait! We don't want him to know we're following him. Let's let him get out first."

"Okay, but we need to see what kind of car he gets in and what direction he goes. Come on."

Karyn opened the door, crouched down, and raced as fast as she could into the den to the back of the house, where they heard the man's footsteps on the glass.

She hid behind a bedroom door as she heard the man open and close the window he'd broken. Then she looked at Zechariah and he mouthed, "Let's go."

Stooping down, she crawled to the door and glanced out. The man had come around the house the same way they did, only he didn't think to try an open window. She saw him go through the bushes toward the alley.

Karyn pulled her keys out of her pocket. "Here. You take these and go get the car. I'm going to follow him and see what kind of car he's in and what direction he goes."

Zechariah appeared as though he were going to protest.

She stared at him. "We don't have time to argue. Just go."

He snatched the keys from her, and then ran toward the car. She followed the man into the bushes, but stopped when she reached the alley. She watched him get into a dark green SUV. She heard him gun the engine, then saw him speed out of the alley. Before he turned right at the corner, she had her cell phone out.

She crouched down low to the ground. "Jade! This is an emergency. Run these plates for me. *Seven Four Two Adam Mary Kate*. Call me back ASAP on my cell."

Lyric James

As she clipped her phone shut, Zechariah came speeding down the alley. She jumped in and reached for the seat belt. "Gun it. He turned left."

Just as they were turning, she saw him go right at the next corner. "That's him in the SUV. Don't lose him."

Zechariah smiled and put the accelerator to the floor. "Do you always have this much fun at work?"

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Chapter Five

Zechariah followed the green SUV to the outskirts of the city. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. You sure you don’t want to call the police now?”

“We need the proof first.”

He didn’t doubt she was correct on that assumption. However, following this man to god knows where was dangerous. “At the first sign of trouble, I’m calling the police.”

Her lips thinned, and she gripped the door handle. “That’s fine. But I need those papers first. I didn’t come all this way for nothing. My sister figured out that the Mayor and several Senators were operating an actual whorehouse. I’ll bet you anything that’s where he’s going.”

As they drove down the deserted road, in the distance, he saw a lone two-story mansion with several cars parked in the driveway and on the street. The green SUV drove around to the back of the house. Lights were on in all of the downstairs windows and several were lit on the top floor. A man, who looked to be a guard, paced back and forth on the front porch. And Zechariah could tell by the bulkiness of his jacket, that he was carrying a weapon.

“We can’t drive by without being seen. How do you want to play this?”

Karyn leaned toward the window and touched her bottom lip with her index finger. “Maybe you can pretend to be a customer.”

Lyric James

Zechariah swung his gaze in her direction. "What? You want me to pretend like I'm looking for a hooker?"

"Well—" She glanced down at herself, and then at him. "They'll know I don't work here just by the way I'm dressed. And besides, you already look the part. You're a business exec just looking for a good time."

"But what if he asks if I have an appointment?"

Karyn slid down in the seat as they pulled closer to the house. "Tell him that Senator Hoffman told you about the place. His name is on the list I found in the microwave. When he takes you inside, I'll sneak around back to see where our friend went."

Zechariah shook his head. "And then what?"

"Hell, I don't know. I've never been to a whorehouse before. Use your instincts. Just wing it."

He rubbed his hands down his face. "I don't like this."

"Look, every minute we sit here, the closer that man comes to either shredding or burning those papers. We're running out of time."

"Fine. But you'd better have 911 on speed dial," he said as he turned off the ignition and got out of the car.

Karyn peaked over the dashboard as Zechariah walked down the street and up the walk to the front door of the house. She knew this was madness, putting both of their lives in danger. But she had no choice. This could be it. The end. Final vindication for Jessica. She had to chance it.

The guard dog at the door made Zechariah put out his hands as he patted him down from shoulder to toe. Then he took him inside. Karyn jumped out of the car, hunkered down, and sprinted around to the back of the house.

When she got to the rear of the home, she tried the knob on the back door. It was open. She peaked through the window. It appeared to be the kitchen, and no one was inside as far as she could see.

She slipped inside and quietly shut the door. For a whorehouse, it was pretty clean. The white cabinets gleamed. There were no dishes in the sink, and a vase filled with pretty yellow roses sat in the middle of an oak table. A bowl filled with real fruit sat in the center of the island.

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She heard voices coming from other rooms in the house, and soft jazz music played on a speaker system.

For a few minutes she stayed there, crouched on the floor beside the cabinets, waiting to make sure no one had heard her. She saw a man and a woman walk past the kitchen door, his hand on her ass. When he kissed her neck, she giggled.

Karyn waited until she didn't hear them anymore, then stood and walked to the doorway. However, as she was about to cross the threshold, she heard the all too familiar "clack clack" of a gun being cocked.

"Well, well, well. Ms. Harris. So nice to see you this evening."

Dread hopped into her throat and panic clutched her heart. She turned. "Mr. Mayor. Nice little whorehouse you have here." He had two goons flanking him, both with guns. So there was no way she was getting out of this. Not this time.

Zechariah, where are you?

"Did you really think we knew you wouldn't come? Your sister made that same mistake. You should have stopped when our friend ran you off the road."

She narrowed her eyes to angry slits, and gnashed her teeth to keep from losing it. "So, it *was* you trying to kill me."

She needed to stall for time as much as she could. "Well, my sister didn't think to call for back up before she paid you a visit. I did."

"I see." He shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I guess that means I need to destroy the evidence you've spent the entire night looking for, doesn't it? And fast."

One of the double-mint buffoons approached her and flipped his gun at her. "Move."

She turned and walked into the hallway.

"Go left."

She obeyed, taking the opportunity to look for any possible escape routes. They passed the living area, which was comfortably furnished with a plush sectional sofa, a chair, and several low tables.

Lyric James

There were two couples in the room, one standing and one sitting, and none of the people batted an eyelash when they walked by, even though Karyn had a gun pointed at her back.

He nudged the weapon against her shoulder. "Move it."

When they walked into the study, her worst fear was realized. Zechariah was sitting in a chair, under the care of another goon, a gun pointed at his head. His face was grim and he had the makings of a nice bruise on the right side of his face.

The mayor remarked, "I thought it would be nice if Mr. Washington joined us for the festivities."

"Oh?" Karyn swung around to face him. "You won't get away with this."

The mayor smirked. "Of course I will."

He moved to the corner of the room and sat in the chair behind the desk. He propped his feet, crossed at the ankles, on its corner and took a cigar out of a sleek black case and lit it. As if this was some ordinary meeting and she and Zechariah were his guests. He took a deep drag and sent several smoke puffs into the air.

At that moment, she hated him. This was the man who had killed her sister. Whether or not he'd pulled the trigger, he was behind it and if she had to die today, she'd make him pay for what he did. Even if she had to sell her soul to the devil and come back and haunt him for the rest of his miserable life.

"How could you do this? People respect you and look up to you. The citizens of this city pay your damned salary. But you're nothing but a low-class pimp."

He took another drag of his cigar and waved off her comment. "A low-class pimp stands on a corner in a purple suit and makes hundreds of dollars, Ms. Harris."

He lowered his feet and rose. "Look at your surroundings. I make thousands."

She leveled back. "It doesn't matter how you try to fancy it up Mr. Mayor, you're still a pimp."

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"Touché." The mayor smiled and hunched his shoulders. "But no matter. Your part in this little investigation will be over soon enough."

At the file cabinet, he pulled out a folder and walked toward the fireplace. Misery ripped through Karyn's heart. If he destroyed the files, she'd have nothing. Her search would be in vain. She had to do something before he tossed it into the fire.

"Why'd you kill my sister?" she asked. "You didn't have to kill her."

"She was getting too close." He turned and pointed the file in her direction. "Just as you've gotten too close. People were starting to pay attention to her investigation. Important people. I couldn't have that."

Out of the corner of her eye, Karyn saw Zechariah shift and a red light tinkering on and off. Glee shot through her. Yes! Thank God for videophones. She just needed to keep the mayor talking.

"Who else is involved in your little prostitution ring?"

He walked back to the desk, the folder still in hand, thank goodness, and tapped his cigar on the ashtray. "This isn't just any little prostitution ring, Ms. Harris. Did you see this house? Did you see the cars parked out front? They're all top quality. Lexus. Mercedes. Jaguar. We have top notch clientele paying high dollar for a night's entertainment."

She folded her arms over her chest and stood so she blocked his view of Zechariah video-graphing their conversation. "I don't care how you jazz it up, Mr. Mayor, you're still a pimp and those women are still whores. And you're a murderer."

"I didn't kill your sister."

She advanced on him, but was brought up short when one of his goons grabbed her. "Just because you didn't pull the trigger doesn't make you any less guilty. You ordered it. And why'd you have to frame her? She wasn't a dirty cop."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Just adding a little spice to the pie. As long as they thought she was dirty, they wouldn't look into what she was researching. And I made sure all her files were destroyed. At least, I thought I did."

"Tucker."

Lyric James

"Yes, old Officer Tucker got to the file before we did. He should have kept his mouth shut. But when he met you tonight at the bar, well, he had to be taken care of as well."

Karyn's mind blistered with rage. The mayor was an animal. Her sister. Tucker. She and Zechariah. And goodness knows who else. All for that almighty dollar. He was sick.

Karyn began to panic. She should've called the police like Zechariah had instructed. Now, no one would know the truth. She had to find a way to get them out of there.

It was now or never.

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Chapter Six

Karyn lunged for the file when the mayor walked past her on his way back to the fireplace. Once she had it in her hands, Zechariah rose and punched the goon standing beside him and leveled a swift kick at the other one, sending him crashing to the floor.

The mayor swore as she made it out the door with Zechariah on her heels. Her mind went numb when she heard a gun blast. Karyn ducked and Zechariah stumbled behind her. She turned, and he fell.

“No!” She reached out to him, but he rolled away.

His voice wrenched out, “No! Go! Get out of here!”

“But—”

“Go, Karyn.”

The mayor yelled from the room. “Get her, goddamn it! If she gets out of here with that file, we’re all finished.”

She turned and sped down the hallway, took a left, and flew out the kitchen door. Just as she did, she heard sirens.

“Thank God.”

She broke out in a dead run toward the lights, waving her hands to get their attention. A bullet shattered a car glass beside her and she hit the ground.

Lyric James

The first police car screeched into park. The officer inside jumped out and fired two shots, hitting the goon chasing Karyn in the chest. He fell off the porch.

"Help me," she cried. "Please help me. Call an ambulance!"

"Ma'am, are you hurt?"

"No." Terror claimed her soul. "But my friend's been shot. He's in the house. Please help him."

Several other law enforcement vehicles roared into position. The officers jumped out and stormed the house. She raced in behind them to see Zechariah on the floor.

"Please don't be dead," she said, over and over. "Please don't be dead."

She threw herself to the floor and clutched his chest. Blood covered his shirt. "Zechariah! Zechariah! Wake up? Can you hear me?"

At that moment, everything swung into focus and she knew that she loved him. *With every fiber of her being, she loved him.* And she had never told him. She was a fool. She'd been so intent on being independent and in control of their relationship, she could lose the man she loved and he would never know how she felt.

"Zechariah, please wake up."

"I'm up, you crazy woman." He moaned. "I told you that you were going to get me shot before the night was over."

"Thank God you're alive." She kissed his forehead, his cheeks, his lips. "Zechariah—"

"Don't leave me," he said.

"I wouldn't dare even think about it."

He tried to get up, and she caught his arm. "No, don't. Stay still. The ambulance is on its way."

Zechariah slumped back down to the floor. The police were taking several people away in handcuffs, including the mayor and his buffoons.

After they went out the door, two paramedics came in rolling a stretcher.

"He's right here," she yelled.

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She stood and got out of the way while they administered what first aid they could, then placed him on the stretcher. She followed them out the door.

One of the hookers who'd been standing in the living room walked out onto the porch with her and held out her hand. "Ms. Harris, I'm Officer Tanner."

"You're a police officer." Incredulous, Karyn gaped at her.

"Yes."

Amazed, she stated. "You called for help."

"Yes, I did. When I saw them take you down the hallway, I knew I had to act fast and that if they had you, they must have the evidence your sister was gathering, too."

"So, you knew. All this time."

"Yes. I knew Jessica. She was a good cop. My captain and I both know that. We decided the best thing we could do to clear her name and find out the truth was for me to go undercover."

"Wait." Karyn paused in alarm. "The files and Zechariah's phone—"

Officer Tanner held them up. "I have them both right here. That was quick thinking on Mr. Washington's part. Don't worry, with your sister's files and his recording, the mayor and his partners will spend a long time in jail."

"Thank you so much."

"You're welcome."

A huge weight lifted from Karyn's shoulders. It was finally over. She'd helped to vindicate her sister's name and even better, she'd realized just how much she loved Zechariah. She watched the ambulance drive away and raced to her car. She had to tell him. She had to let him know.

At the hospital, she went to the check-in desk in the emergency room. "I'm looking for Zechariah Washington. He was brought in for a gunshot wound."

"Just a minute."

The lady walked away, checked a chart, and came back. "Are you Ms. Harris?"

Lyric James

"Yes."

"He asked that you be able to come back as soon as you got here. But you want be able to stay long. They're prepping him for surgery. Go through those double doors to room five."

"Okay."

She walked through the doors and they swooshed closed behind her. The scent of antiseptic and cleanness hit her. In room five, she pushed the door open and Zechariah lay there, his eyes closed, a bandage on his right shoulder.

He was going to be okay. When she'd heard that gunshot, every moment she'd shared with him had flashed through her mind. Those lazy mornings after awesome sex, sharing French-fries by candlelight, ice cream in the park on a hot summer day.

Karyn had a boyfriend, and she didn't even know it. But he did. He'd realized it and had the guts to tell her how he felt and she'd ignored him. Never again. Never again would she let a day go by without telling him that he was the most important person in her life.

He opened his eyes. "Hey, you."

"Hey, yourself. You okay?"

"Yeah. As soon as they get this bullet out of my shoulder, I'll be fine."

"I was so scared." Tears begin to drip down her face. "I thought I'd lost you." She laid her head on his uninjured shoulder.

"Sshhh. It's all right. I'm fine."

"I love you, Zechariah. I do. I'm so sorry it took you getting shot for me to realize that."

"Well, since I took a bullet for you, then you gotta do something for me."

"Anything."

"Marry me."

Karyn jerked her head up. "What?"

"Marry me. But only on one condition."

"Huh?"

He grinned. "Never, ever, take me on a job with you again."

Adventures of a Private Jane: Vindication

Karyn's heart bloomed with the love she felt for him and she realized this was exactly what she wanted. He was exactly what she needed. "Okay. Yes. I'll marry you."

"Phew. Good. Now slide on up under these covers with me."

"I can't do that, there's not enough room."

"Well, get on top, then."

"What?"

"Hey, you owe me."

"Oooh, you're bad. You're laying here with a bullet in your shoulder, on your way to surgery, and all you can think about is sex."

"Hey, I just want to make sure this wound didn't affect my most important parts."

Karyn smiled at the man she loved and lifted the clean white sheet that covered him. "Well mister, by the look of things, I'll say your most important parts are just fine."

Lyric James

Author Bio

Lyric credits her mother for her love of reading. (Thanks, Mom. ☺)

She spent her early childhood trying to pry romance novels out of her mother's hands. One day, she got so fed up with it, she asked her mother to tell her about the book she was reading. She was so enthralled, she took that book from her mother, read it in one sitting, and has been hooked ever since. She refuses to tell anyone how long ago that was.

As a youth, she wanted to be a doctor, dentist, nurse, teacher, or physical therapist. Instead, she ended up working for a health insurance company, a visiting nurse association, a therapy center for children, and a television station. After finally deciding what she wanted to be when she grew up, she decided to be a librarian. For the past two years, Lyric has spent her days with 13-14 year olds in a middle school library.

Lyric still felt something was missing. After surfing the Web and finding eHarlequin, she knew it was time for her to finally pick up that pen...um, keyboard...and write. In 2003, her first manuscript...after several re-writes of chapter one, began.

Lyric's private book collection includes her favorite authors: Julia Quinn, Amanda Quick, Nora Roberts, Mia Zachary, Jodi Lynn Copeland, Jaci Burton, E. Lynn Harris, Dr. Suess, Barbara Park, Eoin Colfer, Jenny Nimmo, Lemony Snickett, J.K. Rowling, and John Grisham.

She lives in the southern United States with her husband, and three children.

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

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Chapter One

Aaron Montana watched the thick cigarette smoke curl around the beautiful woman performing on stage. He wondered if the money she received in tips was worth being treated like a pole-dancing stripper.

Stepping down from the stage, Bailey Carson strummed her guitar, singing her latest country song in the crowded honky-tonk bar in Nashville, Tennessee. Every night that she walked the aisles between the tables, men would stuff a few bills in the pockets of her tight jeans, slurring out a suggestive comment or two.

Aaron sat at the back in his usual spot, wondering if she ever got tired of it all. He loved the way her violet-tinted eyes sparkled when the crowd pounded the tables, begging for one more song. The low sultry twang of her voice soothed him more than any whiskey. Did she go home

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alone every night to a run-down apartment overlooking the street-lined bars below? Was she trying to support six kids that an ex-husband had abandoned her with? He'd read in a tabloid that she was single, but it hadn't given much more about her private life other than she liked her privacy.

He knew she couldn't possibly be making that much money as a bar singer. It was part of the reason he always liked to tip her generously. A woman with Bailey's talent and beauty shouldn't have to struggle so hard, walking the lonely path of life. But then again, wasn't he guilty of being a loner himself?

Aaron pushed himself from his table, downed the rest of his watered-down bourbon and coke, and walked to the front to place a twenty in the tip cup. Too bad the drunken fools who padded her back pockets wouldn't remember a word she'd sung by morning.

He didn't need four or five drinks to forget whatever ailed him. Watching the dark-haired beauty as she performed her magic had him walking around in a stupor. So why couldn't he bring himself to ask her to dinner, or even say hello? Hadn't he paid his dues from a broken heart long ago?

* * * * *

With each blink of the neon cowboy hat across the street, another teardrop slid down her cheek. She'd sung her heart out tonight, as she did every night, and it seemed no one really paid attention. Sure, she'd racked up on tips, but only after four hours of smoke, lights, and losing a pound of sweat.

Maybe her father was right—it was time to give up on her silly dream and move back home to Ohio. None of her family had ever so much as graced a table at Slick Willie's to hear her sing. According to her mother, she was a disgrace to her family.

The bitter words still stung like rubbing alcohol in an open wound. That's exactly why she'd changed her name, gotten a new identity. As far as Bailey was concerned, she didn't have a family. She'd never been Clair

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Baker, oldest daughter of Mountain Ridge Church's preacher, Karl Baker.

Shattering glass and an outburst of cursing snapped her out of her self-pity. She should be used to the domestic disputes of her neighbors after six months of listening to the once-a-week brawl-down-the-hall.

She put her ear to her living room wall. Things seemed to be getting violent this time. From the sound of the thud against a hallway door, it sounded as if a body-slamming match was taking place. Bailey decided it was time to call to 911 before someone was seriously injured.

Within a few seconds of placing the call, a gun blast rang out, followed by a woman's terrified scream. Bailey fell to the scratched hardwood floor in her living room, trapped in the middle of the frightening nightmare on the other side of her wall. She hoped like hell it wouldn't take the emergency crew long to respond.

* * * * *

Aaron was looking forward to a quiet evening at the fire hall. It was the type of night where he could prop up his feet and fantasize about Bailey Carson. He missed the nights he couldn't go watch her sing. But the call that came in changed his plans within the next few minutes.

"Great, looks like another domestic dispute down on Seventh Street." Aaron threw on his fireman's hat. "How many does that make this month?"

His partner, Bill Phillips, shrugged his shoulders and hoisted himself into the driver's side of engine 344. "I know we've had more emergency calls than fires." Bill flipped the sirens. "Not that the lack of fires is a bad thing..."

"Yeah, but this deal over on Seventh Street is getting old." Aaron fastened his seatbelt. "Wonder when Marla Simpson's going to get tired of it and kick this guy's ass out on the street?"

"That's the thing about a lot of these domestic disputes; it's like an addiction with so many of the women. For some reason, they keep hoping the next time things will be different." Bill wheeled out of the fire hall. "I had an aunt who'd go back to my no-good drunken uncle every time."

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"Shhh... Listen." Aaron turned up the police scanner in the cab of the fire truck. They've upgraded the emergency call. They're saying there's been a report of gun fire."

"Maybe she's finally gotten some sense knocked into her and done the ol' geezer in for good. I hope she shot him right in the family jewels."

"That's a little harsh, isn't it Bill?"

"After you've been doing this as long as I have, you kind of develop a cold heart, I'm afraid. Just wait and see—you'll end up cold-hearted too."

There was more truth to the statement than Bill knew, Aaron thought, scratching the stubble on his chin. He'd developed that cold-hearted attitude when he'd found his ex-wife in bed with his boss three years ago. He should have been more attentive, not worked so many long hours. Maybe he'd still have a wife if he'd taken time to be married to something other than his job. Leaving his job as assistant vice president of a Fortune 500 company was the only *good* decision he'd made in his thirty-two years of life.

* * * * *

Emergency crew and squad car lights flashed along Seventh Street, blinking in time with neon signs. It reminded Aaron of a chaotic carnival of curiosity seekers, reporters and photographers, all wanting their share of the action. It was sad how a tragedy could create such an attraction.

Within fifteen minutes, the rescue squad had covered Marla Simpson's body, pronouncing her dead at the scene. Aaron shook his head, trying to gather his thoughts and calm his nerves. No matter how many times he witnessed such a tragedy, he never got used to it. Maybe he wasn't cut out for this line of work. He'd nearly convinced himself to trudge back into the corporate world where the only death he'd witness would be one of a workaholic.

When he shot a glance back at the building roped with the telltale yellow caution tape, nausea overtook him.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Bill stalked his way beside of him.

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"You're gonna have to develop a stronger stomach if you plan on surviving in this line of work." He reached in his jacket and tossed a pack of Roloids in Aaron's direction. "I'm going over to listen to what the witness has to say. I think I know the woman. Want to come along?"

Aaron's first inclination was to say no as he looked up, spotting the woman giving her statement to the police. His stomach did a flip-flop, but not from nausea. Bailey Carson was standing there shaking, pointing back at the building, and trying to hold a cup of coffee steady.

He removed his fire hat. "Yeah, I'll go." His heart skipped a few beats as he stared at Bailey. "I think that's the woman who sings down at Slick Willies." Aaron studied her harder. "Yeah, I'm sure of it.

"You mean the one you talk about down at the station while lustful drool drips from your mouth?" Bill smacked his arm with a chuckle. "Naw...you got it wrong. I'm pretty sure that's Clair Baker. Some things don't ever escape you...like her. She was the homecoming queen back at my old high school." He squinted as they approached her. "Yep...that's her alright. I never thought she'd end up living in a place like *this*. Just goes to show you the people you think are most likely to succeed, sometimes don't."

"I think you talk too damn much." Aaron popped another antacid in his mouth.

"All I'm saying, is if she's changed her name to this Bailey woman, she did a right smart thing. I wouldn't want the people in my hometown knowing I lived in a dump like this."

Aaron saw red, punching Bill in the jaw before he even realized he'd raised his fist. Later he wondered why he'd had such a knee-jerk reaction. He'd never been one to lose his temper or be violent. And when Bailey had turned around, she'd looked him straight in the eye with fright and confusion. Damn, if he didn't blow everything he did. He had about a snowballs chance in hell of getting a date with her now.

Why would she want to date someone who, for all she knew, could end up being a personal domestic dispute of her own?

The thought sucked about as much as being on probation for his little public display. He'd probably be fired when the city board members

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reviewed the incident.

So here he stood, alone in the fire hall and assigned kitchen duty for the next two weeks. Aaron stirred the simmering pot of beef stew with such vigor, half of it splashed from the pan, causing pieces of meat and potatoes to singe on the burner. Of course, the smoke alarm sounded while curls of smoke permeated the air.

“Shit!” He started waving a kitchen towel around the alarm, circulating air to silence the high-pitched madness. He combed his fingers through his thick, dark hair. Why had he bothered to get up this morning?

Setting the stew on the back burner, he slammed the lid down, and went to wash one of the fire engines. As he slid down the firemen’s pole, a wicked thought crossed his mind. The image of Bailey, privately dancing around that very pole just for him, filled his thoughts. It was a fantasy he conjured up in his mind far too often. One he knew would probably never become a reality. Yet, as he pulled out the water hose, a vivid image of her slithering around in a g-string and black-laced boots, singing in a sultry voice, had his cock hard with longing.

He shut off the water and hooked the hose back in position, then headed to the locker room for an ice-cold drenching. He really needed to get his emotions in check where it came to Bailey Carson. Maybe he needed to stop being a regular at Slick Willies and concentrate on the house he was building on the outskirts of town. He’d been dragging his feet on the completion of it. Somehow, he’d lost his enthusiasm over the project.

If he poured himself into laying the brick and putting up sheetrock, he wouldn’t have time to think about those violet eyes, and the way her cute little ass filled out those tight jeans.

So why was he sitting at the back table of Slick Willies six hours later, doing something he never did, like downing his third bourbon and coke?