

# In The Rough

*Venita Louise*



LooseId

## Praise for the writing of Venita Louise

### *In the Rough*

Venita Louise writes a fast-paced story full of dramatic and sexual tension. A must-read for any fan of romantic suspense.

-- Elisa Adams, author of *Divine Intervention* (Loose Id)

A great romantic suspense with lots of heart - and heat. *In the Rough's* story kept me guessing till nearly the end, and Steven and Eve have chemistry in spades. Not your everyday romantic suspense!

-- Barrie Abalard, author of *Hot for Teacher* (Loose Id)

A great read about a woman struggling with childhood ghosts, a man who's ready to move on from his past, and the way their lives become inevitably entangled.

-- Flesa Black, author of *Refuge 2: Sanctuary* (Loose Id)

WOW! This sure has it all – bad guys with good looking butts, a sensitive hunky hero and a tormented girl, classic cars, trucks, rumbling motorbikes. It's enough to bring the house down! Venita Louise has packed it all in this Romantic Suspense!

-- Anne Douglas, author of *The McCabes 1: Persuading Jo* (Loose Id)

Venita Louise takes readers on a wild ride. *In the Rough* kept me hooked until the very last page. This story is not just a fantastic mystery. I loved watching Eve and Steven learn about each other, and discover more about themselves in the process.

-- Melinda Barron, author of *The Captive One* (Loose Id)

# IN THE ROUGH

Venita Louise

LooseId  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

## Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

\* \* \* \* \*

This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (violence).

# In the Rough

Venita Louise

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924  
Carson City NV 89701-1215  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

Copyright © August 2006 by Venita Louise

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 978-1-59632-335-3

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

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Robert Buckley  
Cover Artist: April Martinez



[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

## Prologue

The printer whirled as it reproduced the screen image. Beckard snagged it and walked across the floor of the small apartment. He sat down at the white wicker dining set and inspected the documents on the table -- driver's license, dental records, passport, and a tattered-looking birth certificate. It wouldn't be long now; he would be enjoying a new life and a new identity.

The knock at the door was barely audible.

"Where the hell have you been?" Beckard asked impatiently. There was a moment of silence as he held open the door.

"I was doing what you told me to do," Benjamin answered, stepping into the room.

"I don't remember telling you to disconnect your phone, or to quit your job, for that matter," Beckard said. "It makes you look suspicious to quit after only two months."

"Look, I got paranoid; I don't want to go to jail over this."

"So, you drop by my apartment when you know I'm under surveillance? Smart move, Ben."

Benjamin's head jerked around, as if he was expecting to see a couple of agents break through the door to sweep him off to some fat-creep lockup tank.

"Okay, you're right, this was a stupid idea, but I can't stop thinkin' about Eve. I feel like we've betrayed her."

"That feeling will go away when you have that large chunk of cash in your pocket. Remember? That's why we did this in the first place."

Benjamin stared into Beckard's eyes and shifted his weight from foot to foot like a captured animal.

"Look, I've been thinking," Benjamin, offered. "Maybe Eve doesn't have to disappear. I know it's chancy, but I was hoping maybe you could just let her go be with her sister. I mean maybe ..."

"Are you nuts?" Beckard put his hand on Benjamin's shoulder, squeezing hard enough to make him wince. "Don't wimp out on me now. Not when we're so close to the finish line. We've planned this for months, and don't forget how much you're involved. You even planted the tracer on her car for God's sake!" Beckard eased his grip. "Okay?" His voice lowered. "If we can keep her from finding out, then maybe we can let her go, but you have to think of the plan first."

Benjamin let out a ragged sigh.

"But what if she does find out? She would have no problem putting us away for a very long time. Think of that for a while, huh?" He let go of him with a push. "Tell me, Benjamin, do you know what it's like in prison?" A slow smile spread across his face.

Benjamin's left eyelid ticked wildly. "No."

"Have you ever cornered a moth in a window?" Beckard's eyes glinted. "He can see freedom, but he can't quite get to it." He tapped his finger on the tabletop. "Thump, thump, thump ... against the pane, and you're right behind him, just waiting for the right moment." Beckard slammed his palm on the table, causing Benjamin to flinch.

"In prison ... you're the moth."

Benjamin stood motionless. His eyes dimmed and looked away from Beckard's. "Okay, Beckard ... understood."

"From now on, just do what I'm telling you." Beckard gripped the back of Benjamin's neck and walked him to the door. "I hope we understand each other."

\* \* \* \* \*

Benjamin parked in a lot adjacent to Hanson advertising. He rolled his window down and welcomed the cool evening breeze on his face. He waited and watched.

Everything he cared about in the world was in his car, including his cat, Blackball. He knew he wouldn't be going back home, and he was too terrified to care about the money. The thought of prison wasn't half as bad as being hunted down. And that was exactly what Beckard would do, and he would enjoy the game. He looked around his car, wide-eyed, and wondering if there was a tracer planted somewhere, but why would Beckard do that? He always knew where Benjamin was.

"I'm a good little weasel," Benjamin whispered.

"Meow."

"What'sa matter, Blackball, baby?" He crooned and leaned over to push a finger against Blackball's triangle nose bulging between the bars of the cage.



“Hssssssss.”

“Leggo, leggo, leggo! Don’t bite! Damn cat!” He gave his hand a shake.

“Why the hell did I even bring you along? You’re just a mooch! All I am is a meal ticket to you, aren’t I? I go out and work all day, just to come home and find you asleep! Eat and poop, eat and poop, that’s all you do! Do you have any idea where you would be if it weren’t for me? I’ll tell you where, your big fat ass would be somewhere, out on the street! What do you think of that, huh? Answer me!”

Benjamin rattled the cage, feeling satisfied at having given Blackball his father’s favorite lecture.

Finally, Hanson came out, and he was locking the back door. Benjamin watched until the red taillights of his car were out of sight before stepping out. Jamming his fingers into his pocket, he dug for his key. He pulled it out, but it slipped from his fingers, and he heard the light tinkling sound of metal hitting the asphalt. He looked down. Eve trusted him, not only had she given him the key to the office, but he also had the code to the security alarm. He quickly picked it up and walked double time across the lot. His heart thumped like a racehorse as he slipped the key into the back door and rushed to the security panel to disengage the alarm. The beam of his flashlight illuminated the long, deserted corridor that led to the mailroom. Oversize prints of attractive customers hanging along the walls watched him disapprovingly. Benjamin knew the office like the back of his hand, but tonight it looked unfamiliar. The hallway seemed to close in on him, making it difficult to breathe.

He slowly made his way into the mailroom, his leg brushed against a large stack of illustrations leaning against the doorjamb, sending them crashing to the floor. Crap! A cold shiver ran up his spine, giving way to tiny prickles that bit into his armpits and hairline. A quick hop over the illustrations landed him in front of his desk. He anchored the flashlight under his chin and, with trembling hands, slid his top drawer open. As he sifted through banded postage receipts, computer disks, and shipping logs, his middle fingertip found an uncapped Exacto knife.

“Yaah!” The flashlight fell with a thud on the floor. He sucked the tip of his throbbing finger, his blood tasted salty. Blood that Beckard would have no trouble draining down to the very last drop if he didn’t get away tonight. He had to hurry. Propping the flashlight again, he scrutinized every article.

Benjamin was startled by the sound of the outer office door opening. He snapped off the flashlight and instinctively dropped to the floor. Petrified that the sound of his wheezing would give him away, he crawled under the desk as far as he could, letting out an involuntary whimper as he struggled to squeeze himself into the small opening. His heart pounded so hard against the wall of his chest, it caused his whole body to vibrate its rhythm. Clamping both hands over his nose and mouth, with his eyes closed tightly, he held his breath for the next several moments. Had he been followed? Had Beckard sent someone to

kill him? He heard the lights snap on in the outer office, casting an eerie shadow and light pattern across the carpet. Damn, why hadn't he picked up the illustrations?

"Who the hell left this door unlocked? I'll have their Goddamn hide!" Hanson bellowed.

Benjamin heard Hanson banging around in his office. With shuddering breath, he prayed he wouldn't need to come to the mailroom. He listened as Hanson clamored his way through the central office, slamming drawers and flicking lights on and off.

"Son of a bitch!"

Finally he was rummaging around in Eve's office. Someone was with him.

"John, hurry up, or we'll be late. You know how I hate to walk into the middle of a performance." It was Hanson's wife.

"Hell, Marsha, give me a break."

A twisted smile tugged at Benjamin's lips.

"Well, I know damn well they are around here somewhere!"

Benjamin froze.

"John, you know how much I hate it when you swear."

"For crap's sake, Marsha, will you help me look for them instead of scolding me like some schoolboy? Maybe I left them in the mailroom. I had to do cover for that little asshole today. Did I tell you he called this morning and quit without any notice?"

Benjamin heard Hanson's footsteps coming down the hall, as he muttered something about wringing someone's neck. He felt Hanson's presence just outside the door, then heard him feeling the wall for the light switch ...

"John, I found the tickets, right here on your desk," Marsha called.

Beads of sweat swelled and dripped from Benjamin's hairline.

Hanson growled and turned back to the outer office. He cursed again, as his hard-hitting heels marched down the hall.

"John, must you?"

"Shut up, Marsha!"

At last, the lights snapped off, and he heard Hanson locking the door. In the sudden blackness, Benjamin's eyes opened so wide he thought they might drop out of their sockets. Prompting his tense fingers to move, he snapped the flashlight back on. His stomach clenched. He grabbed a wastebasket and vomited. He hiccupped gulps of air while thinking this is what his life had come to, breaking, entering, and spitting up like a baby.

He rested his cheek against the coolness of the plastic mat on the floor. It was then that he noticed a crumpled wad of paper lying next to his wastebasket. Slowly, opening it with numb, shaky fingers, he recognized Beckard's phone number and WALDO scrawled across the top in his handwriting. He stuffed it deep into his pocket. Eve was totally unaware of the

scam Beckard was creating that would rob elderly investors of their hard-earned funds. The Western Allied Lifetime Diamond Organization -- WALDO -- was designed to do just that.

Benjamin surveyed the room one last time and headed for the exit. The hallway didn't look as narrow now, and the oversize prints depicted much happier customers.

He stood at Eve's office door and hoped whatever happened to her would be painless. The flashlight illuminated her colorful ad designs. Maybe they would become more valuable, now that they were limited editions. If they did, you could be sure Hanson would find a way to benefit. Were these the only types of people Eve had had in her short life -- users, abusers, and moral toads? He stepped softly toward her most recent work. The brilliant colors nearly jumped off the board. He had never taken the time to look at the ads she designed. This one was especially striking. An ominous-looking motorcycle, gleaming black and powered by testosterone. The tall, lanky rider sat astride, in shining black leather, wearing a smile of satisfaction, like an adolescent who had just copped his first feel. Benjamin leaned forward to see where the brilliant light in the illustration's background was coming from. It was the most beautiful desert sunset he had ever seen. The jade cactus next to the rider's boot seemed to reach out and prick Benjamin's conscience, and he yearned fiercely for an escape from his situation. He traced the lines of the distant jagged red rocks lightly with his finger. As little as he knew about art, he knew this girl had talent. What a shame a miscreant like Beckard could decide if she would ever use it again.

So what if he went to jail? He would rather go to jail as an accomplice to a scam, than a murder. A harpoon of guilt hit his chest full force. Maybe it wasn't too late? The only solution was to go to the police and spill the whole story. Making up his mind made him feel better, and for a moment he even pretended to see a nod of approval from his father. He stepped over to pick up the phone and paused. No. He needed to tell them in person.

Without deactivating the alarm, he unlocked the back door, knowing it would only take minutes for the police to arrive. He felt there was something honorable in what he was doing. He didn't know what ... but something.

The glare of a flashlight blinded him. He shoved the piece of paper with Beckard's phone number deeper into his pocket and then shielded his eyes, taking short, jerky steps backwards.

"Mr. Hanson?"

A gloved hand plunged a knife deep into his chest, and he was violently tugged forward, as the blade was withdrawn. A flashlight rapped him solidly on the temple as the attackers spun him completely around, using his shoulder as a pivot. Another blow, and the knife was jammed into his throat. While the sting of the blade sliced his flesh, he wondered who would feed his cat.

## Chapter One

Eve Ryan entered her home shortly before nine. The surprising aroma of dinner greeted her. Okay, so she may have forgotten that she had invited Michael; it had been an exasperating day. A manipulative boss, the new apprentice, the ache she had held in her heart for three weeks, since her sister, Blanca, had moved to Sedona.

“Honey, I’m home!” She was certain Michael would miss the trace of sarcasm.

She headed for the bedroom, craving the comfort of her sweats. As she stepped into her room, her eyes scanned the pale peach walls, trimmed at the ceiling with a delicate floral of mint green. She inspected for any recent changes in the décor and decided Michael must be satisfied with this room, at least for the moment. Giving him a key to her house had turned out to be a big mistake. In the six months they had been dating, he had replaced her comfy, overstuffed couch and loveseat with some white Victorian furniture that reminded her of the tuck and roll upholstery her father had had in his 1955 Chevy, but not quite as nice. The most recent replacement was the monstrous mahogany table and six gondola-style chairs that took up too much of her dining room. She missed her white wicker set.

She flipped off her shoes and walked the length of her rustic oak-framed bed. Confronted by her full-length mirror, she smoothed her hands slowly down the front of her russet Versace business suit and decided not to change just yet. She turned and allowed her eyes to travel down. She was glad she’d had the skirt shortened, in spite of Michael’s protests. Turning back, her gaze fell to the citrine crystal necklace her sister had given her. She held it in her hand and fingered the facets. The golden crystal was long, at least three inches, and carved in a fan-shaped contour. Blanca had instructed her to wear it over her solar plexus so it would give her the power to be assertive. Eve huffed out a breath. As if a rock could do such a thing.

The bathroom light spilled harshly into her tired eyes as she brushed her teeth.

The unpleasant taste of the day's resentments lingered, and mouthwash failed to remove the bitterness from her tongue. She smoothed her lips with lipstick and leaned forward to rub her finger across her teeth.

She presented herself with a broad smile, but disturbing thoughts of her new apprentice, Susan Hale, drifted back into her mind. She had asked so many questions today, mostly about Blanca. *What kind of work does she do? Where does she live? Is she involved with anyone?*

Eve pulled her long auburn hair to the side and let it hang loosely over one shoulder, puckered her lips, and kissed the air. She wondered if her life would have been different as a blond. Susan's hair was blond, the long, lustrous kind they used in the Revlon commercials. It might be nice to be blond for a while, but blonds asked way too many questions.

"I wonder what nosy Susan would do," Eve spoke to her reflection, "if I just gave her an information glut?" Her stomach took a turn, the way it had when she was little and Blanca had pushed her too hard on the park swings. Lord knows she had enough horror stories to keep Susan's head reeling for days.

Eve pressed the button on her answering machine. No messages. Michael must have picked them up already. John Hanson would have called to remind her of the impending followup meeting after acquiring the Tucker Strong advertising campaign. Hardly a day went by that Blanca didn't leave a message, if only a reading from her daily inspirational book. It would have been comforting to hear her voice this evening.

She entered the dining room and was surprised to find the table set, candles burning, and recognized the rich smell of roast duckling, pancakes, and stir-fried rice. What was Michael was up to this time? To be sure, it was a sad way to think of a significant other, but what choice did she have? Manipulation was his favorite entertainment. Something, she felt, was about to make her unhappy, and he couldn't have picked a worse day.

"Just in time." Michael poked his head into the dining room. "Oolong or jasmine tea?"

With her oh-for-God's-sake-don't-you-know-I-like-plain-black-Lipton-tea-with-lemon expression, she said, "Oolong."

Michael handed her the tea. He had just showered. His ebony hair was combed back damp and clinging to his neck. He was handsome; that was a fact. The powder-blue knit shirt seemed to draw out the striking shade of his eyes. His butt-hugging black slacks boasted the results of years of racquetball. She often thought of designing an ad around Michael's butt, if only she could find the right arena.

She looked up at him, cupping her too-hot tea. "Any messages for me?"

"Do you really want to hear that mindless drivel your sister reads to you?" He brushed past her to get a cup from the countertop. His cologne encircled him like a supercilious vapor.

"I just like to hear her voice; I don't care what she says. Besides, her beliefs are not drivel to her."

Michael poured a cup of tea for himself.

"You're giving me a case of aura envy." He rolled his eyes.

Eve sighed. "Did you have a good day?"

"As a matter of fact, I had a very good day. I found a buyer for my grandmother's diamond," he said, before taking a sip.

"Oh? I thought it was a keepsake." She blew at the steam. "I didn't know you were trying to sell it."

"There's nothing I won't sell for the right price, doll."

Eve closed her eyes tightly and ground her teeth.

"By that look on your face, you don't approve of this particular sale."

His smile angered her. "What do I know? I just draw pretty pictures," she said dryly.

"How is that car of yours running?" He let out a snide chuckle. "Any tickets yet?"

It would take bamboo reeds under her fingernails to force her to tell him that she had gotten stopped, but had been able to sneak by with a warning.

"It's a classic!" She shot him a narrow-eyed look. "A 1964-½ Mustang convertible, for God's sake. A 260 Challenger V-8 with pristine white interior. And I bought it from a client for a song."

"In candy-apple red, I know. I hope you know the words to the song 'Cop Magnet.'"

She met his stare and blushed. She gave him a cool smile, to disguise the surge of heat his attitude elicited.

Michael spooned the take-out onto plates she didn't recognize.

Eve fought her annoyance. "Where did these dishes come from?"

For minutes, he continued scraping the containers as if he hadn't heard her.

"I found them in an antique store, next to one of my dealers. Nice, aren't they?"

He fingered the ornate royal-blue pattern along the edge, then held a dinner plate up to grin at his reflection.

She no longer held her irritation in check. "Why do you keep replacing my things? Aren't my dishes good enough?" Eve demanded. "Isn't my furniture acceptable to you?"

He winked, as he licked rice from his thumb. "An artist you may be; a decorator you're not." His eyes drifted around the kitchen. "Why don't you leave that to someone who has a little more taste?"

The phone rang before she could respond.

"Beckard," he answered.

Eve resented him answering her phone and listening to her messages. Six months was hardly enough time for her to be accustomed to his all-out invasion, nor was she sure she wanted to be. Strange, she didn't remember inviting him to move in, yet here he was, in all his controlling glory.

"Calm down," he said. "I told you it's being taken care of. Yeah, on the way by tomorrow." He slammed the phone into its cradle.

"Trouble?"

"Hell, no, just an anxious dealer. Let's eat."

Michael was the smoothest act in town. She didn't know much about his gem trading business, but she was sure his ethics were questionable. As far as lovers go, he was exactly her type. He had never asked about her past, and she very considerately had never asked about his.

"Sit down; tell me about your day," Michael said, as he served her a generous portion of duck and rice.

Obediently, she sat down, unfolded her napkin, and smoothed it across her lap.

"Hanson's happy; the meeting went very well this morning. We got Tucker Strong, the mattress king, to commit to a three-year advertising contract; he couldn't wait to sign after seeing my presentation." She decided not to mention that Hanson had taken full credit for her ideas, making her appear to be more like a trainee than an art director.

Eve forked a large bite of duck and then licked at her full lips, sheened with grease. Suddenly, she felt self-conscious, as she caught him watching her mouth.

"Mattress king? Well, of course he would sign," he told her flatly. "Just look at you."

She gave him a snotty look. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It's your outfit, love. You're wearing your come-and-screw-me-right-after-you-sign-on-the-dotted-line Versace suit."

She swallowed hard and crumpled her napkin in her fist. "What a terrible thing to say, as if that's the only thing men think about when they look at me. I do have some artistic talent, you know."

Michael stared coldly. "It's all I thought about."

Eve shot to her feet, bumping her hip on the edge of the table.

He snatched her wrist with both hands and smiled. "Sit down, Eve. You're being too sensitive. Of course you have talent."

Her knee-jerk response to his comments unnerved her. He held her gaze as she cautiously sat down. This wasn't the way she wanted to spend her evening, sampling the same emotional meal she'd had earlier today.

He had apologized, but there wasn't a trace of sincerity in those glacial eyes of his. She picked up her fork with a trembling hand, tried to bring some rice to her lips, and then

slammed it back down with a force that broke the plate. Bits of fried rice and peas bounced off the white lace tablecloth and onto her lap.

“No! I can’t stand this anymore!” Bolstered by her anger, she found the words she had long been avoiding. “It’s over, done, complete. I want you out!”

Michael glared. “I’ll bet you weren’t this rude to your mattress king.” He leaned forward and jammed his napkin into her cleavage.

Eve quickly reached for her glass and threw the water into Michael’s face. It only took moments for him to reach her. Grasping her upper arms, he hauled her from her chair and sent it toppling. Pain shot through her shoulders as he slammed them up against the dining room wall, her head thumped hard, leaving her aching and dazed. He was squeezing her so tightly she wanted to scream.

Water dripped from his face as he growled, “Maybe I should show you how to get wet, you frigid little bitch!” He pressed his full body up against her.

She was astonished that he was aroused. His mouth clamped down on hers, his probing tongue disgusted her. Rough hands moved quickly down her body, demanding, with bruising caresses, then jerking her hips upward, to feel the strength of his fullness.

“No!” She hardly recognized her own voice. She shoved him back and glared, repulsed he would think she wanted him. His pupils dilated, and he came at her again, this time jamming his left forearm across her throat to block her escape. His breath was hot on her face as he found her lips again and crushed his mouth to hers. His right hand quickly pushed her skirt up and slid between her thighs. Her resistance was met with a frightening pressure against her throat.

Gasping and choking, she slid the back of her hand up the wall and grasped the edge of the Boucher tapestry he had acquired on his last business trip. She tugged hard, and the rod came down, bouncing painfully off her left shoulder. The indifference of the fabric as it slid down to rest on the floor offended her.

His trembling breath rasped in her ear, and his stomach muscles convulsed, as he pumped his sex against her soft abdomen. She struggled for a full breath. His sickening scent was suffocating her.

“Damn it, Michael, let me go!”

He remained rigid, as she slapped at his ribs and gouged her fingers into the taut muscles of his stomach. He tore at her silky undergarment, and his icy fingers groped, painfully massaged, and came perilously close to her entrance. For a brief moment, she allowed him to have her, affording her time to think.

Frantically, she slid her hands up and firmly grasped the citrine crystal necklace. With all the force she could muster, she jammed the sharp end of the stone into his chest. He howled angrily and staggered back.



“Touch me again, and I’ll call the police.” She trembled with rage. “You’d better not be here when I get back!” Her feet found carpet, and she charged to her bedroom closet and seized her suitcase. A hotel room would do for tonight. She packed in a fury, zipped her bag, then grabbed the handle and turned.

Michael was standing calmly in the doorway. His face was dry and emotionless. Mr. Cool. She didn’t give him time to speak, she didn’t want him confusing her, or trying to convince her she was being too sensitive. With a half-exhalation and half-scream, she forced him out of her way and slammed the front door as hard as she could to make up for all of the times she wanted to break up with him and hadn’t.

\* \* \* \* \*

The massive adrenaline surge made her lightheaded. Eve hardly remembered filling out the registration form at the hotel desk. She needed to see her sister, to be safe, to feel loved.

She sat motionless on the edge of the bed, in the quiet of her room, for seconds or hours, staring at the dresser mirror into the eyes of a lonely young woman. The second hand on the hotel alarm clock crept in a snail-like ellipse. Humiliation soaked into every inch of her being. She began to cry softly. Why is my life such a mess?

Blanca’s words came into her mind: “Our thoughts govern our experiences.” Eve fingered the hem of her skirt. The fabric appeared magnified by her tears. Tiny dark grease spots from the spattered rice left a zigzag pattern all across the once spotless surface. *I don’t think any amount of Martinizing is going to get this out.* Small, shallow breaths were the best she could take. The sobs finally came, heaving her slender frame from the force of her tears.

All of a sudden, she understood the dilemma her mother must have faced the first time her father struck her. Speak now, or forever hold your peace, to suffer again and again in cruel and unusual silence. The thought of that choice terrified her. She refused to follow in the footsteps of fear. She would grasp onto the tiniest shred of dignity that she had left and hold on tight. But how do I change my thoughts?

Even if Blanca were here, Eve knew she would be inconsolable. Blanca suffered from a heightened *feng shui* mentality at times like this. She would be flicking off lights, dragging furniture around, or lighting patchouli sticks and scented candles. It would force Eve to pretend to be serene, and she was in no mood to try to be brave. She felt her heart breaking, and she allowed the anguish, and the sadness to engulf her. She cried for the terrible past she had endured, she cried for all her past broken relationships, but most of all she cried for Blanca, the incredible loving spirit who had sacrificed so much of her own life. She thought she might get sick from the fierceness of her gut-wrenching sobs.

Eve had finally allowed herself to feel all of her emotion, something she hadn’t done in a very long time, and was glad she was alone to do it. Then, crawling under the covers, screw-me suit and all, with deep, involuntary catches of breath, she made herself two

unyielding promises. She would find some way to make it all up to Blanca, and she would never, ever, get involved with another man again.

## Chapter Two

Special agent Steven Malloy paced the floor in his hotel room, the one next to Eve's. Wearily raking his fingers through his thick, sandy hair, he checked the mirror to see if he was wild-eyed yet. This Eve woman was making him crazy. Nothing but fatigue lay in the dark caramel pools, but they were steady. His nearly six-foot frame was lightly tanned, and his wide muscular chest boasted a thick dusting of golden hair that narrowed into a darker line that ran down his solid stomach.

Steven couldn't stand the sound of a woman crying. It took every ounce of strength he had to stop himself from walking over to knock on her door. His mind scanned possibilities of how he could present himself.

*Hello, ma'am, I'm collecting stories for Chicken Soup for the Larcenous Soul. Would you care to contribute?* By the sound of her mournful cries, he sincerely hoped her story would have a heartwarming ending, one that didn't involve an eight-by-ten cell with bars.

He grabbed his phone. "It's Malloy. I'm at the hotel just around the corner from Beckard's. Yeah, room 212. She's all settled in next door ... I had to bribe the desk manager to put me in the room next to hers. You'll see it on my expense report. Yeah, I'd rather be tailing Beckard, though." He hung up.

Steven tried to imagine Eve's tear-stained face. She was damn good-looking, the kind of woman he made a point to avoid -- nothing but trouble, high maintenance, probably spoiled and demanding. He was sure of one thing, though -- if her car was seized and put up for auction, he would buy it.

He flopped backward on the soft mattress, grinding his teeth, and willed away the raw emotions that waited patiently for him every night. The memory of a little house, nestled alone against a lush green country hillside, floated across his mind. It was a beautiful day. Laura bent to caress the marigolds, begonias, and day lilies that crowded the front walk on

either side. He wished he had made an offer on it. He wanted so much to make her happy. Another couple beat them to it. The disappointment in her eyes burned a sorrowful image, but she had just shrugged and hugged his neck. "There's a better place waiting for us."

Steven heaved a sigh and sat up. So where did Eve Ryan fit into all of this? Probably just some chick Beckard was using for his operation. She seemed innocent enough, her record was clean, art director at Hanson Advertising, decent salary, living in the suburbs. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't conceive of the overcrowded city being his final frontier.

He dialed another number. "Hey, get your ass over here. You know I have an appointment, and I need you to watch her." He pulled a t-shirt up his flexed arm.

"Yeah, I gotta meet her brother at a bar across town. Be here in five minutes." Throwing the phone on the bed, he stretched the white cotton shirt over his head, then down his stomach, tucking it into the waistband of his faded denim jeans.

Three quick knocks at the door, and Steven opened it.

"Judd Raymond, special agent." He smiled and stepped in.

Steven checked his watch. "Ten minutes, you're late."

Judd frowned. He was the oldest active agent in the bureau, but still built like a bear, all six feet four of him. His flinty blue eyes were set wide apart, and his protruding jaw entered a room well before he did. He'd put in thirty-plus years with the bureau and was soon to retire. He lumbered in and tossed a black nylon bag next to the door.

"Man, you're strict."

Steven swept his gaze over the room, taking inventory. He picked up his cell phone, shoved his wallet in his back pocket, and grabbed his jacket and keys.

Judd sneezed. "Damn, did you have to burn that crap before I got here? You know it irritates my pipes." Dramatically reaching into his suit pocket for his handkerchief, he held it around his head bandit-style.

Steven walked over to douse the incense.

"I always meditate with sandalwood; it gives you more Buddha for your buck. You should give it a try; it might help you through your retirement."

Judd slid his hands into his pockets and studied Steven dispassionately. "The hell with that. I'll be riding my Harley cross country before you can say, 'Ohm.'"

"Don't kid yourself, Judd. There's no place like Ohm." Steven winked.

"I won't be long. Did you call in to let them know you would be here?"

"Yes, Mom," Judd said dryly. Steven gave Judd a gentle jab on his shoulder and left.

Steven walked down the hall and paused for a moment at Eve's door. There was no light coming from her room. He looked in both directions and put a hand on each side of the doorjamb, then pressed his ear to the door. There wasn't a sound.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steven entered a small bar, twelve miles across town. The musty air, music from the jukebox, and loud chattering confronted him at the door. He'd set this meeting up a week ago. Probing into the Ryan family might give him an edge. He didn't have much else to go on.

Nat Ryan was all of twenty-two, no priors, and from the looks of it, little future. Steven predicted he would be dumpster diving by the time he was thirty. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

It would take some clever acting, and Steven was, of course, well trained, but he disliked the idea of making Nat think they were friends.

"Steve! Over here!" Nat waved.

Steven strode over to the corner, nodding to the bartender as he passed.

"Hey, dude, s'up?"

"What are you drinkin'?" Nat held up a beer. His crooked smile told Steven he wouldn't have to work too hard to get the kid to talk. He had already plied himself with alcohol. He raised two fingers to the bartender and sat down.

The cocktail waitress bounced up with a whisky and a beer on her tray. She lowered it to make sure Steven could read her name tag, Vicki.

"That'll be seven-fifty, handsome. Hey! You were in here last week, weren't you?"

He tossed a ten on her tray. "Yeah, my buddy, Nat, here, beat me in a game of pool, so I'm back for revenge."

She smiled and bent over to make change, giving him full view of her ample cleavage. "Well, it's always nice to see a handsome face." She flashed him a brassy smile.

"Keep the change, darlin', and keep 'em comin' ... whiskey for me and beer for my friend." Steven said through a smile. He didn't want Nat passed out, just loose-lipped.

Steven tipped the shot of whiskey down his throat, then gasped loudly. Sputtering and coughing, he whispered, "Went down the wrong pipe," as tears rolled down his reddened cheeks. It took him several moments to recover, while Nat slapped him on the back.

He slowly stood up and went to the bar to motion the bartender over.

"What the hell did you put in my goddamned tea?" Steven rasped.

"I thought you wanted it to look realistic," he said coolly. "So I put a touch of Tabasco in it."

Steven restrained himself from grabbing the bartender by the neck and bouncing his head off the bar.

"Look, I'll take care of the realism; you just pour the drinks. Gimme some water."

"Sure thing, mister. I don't mind sellin' you tea for whiskey, no skin off my teeth. I know lots of folks who can't hold their liquor. I won't tell."

The bartender's shoulders shook with laughter as he turned to pour the water. Steven drained the glass in two long swallows, gave the bartender a warning glare, and then returned to Nat's table.

"How about that game of pool?"

Nat stood, staggered a bit, found the table, and pulled the rack. He noisily bounced the balls in and scooted it into position. He gave Steven a wink and lifted the rack with flair, then signaled for him to break.

"So tell me, Nat, you got family here?" Steven asked casually, chalking his stick. With hard-skinned fingers guiding the cue stick, he cannoned the ball. Loud cracking ensued, as the cue ball plowed through the triangle of colors, pocketing two solid balls and one striped. The remaining orbs spun like tops, colliding and scattering in all directions.

"Yeah, I got an asshole for a dad, a couple of witch sisters, and a thrashed mom." Nat slurred slightly as he examined his warped cue stick.

"Sounds like your average Norman Rockwell Christmas to me." Steven eyed the balls and claimed his target.

Nat shrugged. "I guess my dad isn't so bad, at least he isn't to me." One corner of his mouth curved up to form a crooked smile. "When he's not drunk."

Steven cradled the cue stick, carefully took aim, and shot. The cue ball ricocheted off the cushion and tagged his quarry into the side pocket.

"Was he bad to your sisters?" Chalking his cue stick again, he appeared only half interested. He blew the excess chalk forcefully off the tip. With a full hit, he pocketed two balls in the side, before the cue ball kissed a third that disappeared in the corner pocket.

"Damn! Good shot!" Nat shook his head. "My dad don't like women," he said over his shoulder as he walked to the table to confirm what he'd just seen. He shrugged, then ambled over to the juke to make a selection.

Steven smirked. "What makes you think that?"

With half-lidded eyes, Nat stood propped by his cue stick and shrugged. He began to sway to an old, got-my-ass-in-a-sling country song.

Steven knew he didn't have much time to get Nat to talk. He was on his umpteenth beer and was pretty drunk. He gave Nat's shoe a kick.

"What were you sayin' ... about your sister?"

Nat blinked. "Oh, yeah. I don't remember Blanca, my oldest sister, too much. She's ..." Counting his fingers. "... forty-two, old enough to be my mom. Into the New Age crystals and psychic crap. My other sister is six years older than me."

Steven straightened up. "Is she into the New Age crap, too?"

Nat snorted. "Nah, she's some fancy artist, takin' money to design stupid ads."

Steven's next shot glanced off the cushion and slowly rolled past the intended goal.

"Too bad." Nat smiled, stumbling toward the table.

"So this artist sister of yours, do you see her much?"

Nat aimed and rammed his un-chalked tip into the felt, barely nicking the cue ball.

"Crap!" He flipped the table off. "No, man, I don't. What, do you want to date her or something?"

Steven shrugged. "Maybe, if she doesn't already have a boyfriend. Does she?"

"I don't know. I guess she does; she's a real man-eater."

Steven leaned over the table and sank his last ball in the corner pocket.

Nat sighed. "All she's ever been interested in is that damn job of hers. That and stayin' away from my old man."

Steven slowly stalked the length of the table to map out a path to the eight ball. "So ... how long has it been since you've seen her?"

Nat squirmed. "Look, she hates me, okay? I used to get her in trouble with the old man sometimes. He knocked her around a lot, put her in the hospital a couple of times."

Steven motioned for the bartender to send another drink. "Hospital, huh? Did that bother you?"

Nat curled his lip in disgust. "Are you some kind of frikkin' psychologist or somethin'? I didn't give a crap. Better her than me."

Steven lined up his shot. Little double-crossing jerk. Interrogation over, he didn't want to push it. He was convinced Nat didn't have any information about Eve.

"Eight ball in the corner pocket."

Nat shuffled back to the table, disinterested in Steven's victory.

Vicki skillfully wove between several small tables, juggling the drink-laden serving tray as if it were glued to her palm. She set the drinks down and flashed Steven a come-and-get-me smile. He tossed another ten on her tray and held his glass up for a toast.

"Winner buys! Here's to artists, psychics, assholes, and beer."

"Hell, yes!" Nat cheered, sloshing half his beer onto the floor.

Steven glanced at the bartender, quickly smelling his drink for any peppery evidence, before tossing it back.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steven's experience in criminal investigating told him if Nat knew anything about Eve being involved in Beckard's activities, he would have told him. He sure as hell didn't give a rat's ass what happened to his sister.

As he drove back to the hotel, Steven imagined Eve's slender body being knocked senseless by some knuckle-dragging hulk. The thought of it shot raw hot fury through his veins. Getting involved with a slick con man like Beckard was evidence she was used to being in crap. How could she not know about Beckard? Not knowing was bad, not wanting to know is dangerous.

He had only seen Eve a few hundred times, mostly through the lens of his camera. He recalled her image easily. The curves of her face were permanently etched in his mind, but every photo showed unmistakable sadness in her eyes. Now, he knew why. He wondered what she would think if she knew how many times he had studied her photographs. Suddenly, an image of his wife popped into his mind, and he felt guilty.

"I get the message, honey. I'll keep my mind on business."

Steven pulled into the parking lot of the hotel and parked the black Ford Expedition. Loaded with surveillance equipment, a motion-activated video system, infrared illuminators, video/audio receiver, and built-in GPS logger, it was a typical agency vehicle, complete with black-tinted windows and all-season radial tires, ideal for chasing those hard-to-catch criminals. *You want spies with that?* he mused.

Steven crossed the hotel parking lot and felt the hood of Eve's Mustang. Cold. Something crunched between the soles of his boots and the asphalt. He reached in his pocket and pulled out his keychain flashlight. The narrow beam sparkled off shards of broken glass. Looking up, he saw the light directly above her parking space was smashed.

He inspected the car for damage, then snapped off the light, and with splayed hands, slowly caressed the smooth red paint in sightless appreciation. He'd wanted to touch this car from the first moment he saw it, a real vintage beauty. *Extension of your penis*. He laughed softly as he imagined his wife's voice. He reluctantly dismissed the idea of jimmying the door to sit inside.

Steven found Judd asleep in his room, his suit jacket neatly hung on the bedroom chair. He gave the mattress a hard knee kick, jiggling Judd awake.

"Wha' tha'?"

Steven huffed. "Some stake out this is. She could be miles from here, and you'd never know."

Judd kneaded thick knuckles into his eyelids. "Ah, cool your jets. She's not going anywhere."

Steven knew he was right. "Did you hear anything in the parking lot? The light above her car is broken. There's glass all over the ground."



Judd sat up on the edge of the bed. “Sorry, I didn’t hear a thing, probably just some kids. I’m gonna take off, man. I’m beat, and I have to relieve Carter and Dolan at six a.m.”

Steven shook his head. “Why did they give Beckard to a couple of greenhorns and an old fart like you?”

Judd shot him a dirty look as he drew on his jacket, tugging the sleeves to wrist length.

“Look, I have a lot more experience with smuggling scams than you. I worked in customs before all the homeland security changes. If Beckard is smuggling diamonds, we’ll be the guys to bust him.”

Steven raised an apologetic hand. “Where do you suspect Beckard is going to try to sell?”

Judd’s jaw-cracking yawn made him resemble a sedated baboon. “Not real sure about the area yet, but we know he plans to hold diamond investment seminars and target elderly investors.”

Steven clenched his fists. “You don’t really think he is going to waltz in somewhere with a cache of diamonds do you?”

“That’s why he’s under surveillance. Capeesh?” Judd grabbed his bag and opened the door.

“Did you get any information from the girl’s brother?” he asked over his shoulder.

Steven frowned. “Just that she’s been a victim all of her life. I’ll write a full report. I don’t think she is involved in any of this.”

“That’s what we intend to find out,” Judd said, giving Steven a curt nod before closing the door.

Steven went to the dresser and lit the stick of sandalwood incense. After removing a picture of Laura from his wallet, he sat cross-legged on the floor. The swirl of smoke rising from the scented tip provided a point of focus, and soon he felt the unmistakable pulse of energy. He’d stopped questioning this phenomenon long ago. It was familiar. It felt like home.

## Chapter Three

Eve awoke without opening her eyes. For a few blessed moments she forgot where she was. She had an intense feeling of well-being and sensed something peaceful that she couldn't put into plain words. It was a distant invitation, a scented desire that whispered in her ear, bidding her to visualize herself in safe hands filled with warmth and need. Vaguely, she was aware that nothing in her life had felt this good or happy.

There was a faint smell of ... she lowered the bed sheet and tipped her nose up ... some sort of musky smell drifting into the room. The scent was too faint to identify, but strong enough to awaken the interior muscles deep between her legs that produced a chain reaction of tight, achy clenchings. She frowned, confused by her sudden and passionate craving for a sensual touch.

She slowly licked her lips while running her fingers down her blouse to the outer slopes of her breasts where they rose away from her ribcage. She pressed her breasts together. Her hands gently pushed, shaped, and massaged the roundness. She trapped her nipples between her fingers and gently squeezed them into tight little points. No man knew how to arouse her body the way she did. She wouldn't allow it. She slowly went limp and clamped her eyes shut, pulling in deep, lavish breaths of the musky scent. With a needy sound deep in her throat, she thrust her hands down her stomach to lift the hem of her skirt. With her panties pulled aside, she sent her fingers into the slick delta between her legs and slid them up and down. She imagined they were his fingers, a stranger's fingers, exploring her, exciting her, loving her. The itchy, restless riot inside her made her hips instigate a tiny bump and grind, and her manipulation grew firmer. Was it the warmth from his body she felt? Or just the temperature of her own? Was it the scent of his skin that permeated her? Or was she just imagining the feel of his hand on her breast?

A soft moan escaped her throat. She could almost feel his mouth on hers, this stranger, yet someone familiar. He was strong enough to be gentle and yet vigorous enough to be

unyielding. The thought of him stretched out on top of her caused a frantic noise to escape her. It was as if she could feel his breath on her lips. She wet them again. She fingered tiny circles, dipping and probing until she felt the coil of an approaching climax wind tighter and tighter. She continued to press fingertips deeper, and with an alternating combination of insistent, firm, and oh-so-gentle touches, she coaxed sensation after sensation from her body. She suddenly exploded into concentric bands of clenching sensations, throbbing with hunger and hollow satisfaction. Her heartbeat hammered wildly against her breastbone as she waited for the prickly aches to subside, and she wished she could have called out his name.

After the headiness of her arousal subsided, she finally opened her eyes. What was that all about? All the memories of yesterday flooded in. Michael's abuse, running away, and where she was now. She rolled over to look at the clock. Six a.m. She knew she wouldn't go back to sleep, so she got up to shower.

The warm spray of water splashed over her face, still swollen from last night's crying. She started to cry again, but the water just washed away her tears and left her making silly faces. Holding the miniature soap in one hand, she lathered her throat, breasts, and loins. She pressed lightly at the constellation of bruises across her upper arms, a rude reminder of Michael's assault. Gently rinsing with the other hand, she trembled slightly. She would have told any other woman to call the police.

Eve ignored the prickly sting as she dug the razor under her arms. She'd never liked her body much. She thought her hips were too wide, her legs were too skinny, and her neck was too long. Her toes, well now, they were a completely different story. She was bored with being told how great she looked, when she just plain couldn't see it, but she'd stopped arguing a long time ago, especially to the men that admired her. She took in a tattered breath and tried to count the ways she had prostituted herself in one way or another. First her father, then her boss, and now Michael. This time, she didn't let the water wash away her tears.

Stepping from the shower, she pulled the soft bath towel from the hook and hugged it tightly to her chest. Standing motionless, she felt like she was outside of her own body, watching this drama from a safe place. Finally, while blotting droplets from her sore skin, she played, over and over, every detail of the night before. She never wanted to forget. She thought she heard the ringing of her cell phone, which sent her running into the bedroom.

"Hello? ... Hello? ... Is anyone there?"

She dialed her sister's number. "Blanca, did you just call me? I was in the shower and didn't get to the phone in time" Eve gripped her phone tightly. Her knuckles turned a sickly pale yellow.

"No? Well, I finally ended it, and I've told Michael to leave, but I want to stay out of his way until I'm sure he's gone. Can I stay with you for a few days?" Her teeth bit into her lower lip as she listened. "Thanks. I will be leaving here by eight o'clock, which should put me there late this afternoon, early evening at the latest." She readjusted the damp towel,

tucked just above the curve of her breasts. Droplets of water escaped from underneath the towel shrouding her head and ran down her slender neck to pool in the curve of her throat.

“Of course I’ll be careful. I love you, too.”

Suddenly, anger set in as she dialed the phone again.

“Hi, John, this is Eve. I’m afraid I have a family crisis, and I need to take a few days off.” It was as good an excuse as anything else she could come up with. Eve held the phone away from her ear to avoid his tirade. With her free hand, she pulled up the covers on the bed and smoothed out the wrinkles as she waited for him to run out of breath. She pressed the phone back to her ear.

“I’m sure you will all manage for a few days. You can always reach me on my cell, and I will have access to a computer in a few hours.” Another outburst from her boss, and she realized there was no gun aimed at her head forcing her to listen, so she quietly disconnected the line.

In spite of the bleak emotions that had threatened to swallow her up just moments ago, she had to laugh out loud when she opened her suitcase to dress. In her blind fury to make a swift exit, the items she felt necessary to pack were five pairs of underwear, a lacy form-fitting bra, and two t-shirts, the longer of which sported the slogan, “Look Maw ... No Bra,” a memento from her previous loser boyfriend.

All at once, she felt free. Yes, her life was a shambles, but there was only one way to go from here, and it filled her with a sense of being in control, perhaps even hope. She was finally doing what she wanted to do, needed to do.

Eve avoided the inquisitive eyes of the hotel clerk while checking out. She handed him her credit card and signed the receipt without so much as a good morning. She slipped her credit card back into her wallet, shoved it into her purse, and stepped out of the hotel office. The crisp air smelled of exhaust, fast-food breakfasts, and rat race à la Los Angeles.

Steven was showered, checked out, and waiting in the idling spy car. No one had noticed anyone skulking in the parking lot the night before, so the broken light would remain a mystery.

## Chapter Four

You could have knocked Steven over with a cotton ball when he saw the fashion-conscious woman, who had checked in wearing the hottest business suit he had ever seen, in a “Look Maw ... No Bra” t-shirt. It hit about mid-thigh, and for a moment he indulged himself. He watched her full-fleshed breasts bouncing slightly with each step, but his gaze stopped at her hardened nipples, softly brushing the inside of the cream-colored fabric. He licked his lips as his gaze slid down those long, lethal legs. It had been a long time since he’d looked at a woman this way, which made him feel uneasy and on the verge of being annoyed.

She tossed her bag in the backseat, started her car, then put the top down.

Steven let out a long, low whistle. When desire meets desire. Which was hotter? The woman or the car?

He waited for Eve to exit the driveway before he eased out of his parking place. Ten minutes and he would head home for breakfast and a nap. He pleasurably wrestled with memories of a lascivious dream invading his intermittent sleep in the early morning hours. It was a real bump and grinder, with Eve acting as deputy director for the FBI. After having him captured and detained in the backseat of her car, she ordered that his wanton genitalia be called to active duty and demanded that he perform to her specific instructions. Whew! He hadn’t had a wet dream like that in years.

Eve stopped two car lengths ahead of him. Steven wished he were sitting in the pickup truck that was pulled up alongside Eve Ryan, so he could look down at those beautiful legs. *Just keep your mind on your driving, big guy.* The light changed, and Eve merged into the right-hand lane and entered the on-ramp of the Ventura Freeway, heading south.

Where is she going now? Steven stayed with her, keeping a safe two-car distance behind. Eve gunned it and crossed three lanes, ending up next to the divider.

*Man! That baby has some power! Easy, girl, we don't need the locals joining our little party.*

He dialed the office again. "Hey, Judd, this is Steven. Our Miss Ryan has other places to go. Yeah, I'm going to stick with her." He cursed himself for not taking this assignment more seriously. If he had been doing his job, he would know exactly where she was headed. "Looks like we might have underestimated our little art lady." He shot forward to block a driver from getting in front of him. "Yep, she's headed out of town as we speak." He barely heard the sound of the angry horn blast in the cool, soundproof interior. "So, why is it that you have so little information on her?" He was aggravated and wanted Judd to know it. "Look, I'm at a real disadvantage here. I came onboard armed only with your information check. It looks like someone was a little too casual about Eve Ryan. Yeah, just keep me in the loop." He disconnected the line. Old fart!

Steven was puzzled by Judd's lack of interest. To Judd, it seemed that tailing her was more to observe a rule of procedure, rather than to prove she was in cahoots with Beckard. Questioning her brother had been Steven's idea. That was about all he'd had time for up to now.

He took a big gulp of his cold morning coffee from the chewed edge of a foam cup and shuddered in distaste. He hoped he could salvage what looked like a botched case. Steven didn't know why he even bothered to call in at all. His Expedition carried a built-in GPS logger to track his whereabouts, and Judd most likely knew where he was, even before he did. That is, if his sorry ass wasn't too tired to check.

"Okay, darlin'," he announced to her rear bumper, "looks like we're going to be spending a little more time together." He hauled himself up short when an arousing surge of excitement hit, and he wished she wasn't so damned appealing.

Steven was tired from more than lack of sleep. He was fed up with this whole law enforcement scene. Judd wasn't the only one retiring. Eve Ryan would be Steven's last case. Laura should be here to celebrate with him. They had talked about his retirement often. She worried so much about the dangers of his work.

They were right smack in the middle of planning a baby when she was diagnosed. The doctor sat them down in his office and read the test results. Steven felt the momentary thrill as they clasped hands and laughed with excitement. Yes, she was pregnant; that was the good news. But the doctor wasn't smiling. He wanted to order more tests. They had no choice but to terminate the pregnancy a week later. Their lives had changed, from one moment to the next, filled with treatment, medication, lab appointments, and the agony of waiting for results. Within a year, Laura was gone.

Steven leaned forward and gripped the steering wheel, angry with himself for plowing up the same old painful memories. He rolled his window down, needing to feel the cool breeze on his face, but the goddamned smoggy air made his eyes water.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wind styled Eve's hair as it playfully twirled and parted it at the nape of her neck. Raising her face to the sun, she smiled and then slid her t-shirt up her thighs to turn her store-bought tanning-bed tan into the real thing. *So this is what outside feels like.* Her work had become a sanctuary, a safe place, a place she needed to be rescued from. She was going to enjoy this trip and couldn't wait to see Blanca. First, she would indulge herself with a big breakfast, but not until she was out of Los Angeles. Traffic began to thicken as she approached the city. She didn't mind seeing the glittering conveyor of cars inching its way ahead of her, dropping off to a hundred different destinations. It's all in the journey, not the destination. Blanca's teachings came to her at the oddest times.

Her clutch knee was beginning to tremble at the work out. She turned on the radio for a traffic report just in time to hear the morning dedication. Some lovesick casualty was dedicating a love song to her boyfriend of two years.

"Good luck, honey. Just wait till you find out what he's really like!" she announced to the radio and pounded the steering wheel.

"Nice morning!"

Eve looked over to see a trucker smiling at her. "I guess." She eyed him warily.

"Where you headed?" he asked. His head swiveled quickly between Eve and the traffic ahead.

"That way." She pointed ahead. "You know any good places to get breakfast, outside of town?"

His brakes squealed and hissed. The forty-eight-foot trailer shuddered in response and then slowed to a halt. The thick, hot fumes from his idling engine put a damper on her appetite.

"Breakfast might turn to lunch if this traffic doesn't thin out." He grinned. "There's a great little place right off the Ten, on Hospitality Lane in San Bernardino. Considering traffic, we'll probably get there by ten o'clock."

Where did he get off saying we?

His large, muscular, tattooed arm drooped out of his window as he strained to see into her car. He was huge, even sitting down. The bill of his cap was tagged with a myriad of greasy fingerprints, and a large tuft of dark curly hair escaped out the hole in the back, like a busted mattress spring. His wide, square jaw sported a two-day beard, and the dingy, ripped tank top only added to his glamour.

"So, are you from this area?"

"No," Eve lied.

"Where are you from?" he asked huskily.

She thumbed over her shoulder. "Back that way."

"I like mysterious women, especially in red Mustangs." He let out a sardonic laugh that turned her stomach.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed him watch hungrily as she handled the gearshift. Her thigh muscle flexed as she eased in the clutch, causing the left side of her t-shirt to ride up and down, playing peek-a-boo with the lacy edge of her underwear. She gathered the fabric and stretched it down as far as the threads would allow. She glanced up as he brought the back of his hand to his mouth, wiping it as if he had just devoured a rack of ribs.

The traffic slowly inched forward. She pulled up quickly, then slammed on her brakes to avoid hitting the car in front of her. The engine cut out and died.

"If you put your transmission in neutral, you'll save yourself a lot of energy." His knobby finger pointed to her left leg.

Obediently she followed his direction.

"Where are you headed?" she asked re-starting her engine, wanting in the worst way to divert his attention from her bare thighs.

"Red rocks of Sedona, Arizona, luv." His hoarse voice matched the grinding of his gears.

She wished she had planned an alternate route.

"So, what are you hauling in your trailer?" Eve asked, not the least bit interested.

"I ain't haulin', darlin'; I'm going to pick up." He patted the outside of his gray door, which read Barnes Trucking.

Enough questions. The last thing she wanted to do was encourage him. Spending long hours alone in his cab apparently had turned him into a lonely but certifiable weirdo. She gave him another look. He definitely had a cold-blooded exterior and most likely had a cuddly pet iguana waiting at home for him.

At last, the traffic pushed forward in his lane, and she took the opportunity to squeeze in behind him. She was determined to stay behind those chrome naked-lady mud flaps of his.



## Chapter Five

Glad to be out of the traffic, Eve looked at her watch. Ten o'clock, just like the trucker had said. Beautiful downtown San Bernardino. Eve saw him slowing to take the exit, his thick arm waving for her to follow. On the spur of the moment, she decided she would keep going. She honked and waved back as she passed the exit. I can get something to eat in Indio ... alone. One more hour won't make a big whooping difference, and she would be that much closer to Sedona.

She glanced into her rearview mirror, just as the truck was getting back on the freeway. What was with this guy? Mr. Trucker was coming up swift on the backstretch, completely winding out his engine between shifts.

The blast of the air horn nearly startled Eve into the backseat. She looked over nervously to see the truck driver smiling and waving his enormous hand. Damn! His engine was alternately cutting out and revving up. She smiled politely and then stared straight ahead. That was enough! The top was definitely going up the minute she stopped.

It was one of the drawbacks she hadn't considered when she bought a convertible. She felt just like a goldfish in a bowl, open season to all prying eyes. She was disgusted with this oaf ogling her t-shirt.

It only took an hour and a half to reach Indio, what with observing the speed limit. She certainly didn't want to get caught in a speed trap with her officer magnet. Occasionally she slowed, thinking the trucker would get bored and move along. He stayed close, sometimes in front, sometimes behind, but never more than few car lengths away. She decided she would ignore him until he went away.

Following the signs, she got off the highway to eat at Orville's Restaurant. Home-style favorites, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Something about that sounded good. Home-style? Hopefully not like her home.

She parked at the back end of the restaurant. The vinyl top hummed, as it settled into place, sealing her safely inside. Hands resting on the wheel, she sat in an echo of silence, staring at the sunlit dust particles floating above her dash. If anyone had told her yesterday that she would be eating lunch at Orville's in Indio today, she never would have believed it.

She looked around nervously, hoping the truck driver hadn't followed her. She reached back and dug into her bag to find her suit jacket, then tugged it on and buttoned it over her t-shirt. She was able to get her skirt up just past her knees before an elderly couple pulled into the space right next to her. Too late to pull it up or down, she sat still until they passed, whispering to each other as they gaped at her embarrassed expression. She heard a rip as she tugged and twisted it over her hips, then tucked the shirt in the waistband. Damn!

There were only a few customers in the restaurant, but she felt as if every eye was on her. The old couple from the parking lot was sitting at a table near the entrance, still whispering in each other's ears. Old geezers! Usually, she felt confident and sexy in her brown Versace suit; here she felt judged.

"Table for one?" The hostess, obviously displeased, evil-eyed the length of Eve's skirt. She was a half-foot shorter than Eve, but the bun on top of her head added a good three inches to her height.

Eve shot her an impatient look. "Yes, just one."

"There will be a ten-minute wait," she snapped. The pantyhose encasing her plump thighs made swishing sounds as she walked off.

Eve looked around to see several open tables, then decided to visit the ladies' room.

Leaning over the sink, she looked deeply into her eyes. "Tough day ... tough life!"

"S'cuse me," a tiny voice said.

Eve looked down into a pale, innocent face. Large blue eyes with long golden lashes accented her baby-smooth skin.

"Would you help me button my dress, please?"

Eve smiled and knelt down behind the girl to button the fraying fabric. Her heart made an instant connection as her hand lightly brushed the silky blond hair that hung in a thick tangle of ponytail.

"There you go, sweetie." Without a word, the girl turned and wrapped her tiny arms around Eve's neck and hugged her tight.

"Would you like me to brush your hair?" Eve asked in a gentle voice. The girl nodded, looking as if she would burst into tears at any moment. As tenderly as she could, Eve removed the fat rubber band that had been wrapped way too many times around the tangled mass. She took the brush from her purse and gingerly raked through the tangles. The girl stood straight at attention, never saying a word, even when her brushing snagged more than a few hairs from her head.

Eve took a purple scrunchie from her purse. “How about wearing this instead of that old rubber band?”

The girl beamed happily. Eve wound it loosely around her ponytail. “You look beautiful! My name is Eve. What’s yours?”

“Sara!” a loud voice bellowed outside the door. They both jumped, and the girl lunged forward to clutch Eve’s legs as a fist pounded solidly on the door.

“Is that your daddy?” Eve asked in hushed tones, then bent over to give her another hug. Sara nodded nervously.

“How old are you, Sara?”

Sara put a small finger to the bow of her lips, signaling Eve to talk quietly, then proudly held up five fingers.

“Sara!” There was more pounding.

Eve whispered, “I guess you’d better go.”

Sara hugged her one last time before she opened the door.

The hostess was waiting, with an impatient look on her face.

“Your table is ready, right this way.”

As they passed the couple, Eve overheard the old woman say, “See, I told you it was Julia Roberts!”

Eve grinned and immediately retracted the geezer label.

They paraded past several booths with a window view and ended up at a little table next to the kitchen. Two seats over, and she would have been sitting at the bar.

“Could I have one of the booths by the window?” She pointed.

She slapped the menu on the table. “Nope, they’re reserved for two people.”

Eve slowly sat down, facing the entrance.

The hostess quickly swished off to greet another guest.

Eve looked up from her menu at a man who could have stepped right out of a Calvin Klein ad. His hair was sun-streaked blond on top, with chestnut brown underneath. The pristine white t-shirt he wore hugged the planes of his broad chest, and she could make out the well-defined muscles in his abdomen. She thought about the lyrics in an old song. *Some enchanted evening, you will see a stranger across a crowded room.* She loved watching old movies and was amused when the characters would suddenly break out in song at a restaurant or department store. Well, it wasn’t crowded, it wasn’t evening, and she could only guess what the hostess would do if she broke out in song, but this guy was definitely something to sing about.

Her heartbeat geared up when he looked her way. He either smiled at her, or her imagination was on active duty. She envisioned stroking his chest with the palms of her hands. Images of him lying with her were so vivid, and suddenly she knew exactly what it

would feel like to kiss his perfect mouth, to stroke the curve of his back, to align her body with his, as though it had been created for that very purpose. Surprised by her intense arousal, she snapped herself back into reality. Sporting a slightly evil grin, she wished he would at least take his sunglasses off, so she could see his eyes.

The hostess seemed to experience a complete personality transformation. She smiled warmly and led him to a window booth. Eve expected to see a woman join him any moment -- no one that handsome could be single. Then she remembered the promise she had made.

"What the hell am I thinking? No more men!" she said aloud, just as the hostess walked up.

"Know what you want?" She shot Eve a smug look. "Waitress is out sick, so I'll be serving you today. Name's Grace."

Of course it was.

"I need a little more time." Eve smiled. "Could I please get some coffee and water?"

Eve was determined not to look at him again. She'd had enough heartache for one lifetime, or ten for that matter, and this guy looked exactly like a heartache waiting to happen. She decided to make her choice and then quietly read the history of the restaurant on the back of the menu. Somehow the historical milestones of Orville's Restaurant didn't prove to be as exciting as watching him sip his sweetened coffee with just a touch of cream.

"Mind if I sit here?" the trucker pointed to a seat at the bar.

Eve was concentrating so hard on not noticing the handsome guy that she hadn't seen the trucker walk in.

"It's a free country," she said with a shrug.

He was freshly showered, the two-day beard and greasy hat were gone, and the torn tank top was replaced by a clean black t-shirt that read "NASCAR" across his chest.

"Guess you weren't that hungry, back in San Berdu?" He faced forward, flipping his coffee cup over, ready to fill.

Eve didn't respond.

"Where did you say you were headed?" He turned to look at her over his shoulder. His eyebrows met over his nose, and for a moment it looked like he already knew the answer to his own question.

"I didn't say." Sighing, she waved her hand to get Grace's attention. Grace glanced at her as she filled the condiment bottles.

The trucker lifted a finger, and Grace trotted over with the pot of coffee. As she filled his cup, a warm smile spread sweetly across her face. By the time she reached Eve's table, her smile had vanished and was replaced by a cool stare.

"I'll have the chicken-fried steak platter with a biscuit and scrambled eg--"

"All out," Grace replied roughly.

"Oookay, how about pot roast?"

"We don't serve that till after four p.m. You need more time?" Grace tapped her pencil impatiently on the check.

"No, I'll just have the Mr. Orville's omelet."

"You want cheese on that?"

"Do you have any?" Eve tilted her head to one side.

Grace studied her for a moment. "Jack or American?"

"I'll have American, with whole wheat toast, please."

Grace stabbed the pencil into her bun as she briskly swished over to the handsome guy by the window. No one joined him. Eve guessed that the window booths were reserved for two people or single, good-looking men.

Grace set Eve's overfilled water glass on the table and poured coffee into a slightly chipped cup. She told herself that Grace hadn't spilled coffee in the saucer on purpose. Several drops of the brown liquid dripped from the bottom of her cup onto her skirt when she took the first sip. Tossing her only napkin in the saucer to blot the puddle, she shook her head. Glancing up, she saw Grace carefully refilling the window guy's cup and laughing at some comment he made.

"So, why won't you tell me where you're going?" the trucker asked innocently.

"My mother always told me not to talk to strangers."

"Can I at least pay for your lunch?" He smiled.

"She warned me not to take food from strangers, either."

"I'm not a stranger; we've been driving a hundred and fifty miles together." He pointed to the highway. "Besides, I know so many shortcuts, I could have you anywhere you want to go in half the time."

"Really?" Now she was interested.

Grace brought the trucker his order and then served the window guy. Eve could have sworn that he was having a chicken-fried steak platter, but she wasn't brave enough to walk over to check. She busied herself with her dry, cheese-less omelet and white toast.

"Nooooo!"

The shrill scream made Eve jump. Three tables behind her, she saw little Sara with a mountain of a man who must be her father. He was ripping the scrunchie from her hair.

"Where the hell did you get this?" he bellowed.

"It's mine!" Sara trembled, reaching out her tiny hand.

"Well, it's mine now!" the dullard roared. "Don't you ever talk back to me. You just sit down and shut up!"

With that, Sara clasped her tiny hands on the table and stared at them quietly.

Eve tried to get Sara's attention so she could give her an encouraging smile, but she sat frozen, staring at the top of the table with her baby fingers laced together.

"Waitress!"

Eve cringed and smiled to herself knowing Grace wouldn't put up with his shit.

Quickly Grace went swishing over to his table with that syrupy sweet smile of hers.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think you might be serving us anytime soon? On second thought, never mind, just pack that shit up and make it a to-go order!" he demanded, much louder than he needed to.

"Yes, sir, right away, sir."

Eve turned back to her breakfast, surprised at Grace's acquiescence.

"No! You can't have a piece of toast! Gimme, gimme, gimme ... all you do is want things!"

He slammed his hand on the table causing the silverware to bounce into the air. Sara flinched, so did Eve.

"Sit up straight! Get your elbows off the table! Put your napkin in your lap! Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Eve began obeying every order this jerk shouted at the little girl. She was reliving a scenario that had played out regularly growing up. Her eyes now cast down, she stared at her folded hands, the posture of a victim.

The man quickly rose, threw some money on the table, and snagged Sara by the wrist. He jerked her to her feet and strode toward the door, causing her to run double-time to keep up. His lumpish body, clad in bib overalls, gave him a backward appearance even before he spoke. Sara pulled back to look longingly at Eve, her momentary friend. In one swift movement, the man turned and crouched down to eye-level with Sara. He wrapped his huge hands around her tiny arms and shook her hard.

Eve's eyes filled with tears. She knew exactly how Sara felt -- helpless, hopeless, and alone.

By the time Sara and her father had picked up their order and made it to the parking lot, Eve wore a completely new expression. She rose from her seat and began stomping her way to the parking lot, keeping her eyes on Sara.

Steven rose from his seat and stepped in front of her to block her path as she made her way to the door. He gently put his hand on her shoulder. His touch was electric to her. She smelled an earthy, sandalwood fragrance on his skin, that delicious musky smell, and for an instant she imagined him holding her tight. She was sure that inside his arms was a very safe place.

"I don't think you should mess with that guy," Steven said softly.

Eve blinked and trembled with anger. "Someone has to."

"I live out here. I'll report him to child protective services. I have his license plate number." He reached over and pulled his napkin from the table to show her. "I have some experience with these types of situations. Besides, it's always worse for the victim if you piss off the perpetrator."

By this time, the trucker had made his way out to the parking lot. They watched through the window as he grabbed Sara's father by the front of his overalls, pulled him out of his car, and gave him a sound shaking.

Instantly, he was a champion in Eve's eyes. She clenched her fist, taking an imaginary swing at the stupid creep. "Yes!" she cheered.

Eve watched sadly as Sara rode off with her tormentor. She wondered if Sara mattered to someone, or if she had a big sister who would take beatings for her. A sister exactly like Blanca, who had lived at home until she was twenty-six, still trying to protect Eve from the worst of it. Only now did she understand what Blanca had felt and how far the protective instinct could drive you. Eve was willing to risk a beating to protect little Sara. She would have to trust that the Calvin Klein guy would take care of the S.O.B. through legal channels, although the law never did much for her.

Feeling a light tap on her shoulder, Eve turned, surprised at the withered hand reaching out to clasp hers.

The old woman smiled brightly. "Could we have your autograph, dear? We've seen every one of your movies. *Runaway Bride* was my favorite."

Her husband produced a gigantic smile and held out a napkin and pen.

## Chapter Six

Eve stopped at a last-chance-for-everything store before getting back on the road. How very appropriate, considering the recent events in her life. A finger awning shaded her eyes as she watched a mini-twister pirouette a discarded candy wrapper. The low whistle of the desert wind seemed to echo inside her and made her feel even lonelier.

Get gas, oil, water, designer tote, tortilla chips, she went down her mental list of traveling essentials. She'd wanted to get the phone number of the Calvin Klein guy so she could check on Sara, but he had disappeared while she was signing autographs.

"Here, let me pump that for you." The trucker slid his callused hand down her arm and wrapped it around her slender wrist, tugging the nozzle from her hand.

"There's a metal stop right here that keeps the valve open so you don't have to hold the handle."

Frowning, she yanked her hand away, rubbing her wrist. "Right here, you mean?" She pointed to the place inside the nozzle handle.

"Yep, that would be the spot." His gnarly fingers set the stop.

Purposely, she batted her eyelashes. "Thanks."

She always held the handle. It was just faster that way. She shook her head and stepped over the hose to get the squeegee. *I suppose he's going to show me the correct way to use this, too?* She huffed out a breath and shook her head while plunging the squeegee in and out of the water several times. A few drops of the liquid splashed her face when she slapped the squeegee onto the windshield and began scrubbing the glass, but she refused to wipe them away for fear of attracting a window washing for dummies lecture. Honestly.

\* \* \* \* \*



Steven was pumping gas several pumps away from her view. He folded his arms and leaned against his rear bumper, transfixed as Eve scrubbed the crust from her windshield. She was definitely getting his juices flowing, and he was feeling less and less guilty about his attraction to her. Her brown skirt molded to her thighs and was tailored to accent the lovely curve of her derriere. She took off her jacket to display the infamous t-shirt. The cleaning circles she made caused her plump breasts to bounce in tiny twirls. Carnal didn't begin to describe the sensations flowing through him. He looked around to see if anyone noticed him watching.

Someone was whistling a slightly out-of-tune version of "Born to be Wild." Steven transferred his gaze to the customer next to him washing smashed desert beetles from his motorcycle.

"I just got it last week." The tall lanky guy grinned at Steven's drooling expression.

"It's a Boss Hoss Harley." The corners of his lips curled up, as his velvet-soft wax cloth polished immaculate circles onto the mirror-like black enamel.

"What kind of mileage do you get?" Steven stepped closer to the glimmering tank, flicking a glance at Eve.

"Chevy 350, V8 engine, 345 horsepower, and with a total weight of eleven hundred pounds, that gets me about twenty-five miles to the gallon on the highway." He sounded like the salesman who'd pitched it to him.

"Have a seat."

"Don't mind if I do." Steven whistled and swung a leg over.

"How many gears?" Wearing a goofy smile, he gently bounced his weight in the seat, restraining himself from adding the "vrooom-vrooom" sound effect.

"That's the beauty of it, man, it's automatic, only two gears. You just push down on the shifter to engage the transmission from neutral to first, then push it down again for second."

Steven's eyes darted in Eve's direction. "Must be a pretty smooth ride, huh?"

The customer stood, legs apart, and mimicked floating on an imaginary bike. "Smoother than you could ever know."

He was sure he would never know. These machines probably sold for forty grand.

Steven handed the attendant a fifty. "You got a key to the men's room?"

The attendant hoisted a cinderblock over the counter and set it noisily on the counter. The key was padlocked to it with a two-foot chain. Steven threw a questioning look at the attendant.

Shrugging. "We gotta do that or the key will disappear."

"You don't get many kids in here, do you?" Steven exaggerated the weight as he heaved the block onto his shoulder.

While Eve was still struggling to make major snack decisions, he slipped off unnoticed. He headed to the facilities, a freestanding structure some fifty feet in back of the store.

Eve arranged her groceries in the front seat for easy access.

The trucker's husky voice startled her. "So, can I direct you to the nearest shortcut?" He balanced himself with both hands on the edge of her door.

She thought for a moment. "Okay, what if I was heading to the same area you are ... how much time would your short cut save me?"

"Well, lemme see," he said as he looked around and scratched his head. "The last time I came this way, I was able to hit Sedona in maybe two hours."

She gave him an assessing look. It would be nice to surprise Blanca by arriving early. She switched her gaze to the long desert road, lifted her Diet Pepsi from between her legs, and took a sip. It wasn't as if they would be in the same car together. She pushed her drink back into place. There was a good five to six hours left to make the trip. She tipped her watch forward to see the time. The temperature outside was climbing, and she didn't dare use the air conditioning while she drove and cause the engine to overheat. Did she really need his help? She was perfectly capable of reading a road map, and driving long distances alone had never been difficult for her. But it sure was great to see how he'd rattled Sara's father in the parking lot. A smile tipped the corner of her mouth. She would have bought a ticket to see that again.

"What did you say your name was?" she asked.

He thrust his enormous hand inside her window, "Tommy Barnes, at your service."

"Eve Ryan." She shook his hand loosely. "I was glad to see how you handled that creep with the little girl."

"He was some kinda bastard, wasn't he?" His blue eyes flashed. "I wanted to thrash him, but not in front of the little girl."

"I like to think that bad guys get what they deserve," Eve said innocently.

He stared at her for an uneasy moment. "Rather than tell you how to get to the cut-off, you want to follow me?" He pointed to the back of his truck. "Just wait here while I visit the boy's room."

Eve opened her mouth to decline. "Okay." Where did that come from?

She watched in her rearview mirror as he walked toward the back of the store. She wiped her hand down her skirt, unable to resist the urge to remove his essence. For a moment, she considered leaving, but the idea of making it to Sedona in two hours was just too appealing. Besides, it was well known that truck drivers knew all the best short cuts.

## Chapter Seven

Steven splashed his face with cool water from the faucet and dried it with a coarse paper towel. He was still thinking of the image he'd had of Eve back at the restaurant. She was nearly angelic, with her auburn hair hanging loosely over her shoulders. He could almost smell it from where he sat, and suddenly he wanted to bury his face in those silky tresses and breathe in its apricot fragrance. He had smelled her hair once, in the supermarket. He had stood behind her in line, just long enough to inhale her sweet scent and feel the heat from her body. He needed to have more than a two-dimensional image of her. Remembering how she looked in that t-shirt this morning was just about two shades this side of heaven and very three-dimensional.

An earsplitting bang, followed by a resounding snap sent Steven into a ready stance. With his heart pounding, he scanned the inside of the men's room door. It sounded like a gunshot, but he couldn't see any holes. He reached in his waistband for his Walther P99. Shit! It was back in the car. He patted down his pockets. Aha! Here's the clip ... I suppose I could throw the bullets. His thoughts of Eve had distracted him, and now he wasn't taking care of business again. Unlocking the door, he turned the knob, but the door was jammed tight. He aimed his full weight at the door, striking it with his shoulder ... not a budge. Crouching down, he could see something was wedged in the jamb. He tapped out the pin in the top hinge using the edge of the block, then stopped. At this rate, getting the door open would take too long. His eyes fell on the chain, and he shrugged. Swinging the block back, he brought it forward and let it smash against the door, moving it just a hair. He swung the block farther and again targeted the edge of the door; it moved a little more. With any luck at all, the noise he was making would signal someone for help. With both hands wrapped tightly around the knob, he shouldered the door once more, throwing it open with a clamorous twang. He shaded his eyes against the harsh sunlight and looked down at the bent knife blade that had fallen to the ground. The handle had been snapped off.

He took a hard look at the surrounding area and kneeled to inspect the evidence. The blade looked to be about six inches long. It was an old Bowie knife. It had to be old for the handle to snap off like that, or maybe whoever broke it was incredibly strong. Steven tossed it down and kicked the blade following its dusty path with his eyes.

A cloud of dust surrounded a black Expedition as it roared up. When he saw Dolan he knew it was just another one of the bureau's black-tinted clones. Steven watched him step out, wearing a grim look on his face.

Steven smiled and waited for him to speak first as he glanced around for Carter.

"Malloy, you need to come with us." His deportment alone screamed amateur, but that didn't stop Dolan from being impressed with himself down to his apple-green gills.

"Good afternoon to you, too." Steven corrected.

Dolan's reflective sunglasses glinted back Steven's image in a desert horizon. He used it to maintain his sullen expression. Dolan was slightly larger. With his feet apart, he stood ramrod straight in his men-in-black agent suit. Steven's gut spoke loud, something was very wrong. He sensed someone behind him, and he tightened his hold on the chained block.

"So, anything new with Beckard?"

Dolan glanced at his watch. "No."

The glitter of Eve's bumper caught the corner of Steven's eye.

"I'm not sure if it matters to you, but my suspect is driving away." He nodded his head in Eve's direction.

"Yeah, we know where she's going. No need to follow her anymore." Tension all but radiated from him.

"And why would that be?" Steven caught Carter's reflection moving in from behind.

"Change of plans, Judd wants you off the case."

"Did you bother to investigate why, or isn't that your job?" With a mutinous expression, Steven locked his knees and gritted his teeth.

"Look, we just deliver the message, now get in."

Steven gave him a detached stare and slowly turned to walk toward the store. No way was he going anywhere with them, before he checked in, and turned off all the alarms blaring in his head.

Dolan moved forward, glanced toward the store, then nodded past Steven. A thick forearm clamped around Steven's throat. A dusty scuffle preempted his hard elbow into Carter's gut. Dolan howled as the cinderblock swung up to meet soft human flesh. He clutched his groin with both hands, his face twisted in pain.

"Primitive, but effective!" Steven taunted.

Steven dropped the block in a flare of dust, whirled around, and landed his fist on Carter's jaw. "Not so fast, pal." He caught him in mid fall, then reached inside his jacket and snagged his gun.

Dolan lunged at him from behind, locking both his arms down in a steel grip.

"It takes the two of you to take me down? Come on, where's the sport in that?" Steven rasped. He braced himself as Carter staggered to his feet and threw a fist that landed in his midsection.

"Is that all you got, you miserable little shit?"

Fueled by rage, Steven bent forward, swinging Dolan off, and brought the gun up full force to connect with Carter's eye socket. Carter took a nasty backward dust dive.

"Goddammit, Dolan, get him!" Carter bellowed as he plastered both hands over his wounded eye.

Dolan caught Steven's arm and jerked it up behind his back, disarming him and using the leverage to ease him to the ground. His expression suggested enjoyment as he smashed his forearm against Steven's cheek, holding his face solidly against the dry desert dirt, while boring a knee painfully into his back. Puffs of fine sand blew back into Steven's eyes as he panted out ragged breaths; his teeth ground on a mixture of blood and sand.

"It just doesn't get any better than this does it, Dolan?" Steven mocked and started to laugh, taking a good amount of dust into his lungs. He felt a sharp jab from the bent knife blade just under his left forearm. He quickly gripped the blade, slowly sliding it down at his side, and prepared. Cocking his arm back, he swung forcefully half circle, and rammed it a good two inches into Dolan's calf.

"Son of a bitch!" Dolan snarled as he released his hold, jumped to his feet, and grabbed at the blade, screaming wildly in pain.

Struggling to his feet, Steven's fist shot out and caught Dolan straight in the mouth, throwing him back against his car, decorating the black paint with a spray of blood and spit. A quick karate blow separated the gun from Dolan's hand. Steven caught it in mid air and assumed a classic shooting stance.

"Don't make me shoot, you bastards!" He winced. His hand stung from whacking Dolan's teeth, the cut from the knife was too deep to hurt yet.

"Into the bathroom!" Steven motioned with the gun. He snagged the chained cinderblock on the way. They filed into the cement-floored room, limping and groaning, with Steven close behind.

"Cuff him!" Steven glared. Carter slowly took the cuffs from his belt and then swiped at the blood steadily trickling into his eye.

"First take off your clothes! All of them! Throw them outside!"

The two men looked at each other.

"I said now!" Steven's foot held the door open.

With pain-wracked expressions, the men removed their clothes, all of them, and threw them outside the door.

"Turn around!" Steven ordered.

"Carter, cuff your left wrist to Dolan's right wrist."

Steven smiled, as they struggled to understand the direction. Without taking his eyes off of them, he dug Dolan's cuffs out of the pile of clothes.

"Now turn back ... real slow!"

Turning together, like a miniature burlesque line, the two agents brought their secrets to light. Chuckling softly, Steven skillfully cuffed them one-handed, catching a link of the chain in Dolan's cuff.

"Okay, boys, up against the stall." The cinderblock banged against their knees, like some bizarre pendulum, as they shuffled. Their pain-filled grunts amused Steven more than this ridiculous sight.

"Drop the block on the other side of the stall." Dolan and Carter's heads snapped back in unison, to glare at him. He held up the gun to remind them of their choices.

"Nice and slow, just drop it on the other side."

Dolan grasped the chain with Carter in tow and sluggishly hoisted the block to the top of the stall. He tried to ease it down slowly, but it slipped from his left-handed grip and dropped full force. Their chests slammed against the metal with a resonating bang. The weight of the block forced them to stand on their toes, with the insides of their elbows crooked over the top of the stall.

There was a faint knock on the door. Steven stepped over and peeked out to see a man dressed in white tennis shorts, with a small boy wearing a Superman costume.

"Excuse me," the man said. "My son needs to use the bathroom."

"Sorry, no superheroes allowed." Steven motioned for the man to step forward and opened the door just wide enough for him to see Carter's naked butt. "You wouldn't happen to know how to change a colostomy bag would you?" Steven smiled.

"No, sir, I sure don't," the man stammered as he backed away from the door. "Sorry to bother you." He took his son's hand and quickly led him away.

Steven slammed the door shut and turned back to the agents. "Now, as I was saying, what is this all about?" Steven's eyes flashed like hot coals.

"Orders are to bring you in any way we can. You're a wanted man," Carter snarled.

Steven ground the muzzle of the gun into Carter's ribs. "Says who?"

Carter rubbed his gashed eye against his upper arm, smearing a craggy red line.

"Judd Raymond."

Just hearing his name sent a searing wave of anger through Steven's central nervous system.

"You said you knew where Eve Ryan was headed." He dug the gun into Carter's ribs again.

"Up yours, Malloy!" Dolan growled, giving Carter a mulish sidekick.

"You know, Carter, I don't have any problem taking off a piece of your ass with this pistol. This gun hasn't been fired yet, and we both know the first shot has a long trigger pull. So I'm starting to pull now ... pressure ... more pressure ... almost there ..."

"Okay! Don't shoot!"

Steven detected the sharp smell of urine and looked down to see the growing puddle at Carter's feet.

"Attendant isn't gonna be happy about you missing the bowl," Steven jabbed.

"She's headed off the main road," he stammered.

Dolan grimaced as his exposed feet redirected the flow of Carter's warm pool

"She's following a trucker, headed up the highway. He's a special agent."

"My ass! He's part of this? What the hell else do you know?"

"That's all, I swear it!"

Steven slowly backed through the door. He couldn't let Eve put too much distance between them, no matter how much he wanted to continue this conversation.

"You're not going to leave us like this, are you? Jesus Christ! My arm is numb already!" Dolan's eyes shot daggers.

Spitting grit and then scuffing Carter's fear from his boots, he said, "That's right, boys. Side by side and cheek to cheek."

Steven ripped one of the cologne-scented shirts to wrap the blade Dolan plucked from his leg and slashed all four of their tires. Seizing a bag from the front seat of Dolan's car, he shoved in the guns, clips, and a first-aid kit. First things first. He needed to find Eve Ryan. He wasn't about to take his own car if Judd was after him, and there wasn't enough time to deactivate the GPS logger.

Steven wrapped a strip of shirt tightly around his now-throbbing palm and stayed close to the structure's siding, under the eaves. He looked around for the man and his son, but they had gone. Needing nothing short of a miracle, the trick would be to get past the store with no one else noticing his grimy face, bloody hand, or gun-filled tote. His miracle was granted, as he inched around the front of the store and saw the motorcycle guy walking inside. He jogged to his car, found his folding knife, and slashed his own tires. Those two bozos would escape soon enough, and he didn't want them driving his car. Snatching his backpack from the backseat, he swung it around and strapped all the gear onto the back of the motorcycle.

Looking toward the store, Steven caught the customer's eye just as he started down the road.

The man headed for him in a flat-out run. “Hey! Come back here! Goddamn son of a bitch ... Come back here!”

The massive engine drowned out his shouting as Steven revved the engine and sped out to the main highway.



## Chapter Eight

Nothing made sense right now. The only thing that Steven knew for sure was he had to find Eve Ryan. Questions raced through his mind like a runaway locomotive, and he didn't have any answers. He detested not knowing the involvement of this mysterious truck driver, and why had Raymond told his young agents that he was a wanted man?

The wind against his chest offered him comfort. He was grateful for the automatic transmission that didn't require him to shift gears with his left hand. The power and response of this machine was remarkable; he almost felt terrible for having to take it.

The afternoon sun beat down from a clear sky as he glided through the desert. If it weren't for the present circumstances, he would have loved the hell out of this ride. Heat waves shimmered off the arrow-straight strip of asphalt highway, but the air was cool. His eyes scanned the valley floor, with the feather-like scrub stretching all the way in to the far distance toward the stacked rock formations.

Pulling off the road, he cut off the engine and listened. He faintly heard the distant reverberation of a truck engine and finally spotted the far-off dust trail that tracked Eve's path. They were headed south on one of the back roads, something he had always wanted to do on motorcycle, but not in a situation like this. He was intensely frightened for Eve, and a sense of urgency had a firm grip on his throat. Every muscle sprang to react, and as the engine roared to life, he relished the powerful machine vibrating through his whole being.

Steven pulled onto the back road and proceeded little by little. Mounds of soft sand impeded his progress as he lifted off the seat and plopped back down, rolling in and out of the dirt pockets. Total focus was needed as he zigzagged and wheeled along the heavily rutted dirt road.

With Eve out of his sight, his musings of her in the past paled to the feelings that pierced him now. Images of her silky skin, her exquisite plump breasts, the curve of her hips, and that shock of long auburn hair that bounced around her face besieged him.

Finally, he allowed himself to admit he wanted her, and in his mind fully gave way to his long-denied needs and desires. Desires he feared would finish him. It was madness to even consider getting involved with a diamond smuggler's girlfriend. And what would a sophisticated art director want with a meditating, motorcycle-loving ex-FBI agent anyway? Even so, the thought of something happening to her terrified him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eve sighed and shook her head. She was absolutely worn out from eating the trucker's dust on this ridiculously bumpy road. She bitterly regretted her willingness to follow him into this unoccupied stretch of badlands. What was she thinking, following a stranger into no-man's land? She had the terrible habit of trusting the untrustworthy, and this time it may have landed her into far more trouble than she knew how to handle.

Without warning, the steering wheel jarred, then wobbled, she heard a loud hissing like the air being released from a party balloon. Flap, flap, flap ... her right front tire had gone flat. Damn! Not sure if she wanted help from the trucker, she brought the Mustang to a shuddering halt.

Opening the door, she stepped out cautiously onto the desert sand, half-expecting some venomous creature to assault her. Walking around the desert in a mini skirt and backless shoes wasn't the smartest thing, which made her wonder what was the smartest thing she had ever done?

It took the trucker a good two hundred feet to realize she had stopped. His air brakes hissed in protest as he commanded them to halt the eighteen-wheel gargantuan. Stepping down from his cannon gray cab, he ambled toward her wearing a wry smile. She would have preferred Grace's company to his at this moment, with or without the cheese.

"Got a flat?" he drawled.

She nervously replied, "No, thanks, I already have one."

At least he smiled. "Open up the trunk, you do have a spare, don'tcha?"

She snatched her keys from the ignition, embarrassed that she wasn't sure.

"Voila!" Her hand directed his stare to the trunk.

He burrowed the jack out from under last week's groceries that she had forgotten to unload. Canned peaches, nutrition bars, granola, and several sketch pads. He clanged the jack against her bumper, as he pulled it out. Eve stooped and scanned the paint for scratches, then gritted her teeth as she followed him to the front of the car.

He squatted to place the jack under the bumper and then turned his face just inches from her bare knees.

"Is the emergency brake on?"

She was grateful for a reason to quickly trot to the opposite side of the car.

"It is now."

The muscles in his back steeled as he loosened the lugs. The hardened hands that grasped the wrench looked like they had changed a thousand flats. She hated hearing the grunts that accompanied each lug loosening, he sounded like he was having untamed sex. His enormous size had escaped her until now. Feeling like a rabbit close to a mountain lion, even her flawed instincts, the ones that usually led her astray, warned her to stay back. He gazed at her while slowly and deliberately slipping the handle into the jack, donning a sinister smile. Then he began pumping, adding a coarse groan between each stroke.

Nervously clearing her throat, she asked, "Are there any other routes to Sedona? I mean, any other back roads?"

He removed the wheel and carried it to the trunk as if it were weightless.

"None that I can drive on. Even without a load, my haul weighs thirty-two thousand pounds, I'd sink like an anvil in sand any softer than this."

Eve wished they were on softer sand. He reminded her of a song her father used to sing when he shaved in the morning.

*Sixteen tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt. St. Peter, don't you call me, 'cause I can't go ... I owe my soul to the company store.*

*What would St. Peter say to you, my dear father? How big a debt do you owe to your daughters, who inflated your ego with bruises and broken bones?*

Shading her eyes, she scanned the perimeter. Nothing but cacti and Joshua trees in sight, and now she couldn't even see the main road. *Oh, Evie girl, what have you gotten yourself into?*

She looked down, and noticed a small object in the sand where the flat had been. She bent down to pick it up and then found three larger ones. Holding them in her palm, they looked like opaque pieces of quartz in the bright sunlight. She thought Blanca might know what they were and would probably find a nice chain to wear with them. She jammed them in her t-shirt pocket and turned to watch the trucker pull the spare from the trunk. He bounced it on the hard sand, checking for air, and then rolled it toward the front of the car.

"What brings you out this way?" he asked with a grimace as he mounted the wheel and finger-tightened the lugs.

"I'm just taking a well-needed vacation to see my sister." That was all she was going to say.

He lowered the car and finished tightening the lugs using his grunt wrench technique.

"We better get going, or all the time we saved on this short cut will be lost." He squinted beneath the palm of his hand. "Must be the better part of one-thirty now."

Eve checked her watch. It was one-forty. She relaxed a little, knowing his butt would soon be back in that truck of his.

Another two and a half hours on the back road, and the scenery never changed. This couldn't be right. Cacti, Joshua trees, and big red rocks -- no cars, no buildings, and no people in sight. Glancing at the temperature gauge, the needle was nearing the red zone. She was hoping to escape any more problems that might bring that trucker out of his cab again. No such luck, now the needle was pinned to the hot side. She sure as hell didn't want to blow her engine, so she stopped and grabbed a jug of water from the floor of the backseat. At least she was smart enough to remember to bring that. Leaving her engine running, she opened the hood. The cap was rattling and whistling like Granny's old teakettle. No way could she touch it.

She turned off the engine and waited for Hercules to grunt his way back from the truck. Laying her head back on the seat, she closed her eyes and thought of Blanca. "Oh, for God's sake! I can call Blanca from my cell phone. Why didn't I think of it before?" Digging her cell phone from her purse, she dialed the number.

"You're never gonna to get a signal way out here."

She nearly jumped out of her skin at the trucker's face looming just inside her window.

"Geez! Do you have to sneak up on me like that?"

Opening her door, he gestured for her to get out.

She wasn't quite sure why she chose now to resist. "I think I'll just sit here until the engine cools off." Her fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

He wore a black-hearted expression. "I think you should get out now." His tone was dangerously smooth.

She slowly stepped out and then leaned against the door. The trucker moved in and put a large hand on the either side of her, caging her in.

"It's getting kind of late now. Probably don't have more than an hour of light left. We should camp out here for the night." His breath smelled of tortilla chips, warm beer, and some type of lunch-meat product.

"No, I don't think that's a good idea." Her gaze darted out to the barren desert, now painted with the deep orange and purple shadows of an approaching sunset.

"My cab is big enough for the two of us. You'll hardly know I'm there." He moved in closer, ignoring her protesting expression.

His large hands fell on her shoulders, and his grip caused her to cry out, they were still sore from the last man's great idea. Spreading her hands across his chest, she locked her arms to hold him off. Her protests only encouraged him.

"I hope you scream. I love screamers, and there's no one for miles who can hear you."

She was no match for his strength, and he pressed her back against the car and burrowed his face into the side of her neck. Crazy with fear, she did the only thing she could think of. Her knee shot up in a direct hit to his gonads.

His face filled with pain and rage, he drew back and hit her across the cheek with a wide-open hand. She fell sideways, but he snapped her back to her feet by the wrist.

"You're a damn tease, just like Beckard said!"

She stood stunned and blinking. What the hell was she hearing?

"Michael? You know Michael?"

There was a thunderous rumbling sound approaching, getting louder, and louder, until the still air vibrated with a pulsating roar. In the next instant, Eve saw the source of the sound. There was a huge motorcycle coming straight at them. It was big and black and shiny and evil-looking.

The trucker choked back the swirling dust cloud and started running toward his truck. Steven raced on his heels revving the engine for effect. Tommy Barnes dove into the cab of his truck and slammed the door solidly. As he started his engine, he bared his teeth and yelled an obscenity. Steven smiled and waved his gun before jamming it in his ankle holster. As the thick partition of dust between he and Eve settled, he wheeled the huge motorcycle around, grateful to have avoided another battle. His hand wasn't up for it. Stopping in front of Eve, his boots dropped to the ground and firmly planted themselves in the dirt.

Terror seemed to have had an interesting way of distorting Eve's perception. The man of her dreams had just rescued her, and all she could do was spotlight the bloodstained bandage wrapped around his left hand. The whine of the trucker's engine offered her some relief. At least he was gone.

"Need a lift?" He tugged his sunglasses an inch down the bridge of his nose, exposing the cinnamon-colored eyes that she had wanted to see so badly. They were friendly. At least, she thought they were.

Eve sighed, so very tired of her inability to distinguish safe from unsafe. Her lips began to tremble; she was near to tears. Then she recognized the faint scent of sandalwood clinging to his skin, and somehow it made her feel protected. He held out his wounded hand to steady her, and she swung a leg over to sit behind him. Slowly her arms encircled Steven's waist, and she leaned forward to press her breasts against him. Pressing closer as the bike began to move, she rested her cheek against the strength of his back, breathing in the sweet smell of sandalwood and hero.

The road offered her no rest. She clung to him as they rolled in and out of the sandy pockets that often threatened to halt their progress. Eve turned her head and tried to look behind them. Was the trucker in sight? Steven swerved to miss a rut, and if Eve hadn't grabbed two fistfuls of his shirt, she would have fallen off.

“Be careful! Try to keep your feet on the footrest brackets. Whatever you do, don’t let your legs touch the pipes, you’ll get a hell of a burn,” he hollered above the roar of the engine.

Eve scooted closer to his back and wrapped her arms tightly around his middle until they were like one rider. His back was warm, so warm. The musky smell of his skin made her want to rub her nose against his shoulder. With his body between her legs, she suddenly had the intense urge to press a fierce kiss to the back of his neck. Involuntary clenching commenced between her thighs, and she knew, she just knew she was in for more trouble.

## Chapter Nine

One glance at the gas gauge, and Steven cursed. He had only assumed that the lanky guy had filled his tank, but no, he was too hung up with making it nice and shiny. The gas gauge was reading below empty, and he had probably been running on fumes for who knew how long.

There was nothing ahead but empty land, sand, and rugged rocks splashed by the cool hues of coming twilight.

The engine began to cut out, and Eve lifted her head from his back.

"Why are we stopping?" he heard behind him.

"Ran out of gas," he said as he came to a stop on the parched ground next to the base of a twenty-foot bluff.

"Didn't you fill up before you came out here?"

"It's not my bike." He felt her move behind him, and then she was gone.

"Whose bike is it?"

Kicking the stand down, he got off the bike, wincing back the pain in his hand.

"It's a long story." He looked past her at the stretch of road that showed no signs of civilization.

"Well, it looks like I have a bunch of time. I'd like to hear it," she replied.

"Better gather something to make a fire; it's going to be cold tonight."

Unfastening his backpack, he sifted through the contents, guessing they would last about a day and a half. His eyes scanned the rugged turf. The sun was going down fast, and before long, it would be quite cold.

"You got a tent in there?" Eve sighed.

"I wish ... I also wish you would gather up anything that will burn. I'm not kidding about how cold it gets out here." He watched as Eve, exhausted and windblown, ambled to a cluster of Joshua trees and raked her fingers through her tousled hair. She folded her arms and hunched her shoulders against the cool twilight breeze, then began looking around for something combustible.

Steven was burning pretty good there for a while. They could have started a bonfire if hormones were flammable. His arousal at the feeling of her pressed against him sent waves of desire screaming toward one focal point, and he desperately needed a distraction. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's three-ring circus would be helpful about now. Even the image of the Flying Wallendas floating in his head proved no match for the sensation of Eve bouncing and rubbing against his back as they progressed along the rutted road.

Looking for a couple of flat rocks to start a fire, Steven would have paid any amount of money for a book of matches. Out of curiosity, he turned the key in the lock on the luggage bag. "Well, I'll be damned!" He rummaged through the contents, lantern, mini-stove, and a few unlabeled cans. The other side contained a down sleeping bag and an air mattress. He would have to thank that old lanky guy properly when he got back.

They exchanged an awkward glance. Eve was gathering desert shrub and dry Joshua leaves. The desert sky threw a slate-colored blanket over a cloudless sunset. Seeing the first star of evening, she shivered and worked faster, using her t-shirt as a makeshift basket.

Eve screamed.

Steven's head snapped up from the motorcycle, just in time to see leaves flying every which way and Eve sprinting to close the space between them. She was hurdling over brush, rocks, and a sprawling cactus.

"T-There's s-something big c-crawling over there!" she squealed as she dove at him, squeezing his neck hard enough to stop the blood flow to his head. He lifted her in one fluid movement and perched her on the seat of the motorcycle, balanced by his muscular arms.

"Wow, I never saw anyone run that fast in heels before," he croaked, still in her grip. They should add that to the training in the bureau ... desert hurdles in three-inch heels. That would definitely weed out the men from the boys.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to grab you so hard."

He felt her body slowly relax. His arms were still tightly wrapped around her waist. Desire coursed through him; she was to him like cool water on a dry sponge. The needs that he had buried so long ago suddenly sprang to life, sharply reminding him of how much he missed love in his life. He wanted to kiss her so badly his body ached.

There was a long pause as their eyes met, and with what seemed like agonizing slowness he stepped away from her and brought a palm up to her shoulder.

"Oohh!" She winced, drawing cool air through her teeth.



“What’s wrong, you get bit?” He timidly pulled the sleeve of her shirt up. The last light of day illuminated the bruises decorating her upper arm. They had taken on additional colors, green, yellow, and a touch of indigo that covered a larger area than she remembered.

Clenching his teeth caused a muscle to jerk in his jaw. “That truck driver do that to you?”

Lowering her head, her expression flushed with shame. “A lovely parting gift from my boyfriend,” she whispered.

Steven’s kind-hearted expression went unnoticed. He reached down to cradle her chin in his hand, tilting her face up to his.

“I hope you don’t think all men are like that.”

His eyes studied every centimeter of her face looking for more signs of injury, but his stare locked on her mouth.

“I’m sorry, now we can’t make a fire.” She pouted. “I dropped all of our kindling.”

A cool breeze blew her hair, and he softly brushed it back and fingered the silky lock. The idea of dying of hypothermia was dangerously appealing to him. “Not all.” He smiled.

Her cheeks flushed, and she dropped her hands in her lap. She seemed sad, as if tears would come. She quickly looked up at the sky, nearly dark. Nothing stirred, not even the crawly thing that had sent her running to ... “This is really crazy, but I don’t even know your name.”

“Steven ... Steven Malloy.” He was unable to think up an alias with such short notice.

“Last time I checked, my name was Eve Ryan, but with the way this day has gone I wouldn’t be surprised to find out I’m someone else.”

He wished she were someone else, someone other than Eve Ryan, the smuggler’s girlfriend. He wanted to be just another couple camping their way through the desert. His backpack held her file, the same file that could put her away for a very long time if she had any knowledge of Beckard’s activities.

“Do you mind if I ask why you were following that truck on a deserted back road?”

Sheepishly, she shrugged. “He told me he knew a short cut.”

“Do yourself a favor ... don’t trust anybody,” he said firmly.

“Even you?”

“Even me!”

She rubbed her arm. “Sounds like good advice,” she whispered.

She shuddered as a gust of cold wind billowed under her shirt. “You were right; it’s going to be very cold tonight.”

Steven watched her cross her arms to tightly hug her middle, not at all exciting as when he did it. Bending down, he brought up the miniature lantern and turned the switch.

The silhouetted desert terrain completely disappeared, enclosing them in a luminous sphere of light.

"Oh, good, now we can watch each other freeze to death," she said, with her teeth chattering.

"Not so fast." Smiling with anticipation, he bent over the motorcycle like a magician pulling a rabbit out of his hat. The soft glow of the lantern lessened the impact of the abrupt desert chill.

"It's not as nice as a fire, but this camping stove will help." He groaned as a pain shot through his hand.

"I think you should let me look at that."

"Let's set up camp first, then you can play nurse."

She frowned prettily and shrugged. Steven huffed into the nozzle of the air mattress and over puffed-up cheeks watched every move Eve made.

Absorbed in the windfall the luggage bag offered, she inspected a strange-looking device.

"This might help."

He rolled his eyes. "A bellows pump."

Their fingers touched as she handed it to him, and he jerked back as if he had touched an open flame.

"Not much of a camper, are you?" she teased.

He answered with an embarrassed smile. "No, I found out long ago that I don't like sleeping in the dirt."

"Blanca, that's my sister, and I used to go camping with my father." For moments, her stare lost focus.

"And?"

She blinked. "Oh, yeah, we did all the work, and he went fishing." She brought her hand up to massage her shoulder. She quickly continued, "I'm on my way to see Blanca now. She lives in Sedona."

"Are you and your sister close?" Steven asked, without looking at her.

"She's my best friend," she said softly.

He shot her a glance. "Must be nice ... havin' a best friend, I mean."

He peddled the bellows pump. Slowly the mattress took form, a mattress for one. This would be interesting. Thoughts of lying on it, naked, with his full weight pinning her down, emerged in his mind. What was this strange chemistry between them? But maybe it was only with him.

"One, one, one ... one spoon, one fork, one cup, everything for one," she announced as she sifted through the luggage bag. "Don't you have any friends?"

"I told you, this isn't my bike." Not bothering to mention it would be stocked the same if it were.

"Which do you want for dessert ... chocolate or strawberry?" She waved packets of Astronaut Ice Cream in the air.

"Hmm, I'd kind of like to have the main course before dessert."

She shrugged, but the grin didn't leave her face.

Steven didn't care if she was one or the other. How about both?

"Does this stuff have a shelf life? Here are some roast chicken freeze-dried food sticks dated 1993!"

"I think there are some cans in the other side. Pot luck sounds good."

"Oh, wait! Here's a magazine with some handy decorating tips. *Sixty-five Ways to Brighten up Your Desert Campsite*, by Martha Stewart," she teased and then looked up to see if he was smiling.

He started to whistle softly, then stopped. "I did go camping once," he said.

"Just once?"

He chuckled. "Once was all it took to prove to me that it wasn't something I enjoyed. Surviving a rainstorm, losing all the food to some renegade black bears, and spending the night in a collapsed pup tent wasn't quite the fun we had hoped it would be."

Eve raised an eyebrow. "We?"

"Just me," he corrected.

Pushing the nozzle in, he tossed the mattress to the ground and bent to give it a firm push.

"How do you like your mattress ... firm or sof--?"

Steven glanced up to see Eve's horrified expression, exaggerated by the shadows cast from the lantern light. Her mouth was open, and her eyes hollowed like some fright-carved pumpkin. She was hunched over Dolan's bag. He stepped quickly, but she had Carter's Walther aimed directly at his chest before he could reach her.

"This bag looks like you're ready for lots of friends to stop by," her voice was thick with fear. Her hand shook so hard he thought her wrist might break.

Stiff-legged, he skidded across dry pebbles to an abrupt halt and raised his hands slowly as his stomach did a double flip.

Feet apart, Eve instinctively used her other hand to brace the gun, and for a moment he thought she might actually know how to fire the thing.

"Eve, before you do anything rash, let me explain." Keeping his voice soft and reassuring, he took some small steps forward to reach her before she could take the safety off.

"I'm familiar with that tone of voice," she snarled. "It's the voice men use to gain your trust. Just before they bash your head against some wall. I'm not falling for it." Readjusting her stance, she stood firm.

"Men?" Steven asked and took another step forward.

"Stop right there, Calvin Klein!!"

"The name's Steven."

"I don't care what your name is. I've had all I'm going to take!"

"Look, Eve ..." He knew there was no other way. "... I'm an FBI agent investigating your boyfriend, Michael Beckard." Gravel crunched beneath his boot as he took another small step toward her, then waited to see if she could absorb what he was saying. "If you will allow me, I will show you my identification."

Dumbfounded, she stared at him, blinking and paralyzed, and then finally yelled to the now star-speckled desert sky. "Does everyone in this Godforsaken desert know Michael Beckard? Am I trapped in some crazy parallel universe, where he is the Supreme Being?"

The safety clicked as she thumbed it off. Still trembling, she kept the gun aimed at shoulder level.

Steven froze. She obviously knew how to throw a safety.

"I know what he did to you, Eve." He slowly lowered his arms keeping his gaze steady on her eyes.

"Michael? Yeah, I picked this wonderfully sensitive man to settle down with and got myself slapped around and nearly raped," she agreed glumly.

In a low, gentler tone, "No ... I know what your father did." He continued with as much sympathy in his voice that he could apply. "I know he used to beat you up, I know you've never felt safe, and I know what that did to you, Eve." He wanted to rush up and hold her in his arms, to soften her pain. It must be agony for her to face these emotions out here in the desert, in the cold with a stranger.

Her eyes began to tear. She tried to blink them back, but they spilled over and rolled down her cheeks.

"That's why you chose someone like Michael to be with." His eyes filled with compassion. "Let me help you, Eve. You've been going through this all alone. You don't have to."

"He chose me!" she insisted, lowering the gun a notch. For moments she was unable to speak, and then she began to cry. "I wasn't even attracted to him. It's just that he respected my privacy."

"You mean he wasn't interested enough in you to ask any questions."

Ruthlessly, Steven was destroying her fortress, exploding it to bits, littering the basin floor with every dark feeling that had festered within her for years.

“Eve, you’re bright, talented, and gorgeous.” He took another small step forward. “You just bought into someone else’s lie. There is a part of you that knows what I’m saying is true. You’re being led around by your emotions for years and emotions don’t have an IQ.”

“Are you saying I’m emotionally stupid?”

“No!” he yelled. Then he dropped the volume of his voice a few notches. “You’ve been taken hostage by a lie. You blame yourself for the past,” Steven whispered into the darkness. “Eve, your father didn’t hit you because of who you are. He hit you because of who he is. Do you blame the little girl in the restaurant for what her father did to her? She is just like you, Eve ... just like you.”

Eve blinked furiously, in a vain attempt to clear her vision. Wiping her cheek with the back of her hand, she looked at the gun with an expression of disbelief.

“I ... no, it’s not her fault, she’s just a sweet little ...”

Slowly, lowering her hand, she unclenched her fingers and stiffly released their grip on the handle of the gun. It slipped, to dangle loosely from her fingertips.

“... I just wanted to help her.”

With eyelids fluttering, her knees buckled, and she began to collapse.

Steven barely felt the ground beneath his boots as he raced to catch her.

## Chapter Ten

“Are you okay?”

Eve blinked back the light of the lantern. “Uh, I think so. I’ve never fainted before.” She burrowed deeper into the sleeping bag that covered her.

“I’m glad you’re not hurt, and I’m very glad you decided not to shoot me,” he said softly.

Kneeling beside her, Steven couldn’t help himself. He blew warm breath on her hand and then cupped her cheek lightly, brushing his thumb across her soft, tear-streaked skin. His desire to protect her overwhelmed him. His powerlessness reminded him he couldn’t protect her from herself. She looked like a child, so soft and helpless, with eyelashes still wet from her tears, casting spiky shadows on her cheeks.

He suspected Eve had never allowed a man to comfort her, but there was a first time for everything. He helped her to a sitting position and was caught by surprise when she reached out welcoming arms and circled his neck. She pulled him slightly off balance to support his weight with her slender shoulders. His hands slowly slid behind her back. He closed his eyes tight and pressed her body to his strong chest.

Not a good idea, he thought, and leaned back to touch his forehead to hers. He only meant to comfort her, brushing his lips to the tip of her nose. He couldn’t have been more surprised when she leaned forward and lightly touched her lips to his. Steven pulled back momentarily, running his tongue over his lower lip. God, she tasted good. He felt a brief moment of guilt for taking advantage of her obvious vulnerability, but the desire in her eyes melted away all reason. Before allowing himself another thought, he seized her mouth in a kiss so deep, so lustful, that they ceased to breathe. Her soft groan acted as a conductor, sending currents of warmth to every inch of his body. He slid his tongue against the slick inner curve of her lower lip and then pushed it across the firm, wet cushion of her tongue.

She drew her lips from his. "Can I see your ID now?" she murmured while gazing into his eyes.

He smiled, dug into his back pocket without widening the space between them, and handed her his wallet. She flipped it open as he brushed her hair back, and she felt his open mouth, hot against the side of her neck. Peering over his shoulder, she inspected his credentials.

"Mmmm, FBI agent." She shivered as he softly kissed his way to her ear.

"Yes." His voice muffled against her smooth, soft skin.

"Department of Justice." Her eyes lost focus as his breath blew hot swirls in her ear.

"Yes." He drew her soft lobe into his sexy mouth.

"Investigation," she whispered, sucking air through her teeth.

"Yes," he said, dragging his lips to the soft flesh under her chin.

"Thirty-seven years old." She struggled to see over the top of his head, as he tasted the pulse at the base of her throat.

"Yes."

He took the wallet from her and tossed it aside. His mouth covered hers to cut off her protest, and he kissed her deeply.

Eve threw back the edge of the sleeping bag to invite him in, and it took him all of ten seconds to toss off his boots and join her within the goose down warmth.

"God, yes!" he whispered under his breath.

For several long moments, she kissed him, hungrily tunneling her hands through his hair, taking in the rich sandalwood scent each time a blast of cold air invaded the bag. It was as if she couldn't get enough of him, like she wanted to devour him. Her breath hitched, as her breasts flattened against his chest, he could feel her heart thumping a primal rhythm to his. His skin tingled hot everywhere she touched.

He pulled her to his chest, anxiously caressing the small of her back. Stroking her slender waist, he slid his hand slowly up her ribs to cup her breast. As his lips pressed against her throat, her muffled groan sent currents of simmering passion coursing through his veins. He smiled, her hips pressed forward against him, trembling and insisting as his thumb circled her peaked nipple and then abruptly stopped.

"What's this?" he whispered hoarsely.

"What?" she answered against his lips.

Glancing down at her pocket. "Oh, it's just something I found in the desert," she said, softly kissing the underside of his jaw.

"Show me."

"Now?"

"Yes"

Somehow that word didn't excite her the way it had before. Propping herself on one elbow, she dug into her pocket and pulled out the quartz rocks she'd found under her car. She poured them into his hand and reached up to caress his face.

"Do you really want to look at my rock collection now?" she sighed.

Without answering, he pulled the sleeping bag back to move closer to the lantern.

A frozen gust of wind caught her breath as it rushed in to take his place.

Holding them up to the light one by one, with one eye shut he examined the opaque stones.

"Eve, do you know what these are?"

"No, I thought my sister would know." She smoothed the sleeping bag and patted it, hoping he would return to pick up where they left off.

"Where exactly did you find them?" The squint of his eye raised his voice a notch.

"Under my flat tire." She flopped back onto the bag in frustration. Her jealousy burned toward the tiny pebbles.

"We have to get back to your car." He headed toward his backpack

"What? Now?" she asked, as she bolted upright.

"It's better to travel at night. Tomorrow will be too hot, and it's probably not more than five miles."

"Five miles! You're crazy! I'll wait for you here." She burrowed deeply under the warm down cover.

"No way would I leave a woman alone in the desert!"

Eve sat up quickly. She had barely slipped her shoes on before she rose and marched over to where he was standing. She glared up at him, crossing her arms, too angry to be cold.

"Fine, I'm ready! Now you won't have to worry about leaving any woman alone in the desert."

With an enormous grin, he reached out and pulled her to his chest. He kissed her hard before she could say another word. Her lips, already accustomed to his, were slightly parted; the warm reward of his tongue pressing against hers made her knees turn to butter.

Pulling back slightly, he leaned his forehead to hers, his hot breath branded her lips. "I don't want to leave you in the desert, Eve."

He kissed the end of her nose, now pink from the cold, then her cheek, followed by an achingly sweet kiss that settled on the soft cushion of her lips. She kissed him back, hoping he'd change his mind and stay.

"We have to get going," he insisted. "Are you okay to walk?"

"What is so damned important about getting to my car tonight?" she asked in a frustrated tone.



"These rocks, as you call them, happen to be uncut diamonds, and I suspect there are more where these came from."

"But, how? Michael, you think?"

"Yeah, well that would be my conclusion."

He looked deeply into her eyes as if he were reading the instructions to defuse an explosive and then nodded slightly as if he had found the answer. "Ready to go?" His lips formed a hard line as he flexed his hand a couple of times.

"No more excuses! I'm changing that bandage before we go anywhere. Where is your first-aid kit?"

Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out the small white box. Eve snatched it from him and pointed for him to set down on the mattress next to the lantern.

"Yes, ma'am." His voice wavered as she pushed him down hard on the mattress.

Opening the kit, she took out the small bottle of antiseptic.

"So, tell me how you hurt your hand, Steven." She gently untied the shirt fabric, scented slightly with some indefinable cologne.

"Paper cut." He clenched his teeth against the pain.

Slowly, unwinding the cloth, she stopped and gave him one of her curl-up-and-die looks.

"Okay, I had a disagreement with a couple of co-workers."

He winced as the wound was exposed. It was a deep cut, stretching from the mounds of Jupiter all the way to Mercury, at the base of his fingers. Eve gently dabbed away the dried blood with a gauze pad soaked in antiseptic.

"Knife?" Eve asked as she tossed the bloodstained gauze and doused the antiseptic on a fresh pad.

Steven nodded solemnly as he looked closely at the ragged slice adorning the upper part of his palm.

"I can't see what I'm doing with your head in my way," Eve scolded.

Steven leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss before pulling back.

"You know, this will totally screw up an accurate palm reading don't you?" She grinned.

"It's already red." He smiled back.

Tears began to well up in her eyes again. She swallowed hard and cleared her throat. "You must know a lot about me, working for the FBI and all," she said.

"Not as much as I usually know on a case."

Eve continued to dab away at the cut, making sure she had touched every centimeter with the antiseptic.

"My father taught me some valuable lessons," she said.

"Leave things as I find them, presumably untouched, as if I had never been there ... or anywhere for that matter." She sounded like she was performing an oral report for speech class. "Be invisible, cover your tracks, and never show anyone your dirty laundry. These are the laws of the world that my father instilled in me and ... they work"

"Do they?" Steven asked.

Her eyes began to fill again. She drew in a ragged breath. "Steven, how do you know about my father?" She forced a smile. Suddenly her dabbing became less gentle.

"Ouch! It's my job." He pulled back slightly from the steel-like grip she had on his hand.

"I'm sorry! This is such a tough thing for me to talk about," she said, stroking his wrist. "I thought you were investigating Michael, not my father." She released his hand and began to dig in the first-aid kit for closures to seal the wound.

"Yeah, that's true, but since you live with Beckard, you became an automatic suspect. Suspects are investigated." He gently flexed his palm after each closure she applied.

"Wait a minute, I don't live with Michael, and he doesn't live with ... suspect? Steven, I hope you don't think I'm involved in anything illegal, do you?" She stopped twining the gauze around his hand. Her eyes grew wide with innocence.

"If you were, I would know it." He ripped a long piece of tape with his teeth and handed it to her.

"Do you think that truck driver has anything to do with any of this?" she asked.

"I don't know for sure." Steven watched her wrap the tape smoothly around his hand. "But I'm damn well going to find out."

Steven transferred the contents of Dolan's bag to his backpack, adding another ten pounds to his load. Dolan and Carter were most likely searching for him by now; he hoped he wouldn't have to shoot either of them. His beef wasn't with them. They were blindly following Judd's orders like tweedle-dumb and tweedle-dumber. It was Judd Raymond he wanted to get his hands on. The thought of shooting him right between those wide-set eyes of his brought a broad smile to his lips.

"What's so funny?" Eve looked up at him, one eyebrow raised. She shivered as she crossed her arms tightly around her waist.

"I was just imagining what I was going to do to the guy that got me into this mess." He shuffled through the backpack and pulled out a pair of his socks.

Leading Eve by the hand, he sat her down on the mattress and knelt to pull off her shoes. Only slightly limited by his wound, he tugged the socks onto her feet, then stretched and, with warm hands, smoothed them up her calves as far as they would go.

It was a snug fit, but her shoes slipped on over the soft cotton knit.

"I imagine things I would like to do to my father all the time" she said in a wistful tone, then tried wiggling her toes. "Just like Cinderella." She clasped his hand and rose to her feet.

"Guess that makes me Prince Charming." He kissed the back of her hand, her forearm, and then pulled her into his warm embrace. Her shivering stopped.

"Steven, do we really need to go now? ... I mean, we could stay here tonight, my car will still be there tomorrow."

Bending down, he picked up the edge of the sleeping bag.

"Your cape, Your Highness."

She gathered the bag up around her shoulders and let the bulk of it drag behind. The thought of walking five miles, dragging this sleep sack, was a tad more than she was willing to do.

Steven shrugged the cumbersome backpack into place. His wide shoulders eased the weight up effortlessly behind his muscular back. He gathered up the camp stove and lantern and motioned for her to follow. A chilled breeze ruffled his hair and stung his cheeks. He glanced at his watch to mark their time.

"It's eight o'clock now. We should make it back to your car by ten-thirty." He sounded like an FBI agent again.

"Why me, God?" she whispered, glancing up with a sigh of surrender.

Still, there was a part of her that was enjoying the hell out of this intrigue. Here she was, out in the desert alone with the sexiest man she had ever laid eyes on. An FBI agent, no less, who just three feet in front of her, carried an arsenal of weapons, some of which were deadly enough to vaporize her heart.

## Chapter Eleven

Warm from the hike, Eve ditched the sleeping bag. She wished she could do the same with her shoes. Thank God, they were on flat ground, although the road had patches of thick sand that gave way and crunched beneath her soles. She could only imagine what her feet would have looked like without the protection of Steven's socks. Even so, she felt several places where the first few layers of skin had worn away, and the blisters that had formed would soon give way to throbbing sores. She pressed forward, keeping his keychain flashlight focused on the perfect butt filling the worn denim jeans directly in front of her. It kept her going like a carrot would a burro.

All of a sudden, her thoughts drifted to Sara.

"Did you have a chance to report that jerk to children's social services?" she asked, directing her question above his backpack.

"I called, but got a message, they must have been out to lunch. I identified myself and described the situation and then gave them his license plate number."

"Oh, they're out to lunch all right, and I bet they won't do a damn thing to help little Sara."

She fought to contain the anger that began to rise to her head. Social services had never helped her with their endless stream of paperwork and visits to question her father. He was able to talk himself out of anything with that smooth tone of his. They remained oblivious to the impact this man had had on her life, whether it was broken bones, untold bruises, or even the diagnoses from the emergency room doctor, who determined that the last blow to her abdomen would render her forever childless.

Steven swiveled back to catch a glimpse of Eve. "How do you know her name?"

"We met briefly, in the ladies' room, back at that restaurant. I knew something was wrong the moment I saw her. I felt this incredible urge to protect her." Her voice broke.

"I know the feeling, and I promise you, I will personally see to it that she gets help." He threw his voice over the top of his load.

Eve made a vow that, even if he didn't take action, she would, and she'd take great pleasure in making Sara's father the most miserable man on earth, with or without social services.

"Are we there yet?" Unable to feel her feet at all, she imagined looking down to find she was walking on cold, bloody stumps.

Steven stopped so abruptly that she nearly bumped into him. He slowly turned back. Eve, wide-eyed and ready, drew back quickly beyond his reach and brushed up against the spikes of a Joshua tree. "Ouch!"

He cautiously held out his hand, as he would to a wounded animal.

Eve lowered her eyes and burned with embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry about this; you must be exhausted. You want to take a break?" He caressed her cheek, his expression apologetic.

"I don't think these shoes were intended for hiking." She pointed to the problem. Her feet were bulging and swollen over the top rim of the leather, and now a patch of red oozed through the white knit on her right foot.

"Dear God, Eve, why didn't you say something!" He threw off his pack and dropped to her feet.

"If you take them off, I'll never get them back on." She groaned as he lightly laid cool hands to her ankles.

Light broke all around them. They turned their heads, shielding their eyes from the headlights, not more than ten feet in front of them. Eve's muscles tensed, Steven gave her ankle a reassuring squeeze, and for a brief moment she felt protected.

"Where's that hot-shit motorcycle, of yours?" The sinister voice tore through the desert silence, followed by a snide laugh.

Steven glanced toward his backpack that lay in the shadows just behind him.

"I wouldn't try reaching for it, if I were you," the snarling voice warned.

The large, dark form walked slowly toward them, armed and menacing.

"I think we have some unfinished business, Miss Ryan." His tone was smooth and cool. Eve recognized the voice. It belonged to the trucker, Tommy Barnes. Her heart sank, as she strained to make out his face.

The trucker stepped behind Steven.

"Put your goddamn hands behind your back!"

Slowly, with his eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched, Steven obeyed the instruction.

"Guess those guys got a lick in before you slashed their asses back in that restroom. I thought I had you locked in there good and tight." He wound a nylon cord around Steven's wrists, tight enough to cut off the circulation.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Steven growled, flexing his wrists to stretch the cord. His eyes were locked on the trucker's knife.

"Heard it on the local news -- couple of guys found strung up and stabbed to death in a men's room. They said some FBI agent went crazy and was running around the desert on a stolen motorcycle, armed and dangerous." He smiled and stepped back to face Steven.

Steven's head snapped around to Eve. She was wearing the same expression she'd worn when she found the guns back at the campsite. The harsh headlights emphasized her eyes, huge and frightened, against her pale face. Lips trembling, she panted in deep breaths, as if someone had punched her sharply in the solar plexus.

"Eve, it isn't true! Don't listen! I didn't kill anyone!"

The trucker brought his leg up fast. His boot caught Steven under the jaw, sending him reeling back into the dirt.

Eve's eyes darted from Steven to the trucker, and now there were two.

"Well, looky here!" The trucker knelt down and opened the backpack to find the guns and ammo. He whistled at the stash and pulled out a Walther. Languidly wetting his thumb, he ran it up and down the glittering barrel as he looked up at Eve. His evil smile sent ten kinds of shivers up her spine. She wasn't any less disgusted than when he changed her tire, but right now, she was more concerned with not wetting her pants.

Throwing the safety, he cocked the pistol, making it ready to shoot, and motioned for Eve to walk to the car.

She wasn't sure her throbbing feet would cooperate, but she managed to stumble to the Mustang. The top was down, and a warm feeling washed over her, as if she were being reunited with an old friend. Looking back toward the road, she watched as the trucker hauled Steven to his feet and pushed him toward the car.

The trucker flashed his light on Eve, waiting and shivering by the side of the car. She watched as he gaped, his body visibly shuddered, but it didn't seem to be from the cold. He looked as if he was taking pleasure from the mix of pain and fright painted on her face. His light traveled down, exposing the pebble hard nipples that emphasized the curve of her breasts, he allowed the beam to crawl leisurely down past her slender waist and then trained it on her hips. The trucker's jaw knotted and unknotted. His stare was more than hawk-like. It was predatory.

"You drive, asshole!" He shoved Steven into the car, sending him sprawling across the driver's seat and halfway into the passenger side. He walked back and returned with the lantern and the backpack, tossing them into the backseat.

"It's going to be difficult to steer like this." Steven grunted to pull himself in an upright position.

The trucker pulled out his nasty-looking knife and sliced through the cord. The pressure to Steven's wrists immediately released; blood pounded back into his fingers in a warm rush. He placed his hands on the wheel, hugely perplexed at being appointed the designated driver. He assumed the trucker must have been thinking with his dick.

"One wrong move, and I'll blow a hole in your skull, right after I make you watch me rape and kill the little lady here." The lantern cast an ominous reflection off the gun.

"You get in the backseat with me, darlin'." He opened the passenger door, shoved the seat forward and motioned for her to get in.

Eve reluctantly stepped into the backseat, avoiding eye contact with Steven. Just the relief she had from getting off her feet made her want to cry. For a moment, she considered taking off her shoes, but then she decided against it. She might need to hobble off quickly if she got the chance. Scooting as far from the trucker as the car allowed, she sat rigid and cold. She tried desperately not to think, her mind didn't have anything positive to say about any of this, anyway.

The trucker bent down and pulled something out from under the seat. Uncapping the bottle of Jack Daniels, he took a long draw and swallowed loudly. "Turn this thing around and drive until I tell you to stop."

Steven started the car and eased the clutch out. The engine purred. Unable to resist, he eased in the clutch and punched the gas once to hear the engine rev; it was like music to his ears.

"None of that shit, you asshole, just drive the car!"

He glanced into the rearview mirror, but it was too dark to see.

Turning the wheel, he eased into second gear. He noticed her car was as responsive to his touch as she was. He glanced at his watch. It was ten-thirty p.m. Without his massive daily dose of caffeine, he was beginning to get a headache. He must have been surviving solely on adrenaline and hormones.

The trucker jabbed Eve in the ribs with his bottle, then held it up in front of her. She shook her head and stared out toward the darkness. She shivered as the chilly wind tousled her hair. Leaning back against the seat, she turned her head and pretended to sleep. She prayed for more wind to block out the heady mix of whisky and truck grease. She heard him take a couple of long gulps from his bottle, and then his rough hand squeezed her leg.

"I think you should have a drink," he said in her ear and then waved the gun in her face.

She turned her head and looked into his black eyes and saw that they meant business, so she slowly took the bottle keeping her eyes glued on him and used her shirt to wipe the

mouth. Taking the tiniest sip, she felt the warm liquid journey all the way to her gut. She coughed and offered the bottle back.

“More.” His glassy-eyed grin repulsed her.

She sipped again, more than before, choking as the blistering alcohol traveled downward, then emanated like a starburst from her center.

“Like this!” He grabbed the bottle and chugged three or four gulps. “Ah!”

He handed her the bottle again, and as she lifted the hem of her shirt to wipe away his stinking bacteria, he quickly slid his hand up and clutched her breast. His eyes turned to slits, and his mouth opened slightly as if he just slithered into a bubbling Jacuzzi. “Aaaaaah.”

Eve grabbed at his hand, but this just caused him to squeeze her harder and then slink his left hand around her shoulders to give her another view of the pistol.

“Shhh! Hold still.” Hot whiskey breath seared her ear. “Just drink!” he whispered hoarsely.

Trembling, she brought the bottle to her lips as his hot, callused fingers massaged her breast and painfully pinched at her nipple. He leaned close and licked her face from her jaw line to the corner of her eye. The groan that came from deep in his throat infuriated her.

“Please stop!” she pleaded.

Steven’s eyes tensely switched from the road to the rearview mirror.

“I told you before, I love screamers. Scream for me, baby,” Barnes slurred.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you!” Eve screamed and slammed the bottle against his forehead with a thunk. His eyes widened, he released her, but he was too drunk to wrench his hand out from under her shirt before she swung it again. This time, the bottle broke, splashing the golden liquid in all directions. He gasped loudly as the fumes overpowered him, and he smashed his face into her shirt, to mop the burn from his eyes.

She growled and shoved his head from her chest like she was passing a basketball, then slammed back hard on the arm he had behind her. Eve reached out and bashed his wrist, over and over against the rim of the door to knock the pistol from his hand. He roared as he madly groped for his knife.

Steven stomped on the brake and spun the steering wheel sharply to the left. The car shuddered and skidded into a spin. Eve screamed, clutching wildly for something, anything other than the trucker, to anchor herself.

With teeth bared, he raised his knife, but the force of the spinning car slammed him back against the seat in a drunken daze. A large plume of dust rose up and surrounded them as the car came to a stop.

Steven swiftly jumped the seat and landed several punches to the trucker’s face. He wrenched the knife from his hand and looked up to see Eve’s face. All of its color was completely drained ... it looked like fear ... or shock ... her eyes empty and glazed ... for



moments she was silent as a crypt, then she burst out laughing at the top of her lungs. The sound of it cut sharply through the still night.

Steven allowed her to laugh it all out while he tied the trucker's hands up behind his back with a piece of his own nylon cord. He tied his ankles and shoved him down on the floor in the backseat so he wouldn't bleed on the upholstery.

Eve finally fell silent and watched as he worked, staring blankly. The car wasn't any more responsive than she was at this point, he couldn't get the engine to turn over. No use searching for the diamonds tonight, he would have to wait for daylight. The trucker should be sober and ready to answer some questions by then.

Setting the gear in neutral, he pushed his weight against the inside of the door and turned the wheel. The car crept forward, inch by inch, until it was to the far right of the narrow road. He felt the bandage on his hand turn hot and slick.

There was a light a couple hundred feet back. He noticed it as they drove by. It could have been some campers. The trick would be to get Eve to walk back with him.

Opening the car door, he slowly pulled the seat forward.

"Eve, come with me, sweetie."

She stared right through him. He took her wrist and slowly pulled her toward him, taking her weight against his hip. The minute she stepped foot outside on the hard, sun-baked sand, she screamed.

Geez! He'd forgotten about her feet. He scooped her up and cradled her in his arms.

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked drowsily.

"No, sweetie, I'm not going to kill you." He nuzzled his nose at the hair around her temple.

"God, you scared me," he whispered. "I was so afraid of losing you."

"Me, too," she mumbled.

He sat her in the driver's seat and then went to search for the gun in the road. Led by the lantern's reflection, he blew the dust off the Walther and shoved it in his waistband. His body shuddered back the cold.

Taking his backpack from the backseat, he stuffed his gun in it before he adjusted it on his back. No sense scaring folks, with the false news reports out and all. He needed sleep and so did Eve. He prayed that the light he saw would be someplace to rest.

When he got around to the front of the car, Eve was sound asleep, in a fetal position. Her skin was cold to his touch, and she shivered slightly as he gathered her up again in his arms. He kneed the door closed and held her close to his chest using his body heat and breath to warm her.

He adjusted her weight, held her closer, and kissed her hair.

"Are you going to kill me now?" she whispered.

“Just sleep, honey, I’ve got you. I’ll take care of you.”

## Chapter Twelve

Steven knocked on the door to the cabin with his boot. The light he had noticed from the road was the little yellow no-bug porch light that glowed softly against the green-painted door. There was no answer. He kicked the door a little harder.

"Hello!" he called out.

"Hello," Eve croaked groggily.

He walked completely around the perimeter of the cabin, the lantern shown into the dark, sparsely furnished rooms. When he was satisfied that no one was home, he sat Eve down in the rocking chair on the porch. Raising his foot to kick the door in, he decided to try it first.

The knob turned. "Hello!"

Eve's head jerked up. "Hello," she answered.

With lantern in hand, Steven lifted her from the chair, and her arms circled his neck tightly.

"Wheee!" She laughed as he carried her across the threshold.

He shook his head. She wouldn't be feeling this good in the morning.

After closing the door with the heel of his boot, he walked slowly past a large, cushy beige couch and an empty fireplace. The cabin was bigger than it looked from the outside. Hardwood floors reflected the glow of the lantern and surrounded a couple of brown throw rugs. He settled Eve into a pushed-back recliner in the living room and checked out the rest of the place.

Two bedrooms, one belonged to a child, clean and tidy. A small yellow kitchen with a homemade "Who killed the Cook?" plaque above the stove. No phone, but thank God for

indoor plumbing; he would have killed for a shower. Well ... maybe kill was too strong a word.

When he returned to the living room, he stared down at Eve. Taking the first-aid kit from his backpack, he sat on the edge of the couch. Her feet needed tending and so did his hand. He looked down at his hand. The dirty bandage was soaked in blood.

"Guess I should take care of this first."

He bent over and gave Eve a gentle kiss on the lips. Her sexy groan resonated in his gut first and then coiled downward. He ran a thumb down her cheek as one corner of his mouth turned up. He quietly stepped back, turned, and grabbed the first-aid kit, some fresh clothes from his pack, and headed to the bathroom.

With hands spread in front of him, he propped himself against the cool tiles. Steven let the hot, steamy water splash over his head and watched the bright red rivulets run down the white tile from under his hand. They fingered out into small streams, then came back together to join the larger ones and turned to pink swirls that disappeared down the drain. He could have stayed there in the warmth forever, but he washed and shampooed quickly to get back to Eve.

He dried and dressed his wound before stepping into some briefs and soft, worn jeans. With the heel of his hand, he squeaked a circle of steam off the worn, cracked mirror over the sink and stared at himself.

"You're stranded in a desert cabin with the beautiful woman you've had under surveillance all week, and all you can think is 'I need a shave'?"

He opened the door. A billow of steam preceded him, stepping quietly to the living room to get the razor from his backpack.

Stopping dead in his tracks, he saw that the recliner was empty. The back of his neck crawled ... he whirled around in time to lunge forward and grab Eve's hands in full swing. A baseball bat fell and clattered loudly against the hardwood floor.

"What the hell are you doing?" He gripped her wrists, threw them up over her head, and backed her up against the wall.

"Saving my life!" Eve snapped.

"I'm the last one you need to worry about!" he shouted back.

"You told me not to trust anyone, including you!" Tears sprang from her eyes.

He paused, lowering his voice, "Yes, that's true, but I'm asking you to trust me now."

"I don't know how to trust!" she cried.

"Yes, you do! Look at me, Eve! You can trust me! I promise you, I'm not crazy, and I didn't kill anyone!"

She stared long moments into his eyes and then broke into tears. He slowly lowered her hands and wrapped his arms tightly around her waist. She went limp against his warm chest and cried hard on his shoulder.

"I'll bet you're tired of me crying on you." Her breath hitched as she used her hair to wipe the wetness from his shoulder.

He kissed her cheek softly and smoothed her hair back. His affection broke her heart.

"Why does this hurt so much?" she sobbed again.

"Has a man ever shown you tenderness, Eve?" His arms tightened around her.

She dropped her arms and stepped back. She looked at him with years of sadness in her eyes.

Steven frowned. "Are you okay?"

"I'd kill for a shower," she rasped. "Where are we anyway?" She sniffed back another sob.

"I'm not sure. Looks like the owners of this cabin are away, hopefully for the night. Your car is down on the road. Here, the bathroom is all warm for you." He took a step toward her, and she backed up.

"Okay, Eve, you take your shower, and then we'll have a look at those feet." He went to his backpack and handed her a clean sweatshirt.

Eve opened the door of the steam-filled bathroom. Cool air rushed in to meet her, causing her nipples to protrude beneath Steven's soft, fleecy sweatshirt. There was a fire burning in the fireplace, filling the air with the scent of pine. The couch was pulled out, with fresh sheets and a pillow. The other pillow was tossed on the recliner.

"Hungry?" Steven was stirring something on the stove. "Sorry, this is all I could find on such short notice; somebody killed the cook."

"Huh?" Her eyes widened.

"Just joking." He couldn't help but notice that his sweatshirt looked better on her. Her damp auburn hair had begun to dry in loose curls around her face, framing a girlish appearance. He gazed at the lovely curve of her backside as she stood in front of the fire. There was nothing girlish about that; she was definitely all woman. Unfortunately, she had the look of a woman betrayed. A woman who would have to be shown the opposite side of the coin, and he figured he was just the man to do it. He filled two mugs with hot tomato soup.

"Soup du jour, m'lady."

Eve smiled weakly. "Thank you." She kept her eyes down.

"Let me have a look at those feet." He palmed her shoulders and gently pushed her down on the pull-out bed. Kneeling down, he settled her foot in his lap, resisting the

temptation to stroke the silky soft skin behind her knee. Resisting didn't stop him from becoming aroused, and he hoped she wouldn't notice.

He pressed a thumb against the soft flesh, checking its resilience. The swelling had gone down, and the blood-red ring just above her toes had faded to crimson. He lightly dabbed the antiseptic cream on the raw welts with the tip of his finger. His brow furrowed over his nose, as he became aware of an odd defect.

"Your toes, they are ..."

Eve's hand shot out to cover them. "I was born with it, both feet."

Steven smiled into her eyes and gently removed her hand. "Let's see."

He massaged the cream above her perfectly formed big toe and then traced his thumb over the next two toes that were fused at the base, like Siamese twins.

"My brother used to call me tree frog." Eve sighed and brought the other foot up to show him.

Steven grinned, looking at one foot, then the other. "But it's hardly noticeable; you would have to point it out for someone to see it."

"Well, it's not something I point out, believe me. I hate them." She reached forward to cover them again.

He removed her hand. "Tree frog?" He softly chuckled as he studied them.

"I used to spend a lot of time in our elm tree. It was the only place I could be all by myself. Just me, a stick of charcoal, and my sketchpad." Her eyes shadowed as they met his. "Until my father chopped it down."

Eve brought the mug to her lips to take a sip. She didn't think it was likely that Steven would be tossing his empty mug over his shoulder to ravish her, not after setting eyes on her ugly webbed toes.

The sound of a coyote's yipping caused Eve to flinch and hold her breath.

"What if the owners come back?" She looked scared.

"We'll just tell them our car broke down," Steven said through a smile. "The one down there on the road, with the guy tied up in the backseat."

She smiled nervously and took another sip of her soup.

Steven polished off the rest of his soup. "Done?"

She handed him her cup, then lay back on her elbows watching him rinse the dishes. Well, he certainly was handy to have around. She wondered if he would breed well in captivity, but then, it really didn't matter; she couldn't breed.

Steven came back and sat on the edge of the bed. He marveled at her strength, beauty, and how so many things not-so-nice had contributed to who she was at that very moment.

The fire crackled and bathed her in the warm, flickering glow. He wanted so much to twine his fingers in her long, damp hair, kiss her neck, and tell her that everything was going to be all right. Then again, that could be a lie.

"It's midnight, we'd better get some sleep; the owner may come back early."

Eve nodded. She appeared to be holding back more tears and scooted under the covers.

"You want to talk about it?" he asked, reaching over to caress her shoulder.

"Talk about what? How screwed up I am?" She turned over on her stomach.

He fingered her damp curls, then stroked her hair.

"Not exactly, but I thought we could talk about the good reasons you have for not trusting me."

She shrugged without looking at him. "I trust you," she said flatly.

"Would you like me to hold you for awhile?" he whispered. "Sometimes it helps just being close to someone. You've been through a lot today."

Eve snapped her head around and glared at him. "Well, it never helped me to be close to anyone before!"

"Well, this is now, and you're with me, completely separate from the past." He pulled the covers back and slid in beside her. He felt her stiffen as his hand rested on her back. He lightly massaged her upper back, using his thumb, pressing small circles into her knotted muscles.

The tips of his fingers sent currents of heat down her spine. She fully released a stifled breath and slowly went limp.

"Want me to stop?" He thumbed down the full length of her neck.

She reached back, gathered her hair, and held it aside so he could continue.

Instead, he leaned down and pressed his lips to the back of her neck. His warm breath sent sweet chills all the way down her back and beyond. She slowly rolled over.

"No fair." She frowned sweetly.

"Can I have a kiss goodnight?" he asked, as he leaned toward her.

"Just one," she murmured.

He smiled, lifted her head and adjusted her pillow, smoothing it, and then aligned it to her shoulders. He brushed her hair back softly and then his own. He folded and smoothed the tops of the covers.

"Steven!" She scowled.

He grinned. "Well, if I only get one, I want it to be perfect."

He leaned over her, hesitating just centimeters before their lips met. He felt her breath in his mouth and gazed into her alluring stare. Moistening her lower lip with the warm tip of his tongue, he covered her lips softly with his. Cupping her chin with his hand, he widened his mouth over hers, exploring every silky inch of it with his tongue.

A soft murmur of surrender escaped her, as she ran her hand down the smooth curve of his back.

"That was nice," she whispered.

"Uh-oh, you broke the kiss, now this one doesn't count. We have to start all over," he said under his breath, licking lightly at her neck and nuzzling her ear.

Tiny bumps rose up as his fingertips lightly explored the path to the hollow of her throat.

"Anything you say," she said softly.

He flattened his hand firmly against her upper chest. The heat from his palm penetrated through the wall of her chest and washed over her heart. And for one, bliss-filled moment, she felt whole, unblemished and healed.

"Yes, let's start over." She traced his lips with the tip of her finger. "Right here." With helpless abandon she kissed his sexy mouth and raked her fingers through his hair. She opened her eyes as he pulled away.

"Eve, I want you to know that you can trust me," he whispered, touching her face. "I mean, really trust me." His thumb caressed her cheek, then he gently kissed each eyelid and her mouth.

She avoided answering him with a deep, contented sigh.

"What's this?" Pulling back he looked at her shirt.

"Oh, no! Now what?" she whimpered. "What ever it is you can have it. Let's just stay here."

"Can I have this back?" he asked, as he gathered up the hem of her sweatshirt.

She nodded, trying not to look too eager.

He pulled the sweatshirt up and over her head in one motion, spilling her auburn locks down onto her shoulders. The light from the fire danced golden reflections in her brown eyes and glowed softly on her velvety skin.

"God, you are so beautiful." He slowly pulled her naked body close to him, cupping her breast and running the tip of his tongue around her nipple.

She shivered and licked her lips as she tugged at the waistband of his jeans. "Maybe we should make this an even trade? She wove her fingers through the soft fan of golden hair on his chest, as he unbuttoned his jeans and slid them down his thighs.

"Damn ... I don't have protection," he whispered.

She pulled back and laughed, sending shimmering waves of craving through him.

"After being attacked, sliced, kicked, and tied up at gun point, you're worried about safe sex?" She laughed again. "Don't worry, I'm safe."

"I don't want to get you pregnant." His hushed tone sounded so sincere.

"No danger of that," Eve assured him.



“What do you mean?” he said as he pulled her close.

“I think I’m in more emotional danger than anything else.” Her eyes met his in a questioning stare.

“Look, Eve, I don’t want to be reference material for your next relationship. I really do care for you, and I don’t normally move this fast. You’re just so ...” His voice trailed off as he nuzzled her hair, back and plied kisses down her neck.

“So ... what?” Not quite sure she wanted to hear the answer.

“Beautiful, sexy, sweet, desirable ...”

“This is a little too fast for me, too,” she said as she tilted her head back to afford him freer access.

Goose bumps rose on her skin as he skimmed the backs of his knuckles south.

She instinctively raised her hips off the bed as he used slow, agonizing circles, pressing his fingers into the satiny furrow between her legs.

“Do you play an instrument?” she murmured.

Steven pulled back and gave her a sexy look. “Sorry.”

“Well, you should with hands like that.”

“Have any special requests?” he whispered into her ear. “Show me what you want.” He exhaled a breath that quickened her breathing.

She slid her hand over his, to guide him to her most sensitive areas. He learned fast and soon mimicked her array of firm and gentle circles. He continued delicately probing into her feminine folds, until a delicious and fiery throbbing commenced. She groaned and raised her head long enough to glance into his eyes, fierce with intention. Then, as his prolonged fondling continued, her head fell back in helpless delight. Her whole body seized, yielded, and finally surrendered to him with total abandonment. She gasped as he pushed two fingers inside her, then used the pad of his thumb, firm, insisting, applying just the right pressure, harder, then softer, slower, then faster strokes. She jerked and grinned with painful pleasure. He found the heart of her succulence. Tenderly, yet passionately, he played a concerto. Every muscle and nerve shimmered with her climax.

“Bravo,” she panted against his lips. She shuddered, sighed, and took in the deliciousness of the moment.

“Now it’s my turn to compose.” She seductively slid both of her hands down his stomach and curled her fingers around the firm shaft of his penis. Rigid velvetiness. She was determined to induce identical sweet torment. She squeezed lightly at first and then directed firmer strokes up and down the shaft, while allowing her thumbs to slip and glide smoothly over its silky moist head. She took delight in Steven’s groans of pleasure and smiled when he squeezed his eyes shut from the delectable ache, as she kissed his chest and dragged her lips, hot and moist, down his stomach. With her tongue flicking hungrily at the head of his penis,

she slowly pushed it between her lips as her tongue made a complete orbit. She pulled him into her mouth and heard him draw in a sharp breath.

"Whoa, you better slow down," he whispered through clenched teeth. "If we're gonna make this last."

"I don't want to go slow, or make it last." Her voice was husky. "I want you inside me."

A rough sound came from deep in his throat as he pulled her up and wrapped his arms tightly around her waist. He aligned himself with the satiny-sweet triangle between her thighs, now pressed trembling, warm, and wet against him.

He dragged his lips up her neck and then ran his tongue inside the whorls of her ear as he rolled on top of her. She shuddered again as his breath crossed its threshold.

"We fit just like a puzzle, a perfect match," he said with a smile, then positioned himself on top of her.

She arched her back as his hot palms slid down her sides to cup her bottom.

With a soft groan, he pushed to enter her, unable to wait a second longer.

"Oh, Steven, yes ..." She wrapped her legs around his waist and framed his face with her hands. She gazed deeply into his eyes as he slowly filled her, totally, and for an eternal moment, they froze. As they moved in unison, face-to-face and breath-to-breath, her defenseless heart throbbed in pain, at feeling cared for and loved.

"Am I hurting you?" Steven whispered.

"Not yet." Eve's arms circled his neck, and she pressed her body tightly against his to hide the tears spilling silently from the corners of her eyes.

As his hips thrust forward again and again, she began to peak, so close and then subsiding. How could he know her body so well? Bringing her to the point of climax, sensing the moment, and then holding off, over and over, allowing the sweet ache to build and build, keeping in motion this delectable madness until ...

"Steven, please!" She groaned in anticipation, she was so close.

He smiled and kissed her deeply, and pumping faster this time, took both of them all the way to a place she had only heard about until now.

Exploding waves of breathtaking, clenching sensations gripped her center, sending the most delicious burst of tingles to every inch of her body. She felt one with Steven, one body, one mind, and one spirit. One, one, one, and she cried out his name.

He adjusted her angle slightly and then stretched out full-length, pinning her to the mattress. She barely felt his weight as his fingers kneaded her backside. With his chest pressed firmly against her breasts, and with one last, long thrust, he followed her moments later.

Collapsing together, panting and laughing, she moved her hips slowly.

“Nope, let me stay awhile.” He adjusted her so that he could remain inside, propping himself on his elbows.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you like.” She smiled and brushed her lips to his chin.

“Eve”

“Hmmm?”

“After all this is over ...” He kissed her cheek.

Here is where he would tell her that he was going to be sent away to Borneo on a long assignment, or that this was all a big mistake, or worse, he only had a month to live. She took a deep breath and braced herself against the blow to her heart.

“Can I still drive your car?”

The picture of his boyish grin was almost more than her heart could hold, and she rolled on top of him, laughing, and showering his face with kisses.

## Chapter Thirteen

The sun was barely on its way when Steven checked his watch. Five-thirty a.m. He wanted to get back to the car, to search it. He slid the Walther out from under the pillow and checked the safety.

"Eve, it's time to get up." He gently stroked her arm. He felt comfortable with her, the same comfort he had shared with Laura. It was hard for him to believe that there was another woman in the world who could summon the same feelings within him. Yet, here she was, sweet and beautiful, lying next to him. He reached out and pulled her close, kissing her temple. She tensed, and rolled away, keeping her back to him.

"Is something wrong?" He smoothed the hair away from her face.

"I have morning breath," she mumbled.

"Don't worry about that," he insisted and kissed the back of her hair.

"What should I worry about, Steven?" she asked dryly.

"Not a thing, other than getting back home in one piece, and I'm working on that." He gave her a hug. She tensed again.

He gently pulled her shoulder back, barely able to see her face in the dim morning light. "I hope you don't regret what happened last night," he said softly into her ear.

"I don't, but Laura might. Steven, who's Laura? Her voice trembled. "You were saying her name in your sleep."

He slowly leaned back, clasped his hands behind his head, and stared at the dusky ceiling. A long moment passed before he answered.

"My wife," he whispered.

Eve had forgotten to add that to the list of painful possibilities for his ultimate departure. The pain was stronger than she expected. Tears stung her eyes, but she wiped

them away quickly, remembering that she wouldn't allow herself to be hurt by one more man.

"You said I should trust you! What a joke!" She threw the covers back and grabbed his sweatshirt. She pulled it over her head and down over the ache in her heart, cleverly disguised with anger.

Steven rose up on one elbow and reached for her hand. "Let me explain."

Eve stepped away from the bed and snapped over her shoulder, "Don't bother, there is no excuse for cheating. Save your lies for her."

She headed for the bathroom, and once in, closed the door solidly. A stern lecture was what she needed, along with a shower to wash away all evidence of this latest mistake. Maybe it was brief enough that she didn't even need to count it at all. How could her personal life be so alienated from her professional life? This just didn't make sense. She knew how to make things look exceptional. She could design an ad that would sell a meat grinder to a vegetarian. She was considered one of the best graphic artists in her field. Yet she couldn't find one honest man, not one.

She stepped into the steamy stall and adjusted the spray of water. It coursed over her throat and down her chest. Sweet memories of last night washed over her. She had never felt such warmth and tenderness, or intense desire. As far as she was concerned it was her first intimate experience. So, this is the reason for love songs and mushy movies. She'd never believed in love at first sight, until now. She had always expected that the men in her life would leave her. Eventually. She'd resigned herself to that fact.

Then she realized it didn't matter that Steven was married. It didn't matter that he wasn't going to stay with her. All that mattered is that she had discovered what it was she had been missing all her life. She knew what to aim for now, and she was grateful to Steven for showing her.

She stepped from the shower. Who am I fooling? I love him, and I can't have him. The story of my life. Just how much pain can one heart hold?

With tears brimming in her eyes, she stared sightlessly at the floor and bent to snatch up Steven's sweatshirt and crush it to her face. Her tears saturated the fabric before she was able to collect herself. She raised her head, only to find something stuck to her face. She looked in the mirror to see Steven's briefs molded to her features. She must have caught them up with the sweatshirt in her haste to get away. She had just wept bitterly into Steven's briefs. She wasn't surprised. It symbolized their union. Brief. She peeled them off and hung them on the doorknob to dry.

The bed was folded up, and the cushions were put back in place. It looked as if they had never slept there. Steven was gone, and she felt panic begin to rise. So soon? Would he really leave her all alone in this strange place? She rushed to the door.

"Howdy!"

She screamed in surprise.

A little old man in worn denim bib overalls and a red plaid flannel shirt stood on the porch, with his donkey just below the steps. The miniature beast was all loaded up with an old-fashioned bedroll, tin pans, and a miner's pick. The man wore a tattered hat with the brim pulled down over a good part of his sun-dried face. A scruffy white beard covered his jaw, but she couldn't stop staring at his amazing periwinkle-blue eyes that were set inside a web of tanned lines. A cowbell clanged softly, as the donkey strained at the rope to nibble at something sprouting beneath the newly stained boards on the porch.

"Sorry, ma'am, didn't mean to frighten you. I just came to check up on little Sara, is she here?" He nodded politely.

She blinked. "Uhh, Sara ... why, no, not right now," she said above the pounding of her heart.

Over his shoulder, Eve saw Steven running toward the cabin, carrying her suitcase in one hand and his gun in the other. He hid the gun behind his back before he stepped up onto the porch.

"Good morning!" He handed her the suitcase and quickly shoved the gun in the back of his waistband before extending his hand to the old man. "We're just here for a short visit, Steven and Eve Malloy."

The old man shook his hand, and then Steven stepped close to Eve to put a protective arm around her shoulders.

"Name's Mel Gillis ... Just stopped by to check on little Sara. I usually do when I'm in the area, I worry about her some." His blue eyes sparkled in the morning sun. "She likes to see Polly here." He gave his donkey a pat.

Eve gasped. "You mean little five-year-old blond Sara?"

"Sure, ain't she a precious girl?" He shook his head and chuckled. "Sometimes, when her stepdad is taking a nap, we talk and talk." He shifted his feet nervously. "Too bad, what happened to her mama last year, huh?"

"What did happen to her mother last year?" Steven asked.

"Hell, she just run off ... here one day and gone the next. Left little Sara behind with the jerk who lives here. A real piece of bad luck." He hung his head mournfully. "He visits a lady friend, about once a month, takes little Sara with him, suppose that's where they are now."

"Can I get you something? A cup of coffee or tea?" Eve offered.

"Naw, got everything I need right here." He patted the bundles strapped across Polly's back. "Much obliged, though. I best be on my way. If you see Sara, tell her I'll be back round soon."

"What is it you're mining for?" Steven hollered after him.

"I guess I'll know that when I find it!" The old man held his hand beside his mouth as he laughed gleefully.

He turned back and walked toward the road, the donkey right at his heels, swaying under her load. They watched until he was out of sight and they couldn't hear the cowbell and then turned to look at each other.

Steven grabbed Eve and held her close, kissing both her cheeks.

"Why did you tell that man we are married?"

"It just seemed like the natural thing to do." He shrugged. "I'm so sorry I left you alone, you must have been scared out of your mind!" He lifted her off her feet, causing the sweatshirt to slide up to her waist. "I went down to check on your car, the trucker is gone." He kissed her again quick and full on the mouth.

"Do you think he got away by himself?" She nervously scanned the area.

"Good question, I'd like to know that myself."

Red-faced, she remembered she wasn't wearing any underwear and stretched the sweatshirt down below her bottom.

Steven stepped back and smiled. "Do that again."

"Thanks for bringing my suitcase," she blushed. She took it inside, threw it on the couch, and unzipped the top. Steven massaged her shoulders as she opened it.

"Did someone steal your clothes?" he asked, looking down into the bag.

Eve looked up at him and laughed. "Don't ever pack in a furious rage. This is what you get." She took out a pair of underwear and her last t-shirt.

"Mind if I take a shower?" He gathered her hair in a ponytail and kissed the back of her neck. She tensed and removed her hair from his hand.

"Don't be too long. I'm nervous about being here."

"I promise, I won't leave you alone again." He squeezed her shoulder.

"But I want you to leave me alone, as soon as we get back." She glared at him for making promises he wouldn't keep. "I'll make some coffee," she said, before he could respond, and pulled away to go to the kitchen.

She heard him turn the water on and then off again in less than ten minutes.

She set two steaming mugs of coffee on the table. She unzipped and reached into a small side pocket of her suitcase, hoping to miraculously find an extra pair of shoes. Her fingers found some small objects, and she pulled out three opaque stones, just like the ones she'd found under her car. The bathroom door opened, and Steven walked out clean, shaved, and gorgeous as hell.

"Oh, my God, Steven, look!" She held the stones up and poured them into his hand.

"Are there any more?" he asked as he faced the window and held them up to the light.

"Let's see." She unzipped all the pockets and found thirty-two uncut diamonds.

"Please believe me, Steven, I had no idea these were in here!" She trembled.

"Is this your bag?" he asked, checking the pockets again and feeling the seams for more.

"Yes ... but," she said, then stopped and thought for a moment.

"But what?"

"When Michael and I argued, I ran to the bedroom and grabbed this bag to pack. It was sitting right in the front of my closet. I never kept it there before." Her eyes widened. "He wanted me to take this bag didn't he? But why?"

"Get dressed. We have to get out of here." Steven had that professional tone again.

Eve passed Sara's room on the way to the bathroom. She stepped in to look around. The walls were painted deep royal blue. Eve couldn't imagine spending much time looking at this sickening color. Other than a couple of old stuffed animals that decorated her tiny single bed, she had no other toys. Eve pulled the knob of her closet door open and pushed aside a few second-hand clothes hanging neatly on the rod.

Stooping down in the dim light of the closet, she picked up a worn baby shoe. "Sweet baby," she crooned as she caressed the shoe. She wished Sara were here so she could steal her away.

There was a cardboard box on the closet floor, pushed up against the back wall. Sliding it into the light, she pulled open the torn flaps. There were shorts, blouses, and a couple of pairs of jeans. They must have belonged to Sara's mother. She held up a pair of the jeans. It looked like they were close to the same size. Digging down into the bottom of the box, she felt a pair of tennis shoes.

"No way!" She uncovered a pair of blue denim shoes, with tiny maroon polka dots. She looked inside the heel for the size. "Eight! Seven would be better, but it beats wearing heels." She gathered up the jeans, and a blouse, and then took a last look around. There was a tiny straight back chair facing one corner of the room. Eve tried to guess how many hours Sara had spent in that chair, staring at the disgusting blue paint. She whirled around to stomp into the bathroom. She and Sara would have fun burning that chair.

Opening the medicine cabinet, she eyed a safety razor. It would just serve him right. She used it to shave under her arms, and for the hell of it, she shaved her already waxed legs and then replaced it without rinsing it off, imagining his repulsive face dotted with bloody tissue.

Sara's mother must have been a touch anorexic, or else that bastard had been starving her. Eve tugged the jeans on and took a deep breath to zip up. It looked like she was dipped into them. She was grateful they were the stretchy kind, but she still wasn't able to tuck the sleeveless blue gingham blouse in, so she tied a knot at her waist. She quickly tugged Steven's socks on and slipped into the tennis shoes. She smiled when she noticed that even the laces had red polka dots.



Eve opened the bathroom door and stepped into the living room. The calming fragrance of sandalwood filled the air. Steven was sifting through the shredded remains of her bag strewn all over the floor.

She stood over him, with her hands on her hips. "That bag cost me three hundred dollars, you know."

"Sorry, but a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do ..." Steven glanced up briefly, then did a double take. "God, help me." His mouth fell open as he slowly stood up.

She felt the heat of his gaze as it glided over her body from top to bottom and back.

"Don't get any ideas, we have to get out of here," she reminded him. Besides, she had no intention of having an affair with a married man.

"Ideas? I got a million of 'em." He pulled her close, cupped her butt, and bent to kiss her.

She turned her head and offered her cheek. "Steven, I can't get involved with you." Her sad eyes stared into his.

"Because?" He was already fully erect.

"Because you are married." Her lower lip quivered.

His arms dropped like rocks, he turned to sit on the couch, a hand massaging each knee.

"Eve, Laura died two years ago. She developed ovarian cancer, and she died." He looked up at her. The pain in his eyes was almost more than she could bear. She rushed over and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

"I'm so sorry, so sorry. Why didn't you tell me?" she crooned, rocking him back and forth, softly kissing his cheek.

He slid his arms around her back and pressed her against his chest. A deep sigh resonated in his chest as she stroked his back.

"Oh, sweetie." She pressed her mouth hard against his neck.

Eve felt wretched for feeling sad and happy at the same time. Sad, because this man she cared for had cared very much for his lost wife, and yet happy that she might have the chance to love him back to life. The chance she so desperately wanted to have.

"We should get back to your car." He stroked her hair.

"Were you able to find any more diamonds in this mess?" She turned to scoop up what was left of her bag.

"No, they were all out there in the open as if someone packed them right along with your underwear." He stood up and dug into his pocket and pulled out the handful of rough uncut stones in various sizes.

"Someone like Michael?" She ripped the pillowcase from the pillow and jammed the shredded bag into it, giving it a good punch before she stood up.

"Exactly like," he said, shoving the stones back in his pocket. He slung the pillowcase over his shoulder and disposed of it in the trash.

"What about Sara? We have to help her, Steven." Her eyes pleaded with his.

"We'll be down on the back road. We'll be able to see when they get home." He walked over and pulled his backpack from behind the recliner and swung it up behind his back. Eve gathered up her t-shirts, underwear, shoes, and her brown suit that now looked like it had seen the first four weeks of boot camp, and followed him out the door.

She turned around, and walked backward a few steps to look at the place where she had first made love. It was a small rustic cabin with a forest-green door, snuggled up against a thirty-foot sorrel-colored bluff. The well-groomed cactus garden curved along the front path and all the way around to the side of the cabin. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Steven snatched her small bundle of belongings to carry, and offered his hand. She slipped into it and pulled his arm across her front, pressing it to her breasts. She kissed his shoulder and smiled up at him. He smiled back, then looked around, with an uneasy expression.

"Keep a look out for that trucker."

She slid her hand up to hug his triceps and stretched her pace to match his.

Her car sat lonely on the curve of the back road. The swirls in the sand marked the spins they'd taken the night before. It seemed so long ago.

"You aren't going to do to my car what you did to my bag, are you?" she asked nervously.

"I'd kill anyone who tried." He shot her a reassuring look. She stroked the hair on the back of his arm.

"Eve, I need you to tell me everything you know about Michael."

She looked up into his eyes, feeling a flush rise to her cheeks.

"Well, he's a gemstone dealer ... spends a lot of time on the phone with clients ..."

"That's plain. Who does he hang around with? Where does he come from? What about his family? I need some personal background."

She didn't like his professional tone. It was cold and matter of fact. "The only friends he talked about were the ones he made at the African mines." She nervously reached for her bundle of clothes.

Steven stopped. "Eve, do you even know who Michael is?" he asked coldly.

Eve stared back in silence and swallowed hard.

"No, I don't! And the only person who knows about me is my sister. If I ask questions about people's lives, then they will ask me about mine. I've never talked about my life, not to anyone. It was horrible and shameful, and I would rather live in a world of strangers than to

relieve the heinous upbringing I had! What's more, you don't seem to have a problem with the fact that I don't know much about you, either." Her whole body trembled with emotion.

Steven stepped forward and pulled the clothes from her clutches. Tossing them to the ground, he reached out and wrapped her in his arms to steady her. He released a pain-racked sigh and tenderly kneaded the tension from her back.

"Steven Jacob Malloy," he whispered. "Born in Columbus, Ohio, on May twenty-first, 1968. Older brother Carl, younger sister Mary; they live back east in Connecticut. Parents ... Mildred and John, married for forty-two years, now living in Marion, Ohio. I grew up there and came to California when I was twenty-seven. I met Laura en route; she was the flight attendant. We dated for a year before we married. Our best friends are Greg and Sandy Weller. They literally saved my ass when Laura died ... meditation saved my soul." He kissed the top of her head and pressed her closer to his chest. "I promise, I will fill you in on the million other details as we go along." He lifted her face up to his. "I'm sorry." He kissed her lips. "Am I forgiven?"

Her gaze burned into him as she slid her hands up the front of his t-shirt. She took his face in her hands, stared deeply into his eyes, and then forcefully locked her lips to his. Her slender fingers slid seductively around and plowed passionately up the back of his head as she insistently pushed her tongue against his. A groan came from deep in his throat as she deliberately slid her leg up the outside of his thigh. Her hands inched down to grab two handfuls of his backside and pulled him firmly against her. She leisurely let her leg drop back to the ground, and then she released him.

"Now you're forgiven," she said, stepping back with a look of victory.

He stood panting with his hair ruffled. "Man, you're just full of surprises, aren't you?"

## Chapter Fourteen

Eve rifled through the trunk, while Steven began to search the upholstery of her car. He kept glancing back at her, wondering what had gotten into her. She seemed to be changing, getting stronger and surer of herself, and he liked it.

“So ... what was that all about?” he asked, grunting while pulling the seat up.

“That’ meaning what?” She knew exactly what he meant.

“Well, is that your usual procedure for bestowing forgiveness?” He poked his head around the trunk lid.

“You should have seen the look on the mailman’s face after he delivered my mail to the wrong address,” she said with a laugh.

Tugging up a large piece of carpet, she backed up and bumped into him. “Geez, how did you get over here so fast?”

She turned to face his grim expression. “Steven, I’m kidding. I don’t even know the mailman.” She giggled, giving his arm a squeeze.

“Look.” She held out seven stones and poured them into his hand.

“Where did you find these?”

“Here, under this carpet.” She pointed.

“Steven, how much are they worth?”

“Not my department. I don’t know a damn thing about diamonds.” He reached into the trunk, lifted out the flat tire, and leaned it up against a Joshua tree. Grabbing the edge of the carpet lining the trunk, he pulled it all the way out, sending cans of peaches in several directions.

“You know, Michael is going to come after them.” Her expression clouded. “Shouldn’t we have taken the car to town to search it?”

Steven shook his head. "The locals are looking for me, thanks to Judd Raymond. I'm counting on Beckard coming out here; it's time we meet face to face."

"Why would he do this? Is he trying to get me in trouble?" She looked around, checking the road in both directions.

"He's more likely using you, to cover up something he's doing. I'm sure we'll find out soon enough." He tossed the carpet to the ground and knelt down to rake it with his fingertips.

"Steven, you said you knew about Michael's clients. What exactly is he up to?"

He sat back on his haunches with his eyes closed and tipped his face to the sun.

"He's working on a scam to bilk elderly investors. According to Judd Raymond, the agent who has been in charge of this investigation, he developed a phony organization called Western Allied Lifetime Diamond Organization. These diamonds are most likely inferior quality, and he's going to sell them for much more than they are worth." He looked down and adjusted the bandage on his hand.

"Where is he going to sell them, and why do I have them?" she asked, gathering up the cans from the trunk.

"Where are you headed?" Steven asked her.

Her eyes widened. "You mean he's going to sell them in Arizona?"

"There are a lot of retired people in Sedona, Prescott, and Scottsdale -- a Shangri-La of retirees. I would guess he has someone waiting for you in Sedona, or maybe driving alongside you in an eighteen-wheeler."

"Why didn't he just take them himself?" she asked impatiently.

Steven stood to pull off his shirt; his back was wide and muscular, and it tapered handsomely down to his waistband. Just the sight of him caused an involuntary shudder.

"He's under surveillance," he said, raking a hand through his hair.

"And I'm not?" She shook her head and rolled her eyes to the sky.

Steven laughed. "Well, not until about a week ago."

"What the hell happened a week ago?"

"I was assigned to you."

She pointed a can at him. "You ... were assigned to ... me?"

"Yes."

"So, this thing we have between us -- it's just part of your assignment, right?" She glared.

He deliberately walked toward her, holding her stare. The sun gleamed off his tanned shoulders. She gripped the cans of peaches as though they were weapons. An idea for a suntan lotion ad unexpectedly came to her as she watched him draw near. It all took place in slow motion. There he was in all his glory, gorgeous, a work of Grecian art from his pectorals

to his waistband. His white teeth flashed brightly in the sunlight, a soft desert breeze ruffled his sun-streaked hair. The Joshua trees and jagged red rocks in the background gave him a more rugged appearance. She almost had the scene complete in her mind's eye, when he seized her wrists, causing the cans she was balancing to fall to the ground with a thud.

"Don't even think that!" he replied with heat. He slid his arms around her slender waist and lifted her up. He gazed into her face with a passion hotter than the desert sun. Slowly he lowered her feet to the ground, causing her blouse to ride up, leaving them skin-to-skin. Bending down, he kissed her gently at first. His hands traveled up and twined in her hair, using it to hold her fast as his mouth consumed hers. She shivered as he pulled away.

"I wouldn't think of thinking." She blinked up in breathless confusion.

Steven squinted up at the sun. "It's going to be hot soon. We should search as much of the car as we can while it's still morning. I'd rather be kissing you, though." He bent and kissed her again and gave her a tight squeeze.

"I'll take a rain check," she smiled, running her fingers through the crisp tawny hair on his chest.

She turned and walked to the trunk. Reaching in, she took out one of her nutrition bars.

"Breakfast?" She held one out to him.

"Thanks." He snagged it on the way to the front of the car, reading the wrapper. "This energy bar is for women," he called back as he tore at the end of the wrapper with his teeth.

"Sorry, if I'd known you were coming, I'd have gotten a man one, too," she said, chewing off a bite. "Don't worry, you won't grow breasts or have a menstrual cycle, or anything like that."

"Cheers!" He held up the bar and all but polished it off in one bite, then gazed down at his chest. "Just checking."

Eve laughed and tossed him another one.

"So, where else should we search?" Eve asked, feeling the last corner of the trunk.

"Tires" Steven pointed toward the ground.

"Tires?" She frowned. "Where?"

He grabbed his shirt off the hood of the car and pulled it on, walking to her left rear tire. Stretching out full length on his stomach, he used the tips of his fingers to feel along the hard rubber tread.

"Look here." He motioned over his shoulder.

Eve stooped down and stretched out next to him, briskly brushing a red ant from her path. He showed her what looked to be a repaired slit.

"You have a pencil or a pen to open that up?" He nodded toward the tire.

"I have something better." She jumped up and took her art supply box from the trunk, then she held up an Exacto knife.

"Perfect, each one of these slits has a bead of epoxy over it to keep it closed." He pried the slit open to reveal the diamond nesting inside. He handed her the knife to lever the stone.

"Got it!" It shot from the rubber like a ripe melon seed.

After what felt like hours, they stood up to stretch.

"How many did we mine?" she asked.

"Twelve, but we have to move the car to have a look at the bottom of the tires. We'll do that last."

"Twelve? Wow, that makes nineteen! Plus the thirty-two from this morning, we're rich!" She shook out her cramped hand. "Can we keep them?" Her smile widened.

"Fraid not." He patted her shoulder.

"I didn't think so," she said. "I'm hot and hungry ... let's do lunch." She bent over to pick up the cans of peaches. Steven gave her butt a playful pinch.

"Damn! No can opener!" She shook her head.

"Here." He handed her his pocketknife and walked to the front of the car and stretched out behind the front tire.

She snapped out the can opener and set it to the edge of the can. After her third attempt, she pressed the opener back into place and tossed the knife in the backseat.

"Don't you have a real can opener in here?" she asked as she unzipped a side pocket on his backpack.

"Steven ... what ... is ... this?"

His hands dropped to the ground. Damn, damn, damn. She'd found her file. History, background, photos, the works. Reluctantly, he rose and marched toward her. She was holding a paperback book and wearing a deliciously evil smile.

He released a retained breath, "It's just a book I'm reading," he said, relieved beyond belief.

"*Peninsula of Lust*? You're really reading this book?" she asked, gazing at the cover artwork of a scantily dressed man and woman, caressing on the beach.

"Sure, why not?" he asked, reaching for the book.

"Yeah, sure, everyone reads romance novels, especially men." Eve snickered.

Steven grinned. "Haven't you ever read a good love story?"

"Well, of course I have, but I doubt that the ever-popular *Peninsula of Lust* would be classified as a good love story." She giggled.

"Are you sure?" He reached over and cupped her bottom, sending an electric shock to all immediate areas.

She leaned against his hand, wishing they were back at the cabin, mining for treasure in the pull-out bed.

"Read it to me," she said in a sultry undertone.

He opened his mouth to decline, hesitated, and instead, thumbed open a page.

Clearing his throat. "Okay, since you asked ..." He began to read.

"Wyatt Lanslow learned his lessons on the sea, so when a beautiful woman like Gabrielle Monet came into his life, he expected trouble, and trouble she was. He was savagely attracted to her curvaceous body, and her ebony hair that hung loose and lightly brushed the small of her back as she walked. Her black eyes gleamed with a fire that called to the darkest places in his soul."

Steven looked up into her half-interested eyes and turned a few pages forward.

"The dimly lit tavern concealed the neediness in his eyes. He needed to possess her, to ravage and consume her.

"Dance with me?" she asked in her feminine French accent. She held out a diminutive white hand. Wyatt wrapped his massive weathered hand around it and pressed it to his lips. He slid his arms around her tiny waist and held her tight as she circled her arms fast around his neck. He didn't recognize the torchy ballad the sultry sax was playing, and it didn't matter. All that mattered was that she was here, wrapped up in his arms. He commenced a slow, sexy sway that circled slowly around the floor. He held her firmly and inserted his knee between her legs, and his next step immersed them in full-body undulation. He did nothing to hide his arousal. He wanted her to know, needed her to feel how much he wanted her. She must have wanted him, too. She made no protest to his tactile exploration. The lower his hands dropped, the harder he became. With fingers splayed, he insistently kneaded them into her lush curves. Her moist mound was lined up, pressed and pushing firmly against him, protected only by a thin fabric barrier ..."

Steven glanced up at Eve. Her eyes were dilated in spite of the bright sunlight, her breathing was stepped up, and her lips were seductively parted. He closed the cover.

"... To be continued." He smiled.

A look of protest spread over her face; then she cleared her throat and licked the dryness from her lips. "You read that very well, slow and sexy, just like the passage." She looked down at the book in his hand.

"Change your mind?" He leaned over and pressed his lips to her ear. His hot breath caused her to shiver.

"God, no! That's just trashy smut."

"Whatever you say," he said with a shrug, as he laid it on the backseat. He walked around to the front of the car, flicking her a mirthful glance, then stretched out next to the tire.



Eve collected the cans and reached for his pocketknife to try the opener again, but instead, her hand went for the book. She looked at the cover and studied the artwork from front to back. She glanced toward the front of the car. She could hear Steven running his hands over the hard treads of the tire. Opening the first few pages, a confused look came over her face. She thumbed madly back and forth through the pages, checking several at random. This couldn't be the book Steven had been reading from. It was an operation manual for a waterproof global positioning satellite vehicle logger.

"Curiosity get the better of you?" She jumped at the sound of Steven's voice directly behind her.

"Uh, yes, er, no. I mean ... what is this?"

Steven laughed. "Some of the guys in the bureau put that cover on as a joke. If I knew I was going to have this much fun with it, I would have thanked them."

Eve turned around, red-faced, to give him a soft punch to the shoulder.

"Very funny!" She tossed the book onto the seat and picked up the pocketknife, giving him a sheepish look.

"Here, let me help you; it's the least I can do." He skillfully tapped out a hole, then pumped the opener around the edge of the can. Eve watched the muscles in his forearm flex as he worked. He pushed back the lid and handed her the can.

"I'm impressed," she said. "Did you just think up that passage as you went along?"

He snorted. "Quite a talent, isn't it?"

"Actually it is." She tipped the can and sipped at the sweet juice.

"What other talents do you possess, my secret agent man?" Eve ran her hand over the muscles flexing in his forearm.

She tipped her can again, and a thin trickle of juice ran down the corner of her mouth. Steven reached out and caught the drip with the tip of his forefinger, then sampled the taste.

"Photography," he whispered.

"Really?"

"I like to take pictures. I always wanted to be a photographer." He removed the lid from a second can and leaned back to take a gulp.

"I'd like to see some of your work."

He gazed at his backpack. "Someday, maybe."

"How about you, Eve? Did you always want to be a graphic artist?"

She gave him a startled look and then glanced up at the late morning sun beating down. "Can we put the top up? It's really getting hot out here."

Silently, he dug her keys out of his pocket and walked to the driver seat. Easing the clutch in, he turned the key and stepped lightly on the gas. He let out a sigh of relief as the

engine sprang to life. Eve stepped into the passenger side once the top eased into place. Reaching over, she switched the fan to high, blowing her hair in a billowy arc.

"You didn't answer my question." Steven dug a slice of peach out of his can with the blade of his knife and offered it to her. She leaned over and let him ease it between her lips, and she slurped it into her mouth.

"Not answering questions is an old habit, I guess. Yes, I always wanted to be an artist. Maybe not a graphic artist; it is very commercial, and working with clients can be a real pain. I do love art, though."

"Tell me another thing you love." He slurped up a peach slice.

Her face turned wistful as she said, "I love to hear the wind blowing the ropes on the boats in the harbor; they make a lovely pinging sound."

Steven gave her a big grin "I have a sailboat. It's not very big, but it's a lot of fun."

"Tell me another." He finished off the rest of the juice in his can.

"I love to hear a crowd of people yell 'Happy New Year!'"

Steven gazed out the windshield and nodded. "I've hated that the last couple of years." He leaned over and kissed her softly. "I'm looking forward to the next one, though."

Eve felt her heartbeat step up a notch.

"Now tell me three things you hate." He scraped up the last peach in his can and offered it to her. She shook her head. He brought it back to his lips and pulled it into his mouth.

"I hate food demonstrators in supermarkets. I don't want anyone shoving samples of anything on a cracker at me; I just want to pick up my things and get out of there."

Steven slapped his forehead. "Geez, if it weren't for some of those kindly food demonstrators, I would have starved putting myself through college." He sucked his cheeks in. "Then I would have had to rent myself out as one of those skeletons in anatomy class."

Eve laughed uncontrollably. "I really hate driving with helium balloons in the car."

Steven thumbed a tear from her cheek. "Especially since you have a convertible ... you'd run the chance of them beating you unconscious." Steven loved making her laugh. It had been a long time since he'd joked around like this. "One more."

She was laughing so hard she could barely say, "I hate bagpipes."

"Ouch! I earned a bagpipe scholarship to go to Vassar!"

"Vassar is a girl's college, silly."

"I told you I earned it, Vassar's been co-ed ever since." He tickled her ribs, making her double over with laughter.

Looking down, she noticed that some of the peach juice had dripped onto her shoe, and opened the glove compartment to get a napkin. She swiped away her tears, then pressed the napkin firmly against the spot on her shoe.

“Steven! The polka dots smeared!” she gasped. Dabbing the napkin again, she brought it up to look closely.

“What is this?” She held the napkin in the sunlight.

Steven’s face fell. “It’s blood.”

Eve threw open her door and leapt from the car. Grabbing handfuls of desert sand, she scrubbed it madly against the tops of the shoes. “Oh, my God!” She chanted over and over.

Steven got out and walked around the car to kneel beside her. Scanning the area for something to clean her shoes, he eyed a black edge just underneath her back bumper.

“Shit!” He raced over to pull it from beneath the car and smashed it against the ground.

“What is that?” Eve blinked in bewilderment.

“It’s a GPS logger.”

Their heads jerked around to see Judd Raymond towering behind them.

## Chapter Fifteen

"You've gone way out of your way to be predictable, Steven," Judd said, with his handgun trained on them.

"Glad I haven't disappointed you, Judd." Steven spoke holding his hands away from his body.

"How many diamonds have you recovered so far?" Judd's indigo eyes shadowed as he moved closer to Eve's car, but kept a safe distance from Steven.

"I haven't counted." Steven cautiously began to rise.

"Just stay down!" Judd set his feet firmly apart with his pistol directed at Steven's head. He waited for Steven to sit back down before he took another step toward the car.

"Miss Ryan, why don't you go ahead and put the top back down." He motioned the gun toward the driver's seat. "Don't try anything funny, though. I wouldn't have any problem putting a bullet right between your boyfriend's eyes."

Eve walked to the driver's seat, frightened that her knees would give out before she got there. The top hummed as it folded its way back. She glanced at Steven and then at the backpack. Steven frowned and gave his head a jerk, warning her not to attempt any heroics.

"Now, if you would be so kind as to take a seat right next to your comrade here?"

Obediently, she stopped the engine and stepped back to sit next to Steven. She leaned slightly against his shoulder and he met her pressure giving her a small sense of reassurance.

Judd stepped around to the backseat and lifted out Steven's backpack, then backed away. He took a seat on a large red rock underneath a spacious Joshua tree offering the only slice of shade in the vicinity.

"Want to know just how many diamonds you're looking for?" Judd placed a cigarette between his lips and reached for his lighter. His protruding jaw wobbled as he dragged on the filter.

Steven leaned back against the rear wheel of the car, an elbow resting on each knee. He stared at Judd. A look of insight suddenly came over his face.

"You hid the diamonds in the car, didn't you?" Steven banged the back of his head against the car and squinted up at the cloudless sky. "That's why the light in the parking lot was broken when I got back to the hotel. You didn't want anyone to see what you were doing."

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did, with a little help from Beckard's friends. Very good, Steven. A-plus" Judd took a long draw of his cigarette and blew the smoke above his head.

"What light?" Eve asked nervously. "And ... why were you slicing up my tires?" Her eyebrows knitted together.

"Shut up, Miss Ryan. No one is talking to you!" Judd raised the pistol again. His flinty eyes narrowed and burned into her.

"But ..."

Steven put his hand on her knee and gave it a light squeeze to cut off her objection.

"That's why you requested Dolan and Carter. They were too new to question a seasoned agent like you, right, Judd?"

"Yeah, well, we all get our experience somewhere." Judd smirked. "Too bad theirs ended tied up in a desert urinal."

"Dead," Steven added solemnly.

"Hell, yes, dead." Judd scowled. "They would have eventually figured it all out. They were new, not stupid. They're better off dead anyway -- they might have ended up like me, giving up thirty years of their lives to the bureau. If you think I'm going to walk away with a measly pension and a thank-you note, you're crazy!"

"So you team up with a slime like Beckard to retire in style." Steven grimaced and adjusted the bandage on his hand.

"Something like that." Judd glanced down the road.

Steven frowned. "So, why did you request me, Judd? I'm not new."

"Well, hell, you could've fooled me!" A chuckle rolled from his throat. "You've been running around for days thinkin' with your johnson over Miss Ryan here. You didn't even see me coming a minute ago." He paused to give him an admonishing stare. "We knew you were perfect for the job, a lonely agent still missing his dead wife. We just didn't know how perfect." Judd laughed snidely.

Steven felt the flush rise to his face. Judd was just verbalizing the thoughts he'd already had himself. He'd violated the cardinal rule ... don't get involved with a suspect. He'd given it

his best shot, but couldn't resist his primal urges. But much more than that, he cared deeply for Eve. She had unknowingly been dragged into some pretty deep shit here. Now he had to find a way to get her out of it ... alive.

"I don't think you will be nominated for agent of the year, yourself," Steven chided.

Judd grinned and unzipped the back pocket of Steven's backpack. "Well, let ... me ... see, what have we here? Ah, yes, it's Miss Ryan's profile."

Steven bolted forward and started to get to his feet.

Judd fired a shot into the air. "Just sit back and relax!"

Eve jumped and leaned harder into Steven, her arms wrapped tightly around his bicep. She laid her head flat against his collarbone.

He reached around to cup her cheek, wishing he could keep her from hearing what Judd sadistically was about to say.

Judd opened the folder and pulled out a photo. "I think I like this one best." He held it up so Eve could see. It was a close-up of her coming out of her house on her way to work.

She lifted her head from Steven's chest and squinted at the photo. An eerie feeling came over her as the word *surveillance* entrenched its reality in her mind.

"Of course, this one is nice, too." He held up another close-up side view of her going into work.

Steven sighed deeply, hoping Judd would get bored with his horrible game and stop after showing her the photos.

"This page, my dear, contains your full name, Eve ... Celeste ... Ryan, social security number, address, workplace, and assets." Judd glanced up and smiled.

"Assets!" Eve snarled.

Judd held a finger to his lips. "You'll have to be quiet if you want to hear the best part."

"Judd, you really shouldn't do this." Steven's tone was pleading.

"Oh, yeah, I should. You have been a very bad agent, and now you have to accept the consequences." He took one last draw on his cigarette and flicked it at Steven's feet.

"Miss Ryan, did Steven tell you that he has a degree in psychology?"

Eve slowly shook her head and looked at Steven.

"Well, he does, and he has interrogated hundreds of criminals, for which he writes up a personality profile, or diagnosis, if you will ... Would you like to hear yours?"

Eve clenched her teeth, "No! I don't want to hear any more!" She bent forward gripping her stomach. Steven put his arms tightly around her and whispered in her ear.

"I'm glad you said that, because here is what the good Dr. Malloy has said about your personality." He cleared his throat. "You suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, due to childhood abuse. You have a compulsion to repeat trauma. Let's see ... self-destructiveness, re-victimization, and an inappropriate response to danger."

Judd took out a handkerchief and patted the back of his neck. "Sounds to me like you could use some extensive psychotherapy. What do you think?"

Eve hugged her knees as she rocked herself and burst into tears. Even Steven keeping his arms around her and whispering in her ear offered her little comfort.

"Now, now, let's not overreact ... wait, that would probably be part of your coping mechanism, wouldn't it?" Judd stood up, took off his gray suit jacket, and laid it neatly across the rock. He picked off a few pieces of lint, then smoothed it with his hand.

"Miss Ryan." Judd spoke with a patronizing tone.

Eve ignored him. She hated that she was giving this asshole exactly what he wanted from her.

"Miss Ryan!" Judd shouted. Eve snapped her head up.

"I want you to help agent Steve recover the rest of the diamonds ... Steven, how many diamonds did you get out of the tires so far?"

He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. "Sixteen from the tires, seven from the trunk."

"Trunk?" Judd frowned. "There should be twenty-five left. Now get to work!"

Steven kissed Eve's cheek, and stroked her hair. She was trembling so badly she could hardly hold the Exacto knife to pry the diamonds from the tires. He tried to keep physical contact with her at all times, even if it was only shoulders touching.

"I know how hurt you must be right now, but you have to understand that I didn't know you when I wrote the initial report," Steven whispered.

Eve gave him a red-eyed impatient look. "Would your diagnosis be any different now?" She grunted as she dug at the hard rubber.

Steven stared into her sad brown eyes. "It would be more personal now."

"Personal!"

Judd watched, steely-eyed, from his perch on the rock. "Shut up! Just keep working!" He looked down the road, then stood up and walked halfway to the car. He paced a couple of steps, then he returned to the rock, lit another cigarette and glanced down the road again.

"We need some water over here!" Steven demanded.

"How many diamonds do you have now?" Judd asked.

Steven sighed and pressed his forehead to the sleeve of his t-shirt.

Eve gathered up the stones and counted them. "Nineteen!" she yelled.

Judd glanced down the road again. "You can have some water when you reach twenty-five."

Steven looked back to see that Judd was obviously agitated. He quickly dug several diamonds from his pocket and added them to the count.

"Do we have enough?" Eve asked in a hushed tone.

He nodded and stood up quickly, trying to form a workable escape plan in his mind.

"Hold it right there, Steven. Just hand them to Miss Ryan."

She extended her hand to Steven, and with a pained expression he poured the stones into it. He gave Judd an unmistakable look that said he would kill him if he hurt her.

Judd stepped toward the car. His wry face was etched in Eve's mind. She stood up and inched her way to Judd, numb and lightheaded, with the stones in an open palm.

His eyes were fixed in a hypnotic stare on the diamonds. Suddenly her right hand shot up to throw a handful of sand in his face.

Judd cried out and brought the backs of his hands to his eyes as Eve swung her leg up fast and caught him directly in the groin. He doubled over in pain.

Steven was caught off guard and needed several seconds to catch up with Eve's plan. He lunged at Judd, knocking him off his feet with Steven's arms in a stranglehold around his waist. Judd wasn't about to let Steven take him down without a fight, and he delivered a couple of hard body blows to the ribs. Steven felt the cut on his palm open as he clutched Judd's wrist, straining to keep the gun out of range.

Eve bent down and picked up a decent-size rock, then danced around the men rolling in the dirt, watching for an opening to knock Judd silly.

"Sorry!" She wasn't sure whose fingers she stepped on.

Judd's massive hand shot out and grabbed her ankle, pulling her foot out from under her and sending her flying back to miss a beaver-tail cactus by inches. Steven choked back a snarl of fury and sent a punch grinding into Judd's jaw, then another into his gut.

Above their furious grunting and groaning, there was a gunshot. All activity ceased when they saw Eve standing over them with Judd's gun.

She aimed the weapon directly at Judd. "Cuff him, Steven!"

Steven blinked, astonished at her courage. "Whatever you say!" he grunted, fighting to catch his breath. He pulled himself up, took Judd's cuffs from his belt, and quickly secured his hands behind his back.

"Hell! At least let me wipe the sand out of my eyes." Judd gasped.

"Let me help you." Eve humored him. She took the bottle of water from Steven's backpack and poured half of it in Judd's face, then took a long swig.

"Better?" She walked around to his front and kicked him hard in the stomach. He folded painfully.

"I'm sorry; this must be my inappropriate response to danger."

Surprised and panting, Steven watched in wonder.

She gave him one more hard kick to the stomach and yelled over Judd's groan, "Or maybe it's my compulsion to repeat trauma. What do you think, Doctor?" She glared over at Steven.



"I think maybe you should let me have that." He cautiously pulled the gun from her hand. Relieved, he bent to kiss her, and for a moment he thought she might refuse him. But she brought her lips up to meet his, and he kissed her hard.

He sharply pulled his mouth from hers. "Don't ever do that again!" He panted.

"Do what? Save our butts from the agent gone bad?" Her expression was jubilant.

"You scared the hell out of me!" He held her arms tight, and she could feel him tremble slightly. She pulled back and tugged his pocket open to pour the diamonds back in.

"Did you mean what you said?" She moved forward, just inches from his face. "Or were you just trying to make me feel better?" She stood glaring. Her pulse throbbed furiously at the base of her throat.

"What?"

"When you whispered in my ear ... Do you really love me?" She looked away and swallowed hard to dissolve the thickness in her throat.

"I don't say things I don't mean." He reached out and grabbed the knot of her blouse and slowly towed her into his arms. He bent down and kissed her softly.

"Well, now, ain't that just too sweet?" Judd droned sarcastically.

"Good night, Judd," Steven said and kicked him hard in the forehead.

## Chapter Sixteen

Eve rolled Judd's jacket in a tight ball and shoved it under her butt. "Now what?" She reached over and lifted Steven's hand to look at his bandage. "Your cut is bleeding again."

"I'm not surprised," he said glancing down. "I want to contact the bureau and get us the hell out of here. I just wish I knew what Judd has told them." He gazed down at Judd, passed out peacefully in the sun-hardened dirt.

"Nothing good, you can be sure of that." Eve stood and walked to the backpack to get the first-aid kit.

Her file lay next to it, right where Judd had left it. She gingerly pushed it with her toe. She half-hoped it would sprout wings and fly away. She watched as an ant scout crawled across the cover, inspecting the slick surface. Stooping down, she ran a hand across it to brush the visitor away and slowly opened it.

It felt strange to her looking at her life through agency eyes. It was cold and accurate, filled only with facts, dates, and figures. The photos were clear, close, and some of them were damn flattering, considering that she was not photogenic at all. She thumbed the report Steven had prepared.

"Eve, you don't have to read that." He knelt down next to her, putting a gentle hand on her back.

"I want to." All the things Judd had read were in there. What he hadn't read were the notes that Steven had written in the synopsis.

*Subject has displayed miraculous self-recovery from a seriously abusive childhood. History of severe physical abuse from paternal caregiver; see attached medical records. No signs of self-mutilation, drug abuse, deviance, multiple personality, or ritualistic behavior. Subject has seemingly overcome most anticipated responses of severe self-destructive*

*activities originating in painful encounters with hostile caretakers in the first years of life. She is a functional, educated professional, with minimal displays of behavioral disorders.*

"There aren't any medical records here." She flipped through the file again.

"They're back at the bureau." He thumbed away a trickle of perspiration from her temple.

"You don't call being involved with Michael self-destructive?" She swallowed hard.

"Yes, well, you did leave him, and I think you are on your way to taking control of your life." His look of encouragement was well received. "It takes years to recover from what you have been through, Eve. Most victims don't do as well as you have. Believe me, I know."

"Look how much it took, though. Aside from the fact that I didn't know much about him, he tried to rape me." She dropped her head.

Steven bent his head next to hers. "Stop beating yourself up," he said softly. "You're doing the best you know how, and it's better than you think."

She reached out and hugged him as feelings of gratitude overwhelmed her. She didn't feel the intense pain from his tenderness that she had in the beginning. Steven was the best thing that could have possibly happened to her, in spite of the extraordinary way they came together.

Gratitude gave way to a deep craving that seemed to be growing increasingly inside of her. Maybe it was exactly as Steven said. She was taking control of her life, and these were the feelings that came along with it. Foreign, but filled with a delightful, death-defying fury. Eve's breath quickened, and her eyes met his. She looked at his lips. They made her want to do things, wild things. Steven instantly responded; their mouths came together, as starving and lustful as they had been the night before. She felt his tongue exploring, and she drew it even further into her mouth. It was as if her hands belonged to someone else. They slid over the top of his shoulders, then down his back, and she dug her fingers into his flesh while pressing him closer.

She should have checked to see that Judd was still unconscious, but she was too turned on to care if he wasn't. Steven got to his feet in one swift motion, bringing her with him. He made a rough noise in his throat as his erection pulsed against her. Oblivious to the desert sun, the heat, and the threat of being watched, Eve countered Steven's sounds with echoes of passion as he rocked his hips. A hot, melting feeling poured through her from both sides.

She was desperate to feel his skin. She jerked their shirts up until they were skin to skin. At last, her hands were on naked flesh. They fought with their garments, tiny ripping sounds followed. Both were helplessly eager to have each other. Steven unzipped and palmed her jeans down her hips and then unzipped his own jeans with quick, jerky movements. He lifted her off her feet and guided her into position. With muscles straining to support her, in one thrust he buried himself deep inside her and captured her strangled cry with his mouth.

Eve was hungry for the taste of him. She wanted to brand her image in his head so he would never, ever forget her. Entranced by the expression in his eyes, his set jaw, and the harsh sounds he made, she knew she could never forget him. Her breath came in quick little gasps as she met him thrust for thrust.

Steven kept the rhythm steady, driving Eve to the edge of control. She felt the delicious winding up, tighter and tighter, until she exploded into wave after wave, one orgasm after another. Their cries of passion cut uncaringly through the stillness all around them.

They remained as they were, dry-mouthed and panting, until their breath eased to normal. Steven rested his forehead against hers.

"Damn, woman. You're dangerous," he said and kissed her lips again. Eve gave him a sinful smile and kissed him back.

Reluctantly, he disengaged from her slick warmth. She clung to his arms for balance until her feet found earth. As they zipped and readjusted their clothes, they looked around to see if Judd was conscious. Luckily, he wasn't

Eve pulled away and stooped to snatch up her file again.

"You know, these photos are very good. I'm impressed. Most amateurs aren't this good ... believe me, I know." She scanned each one thoroughly with her artist's eye.

"Who are you calling an amateur?" He smiled. "You should see the one I took out of your file." He grinned wider.

"You will have to show me sometime." She blushed and took the first-aid kit from his backpack.

He glanced at his watch. "It's almost noon, we aren't going to be able to stay out here much longer." He glanced at Judd. "Judd's car must be nearby; he sure as hell didn't walk out here. We can radio for help." He started to walk away.

"Hold on there. I'm not finished!" She unwrapped the bandage. His cut showed signs of infection. "Steven, this doesn't look good."

"Yeah, well, I never met a knife wound that did." He dug out the rubbing alcohol and pointed the cap for her to remove it.

"Are you sure you want to use that? I have the antiseptic right here." She held up the soaked gauze pad.

"This will clean it out much faster."

"How much do you weigh?" she asked.

"One-seventy-five. Why?"

"I just want to know how much weight I'm going to have to drag back to the cabin when you pass out from the pain."

Steven shot her a glance, then poured the alcohol generously across his palm. He looked up at her. "No problem." He shrugged. "Damn!" He sucked air through his teeth, his

face distorted in pain. He dropped the bottle and seized his wrist. "God!" Turning to avoid her I-told-you-so-expression, he mouthed every vulgar word in his vocabulary.

"Men!" Eve snorted and allowed him to finish his agonizing.

After several versions of the pain shuffle, he surrendered his throbbing hand for her to dress. She silently applied the closures, hopefully for the last time. She avoided looking at the inflamed gaps that had reopened from his fight with Judd. At least the bleeding had stopped. The sterile gauze was nearly gone, so she made sure she wrapped the bandage as efficiently as possible.

"Steven, do you think the blood on these shoes belongs to Sara's mother?"

"I hope not, but it doesn't look good, especially since she disappeared suddenly." He leaned forward to look into her eyes. "Don't worry. We are going to get Sara away from that bastard."

Eve nodded and smiled weakly.

Steven looked back at Judd. He was beginning to move.

"I think sleeping beauty is back with us." He pulled the gun from his waistband and strolled over to Judd.

"Good morning, princess. We need to talk." Steven stooped to look into Judd's face. His reddened eyelids were beginning to swell, and he had a large purplish knot on his forehead where Steven's boot had landed.

"Tell me, Judd, just what have you told the bureau?" Steven's fist itched to hit him again as he fingered the trigger on the gun.

Judd groaned and smiled sadistically. "I told them that you had gone nuts ... that you killed Carter and Dolan, that I even suspected you of killing some innocent trucker. Now you're planning on running off with the diamonds and Miss Ryan," he said in a hoarse tone.

"You're full of shit! They will never believe that!" Steven stood to pump the blood back into his legs.

"They already do believe it, since I e-mailed them digital photos of you being less than professional with the lovely lady." Judd laughed a little too loud.

Steven rubbed the back of his neck hard and started to pace.

"What's a matter, Steven, getting nervous?" Judd curled his lip in a twisted smile.

"What about Beckard's plan to sell the diamonds?"

"Been there, done that! Back in the seventies, when you were just a snot-nosed kid, I was on a special task force to bust a diamond-selling scam in Arizona. I did a good job, too. I got the bureau to believe it was happening again, this time with Beckard. They already had proof of his smuggling and asked me to take the case. I taped a few phone calls and gave them a good reason to believe he was going to swindle some investors, just to lead them off our trail." He gave Steven a superior gaze.

“Trail?”

“Beckard and I are splitting the diamonds.”

Steven thrust his hand through his hair. “I wouldn’t trust Beckard as far as I could throw him!”

“Well, that’s my problem, isn’t it?” Judd smiled. “Your problem is they are going to be looking for you!”

Steven kicked a rock, and it landed with a thud against Judd’s shoulder. His eyes were stamped with pain as he twisted his wrists behind his back.

“What about your family, Judd? Don’t you care what happens to them? Why do you need to risk so much?” Steven’s finger slipped up to wipe a bead of sweat off his forehead.

“Family? You asshole! I don’t have a family! The bureau is my family! Ungrateful one, at that!” His voice was grating. Squinting at the sun, he squirmed like a worm on a hook.

“Look, I want some water ... I’m not going to talk anymore until I get some.” He licked at his parched lips and tugged angrily at the handcuffs.

Eve stomped over to the backseat of her car grabbing the half-gallon of water she kept on the floor. She clenched her teeth as she dangled it over his face. He rolled over, face up, with his eyes slit against the sun.

“Open wide!” she ordered. He opened his mouth slightly, and she poured a small amount in.

“God, it’s warm!” His lips curled in aversion.

Eve blinked innocently. “Well, for heaven’s sake, why didn’t you say you wanted ice? You want the water or not?”

He opened his mouth again, and this time she poured to overflowing. Judd coughed and gasped for air as Eve continued spilling the water over his face.

Steven stopped pacing and frowned. “You mean there is no Western Allied Lifetime Diamond Organization?”

Judd sputtered and wheezed for air with his cheek set against the wet sand. He glared at Eve while trying to clear the water from his throat.

She took a sip of the water and gave Steven a gulp, then returned it to the car.

“No, Steven, there is no Western Allied Lifetime Diamond Organization. Now, are you going to ask me about Santa Claus?” Judd raised his head and smiled.

Steven shook his head. “So if the diamonds aren’t going to be sold to investors, then who are you going to sell them to?”

“Dealers, Steven.”

Steven whirled around to see Beckard holding Eve in a headlock. The muzzle of his gun was pressed firmly against her pale throat. Steven avoided the terror in Eve’s expression

and locked eyes with Beckard. His steely blue eyes showed no emotion whatsoever, and Steven knew Beckard wouldn't have a problem hurting Eve if he wanted to.

"Toss the gun this way, Steven," Beckard said smoothly. Steven closed his eyes slowly, as if in pain, and then slid Judd's pistol toward Beckard's feet.

"Well, it's about goddamn time you got here!" Judd rasped. "Get these cuffs off me!"

Steven flinched as the shot rang out. He turned and looked down to see Judd, his mouth agape, eyes wide open, with the bullet hole bored neatly between them. He had a look of surprise molded on his face. A scarlet stream flowed freely from the back of his head and pooled onto the hot sand, spilling his life force back into the earth. Steven's head snapped back to stare at Beckard.

"What?" he asked calmly. "I didn't need him anymore. He performed all of his duties in an excellent manner. He played the game well, planted all the records. The only mistake he made was trusting me."

He pushed Eve hard, making her walk in front of him. Steven put his hands out to catch her. He wanted blood. He wanted to rip Beckard's heart out.

"Now what?" Steven asked, steadying Eve by the elbow.

"Now you hand over the diamonds." Beckard stared coldly.

Steven dug into his pocket and slowly pulled them out.

"Just put them here on the rock. How many did you find?" Beckard raised the gun.

"Well, I'm not sure now ... lemme see." Steven drawled.

Beckard was losing his cool. "Just count them!" He reached out, grabbed Eve by the hair, and eased her to her knees. She yelped, as he canted her head back and twisted her hair up tight against her scalp.

"All right! Let her go!" Steven snarled.

His cool tone recovered, Beckard said, "Count first."

"Aside from your whimpering, you sure haven't said much, Eve. Did you miss me?" He nuzzled his face next to hers while watching Steven's every move.

"Like a hemorrhoid." She spoke through gritted teeth.

Steven suppressed a smile. "We have seventy-four."

"No, I have seventy-four, but you're still short by six." Beckard tightened his grip on Eve's hair, tears sprung in her eyes.

"Where are they?" he demanded.

"Still in the car!" Steven leaned forward, aching to break Beckard's arm.

Beckard released Eve's hair and pushed her forward. She threw her hands out in front of her, slapping the sand as she hit. Steven immediately bent down to help her to her feet.

"Well, well ... you got yourself a real gentleman this time, didn't you, Eve? Let's hope he's a smart gentleman."

Beckard motioned for them to walk toward the road, scraped the diamonds into his pocket, and snagged Steven's backpack.

"We'll have to look for them later. It's way too hot for my blood. I'm sure you won't mind returning to the honeymoon cabin?" He smiled smugly. "We'll wait there."

Steven took Eve's arm and guided her by the elbow. She rubbed her hands together, then blew off the sting.

"At least cover him up!" Eve pointed to Judd's blank stare.

Michael signaled for them to walk, then tossed Judd's jacket over his face.

"I hope they don't get home while we're there. This would scare little Sara to death," Eve whispered.

"Either speak up so I can hear you, or shut the hell up!" Beckard ordered from behind.



## Chapter Seventeen

The generator hummed quietly as the air conditioner blasted cool air into the living room. With her eyes closed, Eve lamented the fact that the memory of her best and worst experiences would take place in the same cabin.

“Eve, why don’t you get me some cold water?” Beckard motioned toward the kitchen as he signaled for Steven to sit on the couch.

“She’s good with water.” He smiled at Steven.

Eve shot him a foul look and walked to the kitchen. The thought of having Steven and Michael in the same room together aggravated her to no end. The reaction she felt nagged at the back of her mind. Then it hit her. She’d had the same feeling the day she found her father reading her diary. That wasn’t a pretty day, either. She looked around for something sharp to poke Michael with, then shed the idea, not wanting to press her luck or Steven’s.

Wandering around the kitchen, she put off the moment she had to return and look into Michael’s smug face. She opened and loudly closed several of the cabinets before finding the glasses. That one’s for Michael. It was a thirty-two-ounce plastic tumbler, with “Eat the Worm” on it. She was sure he would appreciate the fine craftsmanship.

“Just set it on the end table. I want to make sure the water stays in the glass,” Beckard ordered from the recliner.

Eve sat on the floor adjacent to them.

“Well, now, isn’t this cozy?” Michael took a long drink, cocking his head one-eyed around the wide tumbler to watch them.

Steven smiled coolly. “What’s your plan now, Beckard?”

“The plan is the same as it always was, I get the diamonds, and you get the blame.” A deep breathy sound echoed back from the tumbler, he gulped again. A puff of breath caused a lock of hair to flutter up off his forehead. Eve bit into her lip to keep from laughing.

"Just how the hell do you think you're going to pull this off? The agency has been watching you for weeks."

Beckard's eyes narrowed as he examined Steven's Walther. "Judd was the one watching me ... and watching you."

Steven frowned. "Why would he watch me?"

"Well, how the hell else could he add or subtract things from your file?"

"What kind of things?" Steven asked uneasily.

Eve felt slightly dizzy as her head switched back and forth between Steven and Michael, like she was watching a particularly engrossing tennis match.

"Observations mostly -- lonely widower, burned out, performance suffering, and looking to retire." Michael held out his glass for Eve to refill it.

She reluctantly took it and walked to the kitchen, keeping her eyes on the two men. She strained to hear what they were saying as she poured the water and scanned the kitchen for something lethal to add to the glass. Unfortunately, she thought he would probably detect cleansing powder. She returned to the living room.

"Judd didn't know I was going to retire."

"Oh, yes, Steven, he did." Michael pointed the gun at Eve, motioning for her to set the tumbler on the table before returning to her seat on the floor.

Steven painfully studied the ceiling with a thoughtful expression.

"So, Eve, my dear, maybe you should take your new boyfriend's request for a last meal?" He looked at Steven. "Did she tell you she is an excellent cook?" He smiled as he slid his foot under her thigh and rubbed the top of his shoe against it. Eve recoiled as if from a hot flame. Beckard stiffened and gripped the gun as she slowly rose and walked over to sit next to Steven.

Eve looked at Michael and felt sick. "Last meal?" Her voice was barely audible.

"You didn't really think I would let him out of this alive, did you?" He sipped at his water.

"There's no way you can get away with this. You will be in custody in a matter of hours." Steven laced his fingers with Eve's. His thumb firmly stroked the top of her hand.

Beckard threw him a satisfied smile. "Now that's where you're wrong. You see, Judd switched our dental records. So when they find your charred, crispy body, they'll think it's me."

"Didn't I see this in a movie?" Steven smiled, matching Beckard's cool demeanor.

Beckard laughed. "I hate to be so unoriginal, but it probably worked there, too."

Eve gripped Steven's hand, digging her fingers into the soft skin between his knuckles. She pushed away a brief vision of Steven's smoldering, charred body and burrowed closer to him.

"This whole mission was to just get the bureau to believe that you're dead?" Steven demanded.

"Just? No, not just me dead, but also that you killed Judd, Carter, and Dolan before you made your way out of the country with Eve and the diamonds."

"You have more than one ticket?" Eve asked as a wave of nausea washed over her.

He tilted his head and smiled. "Yes, Eve, one for me and one for you." He mouthed a kiss in her direction.

She caught her breath and leaned against Steven. It took several seconds before she began to breathe again.

She jumped when Michael suddenly slapped his hand against his thigh.

"I'm hungry. Steven, join me in the kitchen. You can tell Eve what you'd like to eat, and I can tell you what she likes in the bedroom."

Eve vaulted forward with a snarl. Steven quickly wrapped his arm around her waist to restrain her as Michael aimed the gun at her head. He drew her back next to him.

"You think you're really funny, don't you, you pompous jerk?" Steven said.

Michael threw his head back and laughed, then reduced it to a charming smile. "Shall we?" He signaled for them to go to the kitchen. "You go first, Eve."

Eve walked to the kitchen keeping her eyes locked on Michael.

"Now you." Michael directed Steven past Eve and pointed to the yellow vinyl-cushioned chair at the end of the table.

"Just keep your hands where I can see them." Michael eased down in the chair at the opposite end of the small table and rested his elbows on the smooth Formica top. The only other evidence of life in the kitchen was a small speckled philodendron that hung from the ceiling next to the window. The plant lazily swayed on the lemon-colored macramé hanger.

The kitchen was sparse and simple, just the essentials. A couple of iron skillets hung behind the stove next to a barely used oven and a small harvest-gold refrigerator.

"Eve, how about some of your chicken mushroom piccata?" Michael said with his usual arrogance.

"Would you like that with or without hemlock?" she said dryly.

"It damn well better be without!" He glared.

Eve closed her eyes tightly. "Steven, what would you like?"

It had been a very long time since a woman asked him what he wanted her to cook. His eyes lost focus. He really wanted her to cook something that took hours to simmer while they made love all afternoon on his king-size bed back in his apartment. He wanted to taste her, tickle her, and suck on those crazy toes of hers. Unless he got them out of this mess, he would die with that desire.

"We could get some take-out." He smiled at Michael.

Eve opened the refrigerator. "Looks like chicken." She pulled the chicken, butter, and milk from the top shelf. They watched intently as she artfully wielded the cleaver. Off with the wings, then the legs were cleanly removed. She gazed over at Michael as she severed the thigh from the leg with one swift, loud chop, causing him to blink once. She smiled with satisfaction as her finger expertly marked every joint. She quartered the breast with two whacks. Scoring the back, she held it up as she bared her teeth and twisted it into two pieces. She totally dismembered the fowl in less than two minutes.

"Want to know what I'm thinking about when I do this?" Eve asked as she seasoned the meat.

"No!" Both men voiced in unison.

They watched in silence as she nimbly moved about the kitchen, heating the pans and cutting up fresh garden vegetables. It was like watching a ballet in fine cuisine, and all that was missing was a Strauss piece playing in the background.

Steven wondered if she was as exciting when she painted a picture. Did she ever paint in the nude? Where did she get ideas for her ads? What movies did she like? What books had she read? There were so many things he wanted to discover about Eve. They were so many more good reasons to stay alive. She intrigued him.

She set a basket of baking-powder biscuits in the center of the table, followed by a plate of golden-brown fried chicken and a bowl of fresh steamed vegetables.

"Sorry, the potatoes are instant." She looked at Steven.

"Stop apologizing, this looks great." He reached out to squeeze her wrist.

"Sweet." Michael gave Steven a fake smile.

There was a knock at the door.

"Eve, get that, will you?" Michael motioned and reached for a piece of white meat.

Steven half rose from his seat.

"Just let Eve get it!" Michael ordered, holding up the gun.

Eve stepped lightly toward the door with her heart pounding. Sara's dad wouldn't knock on his own door. Maybe it was the little old man again. She opened the door a crack and stood dumbfounded.

"Susan!" She threw the door open, lunged forward, and hugged her tightly, whispering a mile a minute.

"Oh, my God, did Hanson send you out here? You have to go get help. We're being held hostage by Michael, and he's going to kill Steve --"

"Hello, baby."

Eve spun around to see Steven with Michael two feet behind him. Susan rushed past them and threw her arms around Michael's neck.

"Whoa, doll, I have a gun here!" Michael nudged her back to free up the weapon.

Eve stood at the door with her mouth open, trying to make some sense in what she was seeing.

Susan turned around, giggling. "You didn't know, did you, Eve?"

The room filled with the fragrance of Susan's sweet perfume, clouding Eve's ability to think. Susan looked great in her baby-blue designer jeans fitting snug around the curve of her hips. Her emerald knit top was low cut, revealing nearly all of her lush, tanned breasts. Eve had never been allowed to don slut wear growing up; titty-tops were what Blanca called them.

"You are absolutely and irrevocably fired!" Eve glared at Susan.

Susan roared with laughter, sending her breasts into a vertical dance.

"Like I care! When Michael sells all these diamonds, I'll never have to work again." She flipped back a lock of blond hair and reached around to fondle Michael's butt. He smiled and motioned for them to return to the kitchen.

"Did you have any trouble finding the place?" Michael gave her a quick, open-eyed kiss as Steven and Eve returned to the kitchen table.

"Nope, I just followed the signal of your pocket logger."

"We were sitting down to eat, come join us." Michael guided her to the table and pointed to the chair next to Eve.

"Eve, you're not eating." Michael frowned.

Eve glowered at Susan. "I'm not hungry."

Susan shrugged and snagged a chicken leg. She eyed Steven curiously as she ate. A gloss of tallow covered her plumb-colored lipstick. She winked at him and raised her eyebrows in flirtation as she licked at the chicken leg.

"Down, girl." Michael smiled. "He isn't long for this world. Besides, he's a cop type."

Susan cringed. "Yuck! Why would anyone want to be a cop?"

"Why would anyone want to be a dumb blond?" Eve replied in defense.

"You look familiar to me. Have we met?" Steven asked.

"I don't think so. I work ... er, used to work for Eve, at the advertising agency." She giggled at Eve.

"Oh, yeah, I remember you slinking in and out of Hanson's when I was watching the place."

"That's right! You were watching Eve from the outside, and Benjamin and I were watching her from the inside." She deliberately sucked her fingers, leaving a kissing noise at each tip.

"Benjamin!" Eve exclaimed.

"Yeah, Benjamin and I told Michael everything you said and did. Benjamin even put the tracer on your car, and he helped plant the diamonds."

Steven leaned forward casually. "So, where is Benjamin now?"

Susan looked at Michael. A loony smile spread over her face, and her green eyes glittered as she held up his knife. "He isn't with us any longer." She brought the knife down swiftly to spear another piece of chicken, causing the table to vibrate.

"Benjamin is dead?" Eve's voice quivered as she backed away from Susan.

Susan made a phony sad face. "He was a dweeb!"

Steven put an arm around Eve as she cried softly.

"Boo-hoo. You're probably the only one who would care about that ugly creep," Susan mocked. She hunched her shoulders and smiled at Michael. "Can I see them?"

He reached in his pocket and poured the stones onto the table. She leaned over and sucked on his neck.

"Wipe your mouth before you do that, dammit!" He frowned and wiped his neck with her napkin. She gathered up the stones and rolled them around in her palm.

Steven eyed Michael. "So tell me, Beckard, what is this weird influence you have over women?"

"You know, I've thought about that, and ... well ... I think it's my ass. They just love my ass," he said smoothly, smiling at Eve, then Susan.

Susan chuckled. Eve lowered her head, then started stacking dishes to clear the table.

Steven leaned back, clasped his hands behind his head, and pushed his feet out in front of him. "That's the way those diamonds came over from the African mines, isn't it? In your ass?"

Susan dropped the diamonds as if they had grown white hot.

"Hey! Don't lose them!" He gathered them up and put them back in his pocket, then glared at Steven. "So what if they did?"

"So, how many trips did it take to smuggle eighty diamonds?" Steven smirked.

"Who the hell cares? Point is, they're here, I'm rich, and you lose."

"We're rich." Susan corrected and slid her arms around his neck.

"Yeah, right." Michael threw Eve a smile over her shoulder.

## Chapter Eighteen

“Just leave the goddamn dishes!” Michael growled. “We have to go.” He pushed Eve away from the soapy dishwater and looked at his watch. “It’s almost four o’clock. Susan, go start the car.”

Steven clenched his fist, waiting for an opportunity to strike. Michael had gotten a little too casual. Michael marched them out to the road as Susan pulled up in his Lexus. He grabbed Steven’s cuffs from his backpack and secured Steven’s hands behind his back.

“Get in!” Michael opened the front door and pushed Steven in next to Susan.

Eve heard the sound of another engine and looked up to see Sara’s dad heading toward the cabin. Michael was tossing the backpack into the trunk when the little truck stopped not more than ten feet away. Both Sara and her dad spotted them. Sara’s frightened eyes met Eve’s, and she began saying something. Eve couldn’t hear her through the glass, but she knew what Sara was saying ... *Mama*. She was saying, *Mama*.

Michael quickly opened the back door and shoved Eve into the car, then slid in beside her.

“Go!” he shouted at Susan.

Eve strained to see Sara’s face and hoped she wouldn’t detect the fear in her eyes. Fighting back the ache rising in her chest, she forced a smile. Of course Sara would think she was her mother; after all, she was wearing the woman’s clothes. Her eyes shifted to the scowl on her stepfather’s face. He reminded her so very much of her own father, so stern and heartless. He resembled a gorilla, only less friendly. She stuck her tongue out at him before they rode out of view.

“If you want to get the rest of the diamonds, it would probably be a good idea to turn back the other way.” Steven jerked his head back toward Michael. “And if you want to get me aroused, you should slide your hand a little farther up my leg.” He shot Susan a heated

glance. She blushed and returned her hand to the steering wheel, turning slightly to shrug at Michael.

"Turn the car around, Susan." Michael eyed her keenly.

Eve looked out her window to harbor a smile. She glanced up from the back window to see the trucker's cab parked at the top of the plateau. It was too high to tell if the trucker was in it, and she wondered where the trailer was parked. Sunk like an anvil in some soft sand somewhere, she hoped.

They pulled up next to the Mustang. Steven's eyes seemed to be scanning the site to map out the best escape route.

"Out!" Michael opened Steven's door. "Eve, you get out on Susan's side."

Michael dug into his pocket for the key to Steven's handcuffs. "Turn around. You have work to do."

Steven spoke over his shoulder. "Don't you have enough? Why the hell are you sticking around for six measly diamonds?"

The cuff sprang open as Michael turned the key. "You don't know much about diamonds do you?"

Steven shrugged dispassionately as Michael lectured.

"Those six measly diamonds are worth over fifty thousand dollars each, maybe more when my cutter works on them!"

"Doesn't the fact that they were transported in your ass cause them to lose value?" Steven pushed to unnerve him.

"You shit! They're here somewhere, and I'm not leaving without them!" Michael lost his grip on the Walther as he fumbled with the key.

Instantly, Steven propelled himself backward into Michael and spun around to plow a hard fist into his diaphragm, then immediately cocked his fist back again, to hit Michael hard just below his left cheekbone. Michael's eyes widened for a moment as he dropped backward, sending the Walther skidding across the dry ground.

Eve and Susan heard the struggle and were just rounding the front of the car when the gun slid by them. A moment's glance at one another, and they began to run side by side, pushing at each other as they raced for the gun. Eve grabbed a handful of Susan's blouse to slow her down, and Susan whirled around, slapping Eve's hands away.

The blisters on Eve's feet were still raw, and she suffered with the stinging pain of each step. Susan gripped Eve's arm in a death lock, just as her fingers were inches from the gun. She leaned back into it, swung Eve out in a big circle, and smashed her into Steven, now running up from behind, sending them both sprawling in a tangle of extremities.

"Got it!" Susan cried out, standing with a bold, deadly aim.



“Michael!” Susan screamed. “Michael!” Trying to see him, she danced about on her toes as if they were on fire.

“He’s taking a nap,” Steven said dryly, helping Eve to her feet.

“Stay where you are!” Susan’s expression was hysterical. “Just stay where you are!”

*ZZZWOP!* An enormous desert beetle suddenly collided with Susan’s head, causing her to jerk sideways. She screamed and jumped up and down. Shaking her head, she swatted madly at her hair, shrieking wicked words.

Eve gave Steven an incredulous look, just seconds before Susan started firing the gun.

“Get down!” In a flash, Steven had Eve on the ground and covered from head to toe with his own body. A bullet whizzed somewhere overhead. Eye to eye, Steven looked down at her. “You okay?” She nodded and he kissed her quickly. He turned his head to look at Susan. She was still frantically fighting to remove the gargantuan beetle tangled in her hair. Another volley of shots aimed at nothing rang out. Then silence.

“Ready? Go!” He grabbed her hand and hauled her up beside him and into a low-crouched run. Another shot was fired, and a spray of dirt snapped near their feet as they ran for the rocks in front of them. They were far enough away that Eve heard Steven groan before she heard the gun pop. Her head snapped back at him.

“Go! I’m right behind you!” Steven yelled.

Eve stretched out her arms to break her crash against the face of the rock. She leaned her damp cheek against the warm grit and, with her breath sawing, turned around to watch for Steven.

“Oh, my God, Steven, you’re hit!” She helplessly held her trembling hands inches above the growing red stain on his sleeve.

He turned and stood with his butt braced against the huge rock, hands on his knees, panting to recover his breath, before lifting the fabric to look. “It’s just a graze,” he said through clenched molars.

Eve burst into tears. “That’s what they say in the movies, just before they keel over and die!”

“Eve, honey, I need you to be strong right now, so you have to stay calm.”

She hated that she had lost her cool again. She bit into her lower lip and tried to compose herself.

Steven winced as he pulled her against his chest. “I’m not going to die!”

“Promise?” She sniffed.

“I won’t, if you won’t.” His breath pushed against her lips. “Deal?”

She knew it wasn’t the time or the place, but she kissed him anyway, brushing her lips gently against his. “Ummm, salty.” It felt good and she wanted to savor him again.

Another gunshot reminded them of where they were. Steven yanked her back behind a boulder and looked up to see if there was any way up or out.

"We have to get out of here before she loses her beetle buddy and comes after us." He eyed the pile of boulders above them.

"Damn, I wish I had my gun," Steven said.

Eve reached into her blouse and pulled out a fork. "Will this help?"

Steven couldn't keep the smile off his face. "It will, the next time I go to Fong Lee's. I never could learn to use chopsticks."

She shrugged. "I had it in my hand when Michael pushed me out of the kitchen." She put it back in her bra next to Blanca's protection necklace.

"Where is Michael?" Eve tried to see around the edge of the rock.

Steven pulled her back. "I cuffed him, hands and feet, and I have the key right here. He'll stay that way unless little Miss Got-a-bug-in-her-hair shoots them off." He rose slowly to look over the rock.

"We need some altitude to keep an eye on them. You mind climbing?" he asked as he gazed up at the boulders.

She shivered as she looked at the looming rocks above. "It's not the climbing I mind; it's the falling down into a lifeless, crumpled heap that makes me uncomfortable."

"I promise I won't let you fall," he said as he slipped his arm around her shoulders, pushed her hair back, and plied a warm kiss to her cheek.

She turned her face to his. "So you actually think that will persuade me?"

"I don't have time to persuade you." His lips were warm and salty. He tilted his head to taste more, then widened his mouth as the warmth of his tongue found hers.

What was this delicious power he had over her body? Passion blazed through her, and she knew instantly that she would joyfully and unquestioningly follow him to the gates of death if he asked her to. When she thought of all the years she had wasted with wrong men, Michael-types, she grew angry. How could she have known that there was someone out there who could make her feel so damned alive ... and ... happy?

His face held a look of satisfaction as she murmured a soft groan of surrender.

Three bullets ricocheted off the boulder next to them showering a spray of flecks and dust. Their lips rapidly parted.

"Nice touch. Consider me persuaded." She ducked lower behind the boulder.

"This way." Steven led her through the narrow crevice behind the boulder. She struggled to keep her shoes from getting wedged between the rocks as they slowly ascended.

"We'll be able to see them from up there." Steven nodded to a point twenty feet above. He turned to offer his hand, and groaned as he fingered the ledge.

"Steven, your hand ..."

"Don't worry about my hand, just watch your step." He pulled her up beside him as if she were weightless. She wedged herself between the two boulders and used her feet to propel herself upward to spare his hand.

"You okay?"

Eve nodded. Steven ran his fingers over the rock above, then pulled himself up, marking each hold with an imprint of blood.

"Damn it, it's not going to be hard to follow us."

"Here." She untied the knot at the front of her blouse and ripped a strip of fabric all the way around her waist. Bracing herself between the rocks, she wrapped the long strip of fabric snugly around his hand.

"Thanks." He winced and turned to climb up.

"Wait!" She tore a wider strip, turning her fashion to bare midriff, and wrapped it tight around the wound on his arm.

"One more, and I'll be the happiest man in town." He brushed his knuckles lightly against her stomach and grinned back the pain.

"You don't have to get hurt. I promise to make you happy." She ran her fingers through his damp hair, then fisted a handful to tug him to her lips. Eve felt a flush rise to the top of her head and would have traded everything she owned to be somewhere, anywhere, else alone with him. She thought of his wife and wondered what their life had been like. Could Steven love her as much as he had Laura? Her heart broke for him and the pain he must have gone through when she died, and it made her love him more.

"Onward," Steven whispered.

They turned together, hands embracing the hard, gravelly surface of the boulder. Steven's gaze darted from rock to rock as he plotted the course, making sure there was firm ground beneath them. He found her hand and tugged her behind his back, keeping a low stance. Eve mimicked his movements and took a deep breath, ignoring her fear.

"Looks like you've done this before." She squeezed his hand as she tugged her foot from a crack.

"Yeah, I've done some climbing. The government pays us to stay in shape. The only difference is that I was inside, I had two good hands, and no one was shooting at me. Other than that, it's the same." He took a long step up and pulled her up behind him.

Eve chuckled.

"What's funny?" He looked back over his shoulder.

"We have the same sense of humor, even when it's scary."

He stopped short, pulled her arm around his waist, and flattened his hand on top of hers. She molded her body to his back and reached around to stroke his chest. A peculiar

cool breeze suddenly surrounded them, and she experienced a brief moment of peace. She could have stood like this forever. He pulled her hand up and gave it a quick kiss.

"Come on, we're almost there." He stepped up onto the next rock and peered around the edge.

"Looks like Susan took off in Michael's car." He squinted to make out the tire tracks.

"Without Michael?" Eve rose up on her toes to see over the edge of the rock. "I wonder if she has the diamonds."

"My guess is she burglarized his pockets before she took off."

"Michael is going to be so pissed!" Eve smirked.

Steven glanced up. "These rocks connect to the bluff next to the cabin. There must be another back road. I saw a truck cab up on top earlier." He crouched down to scan the scene again.

"I saw it, too! It belongs to that creep." She pushed back from the rock.

A burly arm burst over the top of the ridge as a hand swooped down to scoop up a massive fist full of Eve's hair. The trucker lifted her completely off her feet and began hauling her up to the top of the boulder. She frantically reached out for Steven, but the best she could do was palm the air, her arms and legs thrashing wildly. With her throat folded down in an unnatural position, she emitted a low cry.

Steven whirled around to see the trucker's red face looming over Eve's struggling body. He was pulling her up fast. Steven's eyes were riveted on the knife the trucker gripped in his other hand. If he was able to hoist her all the way up, he would have free access to her throat.

Eve grasped the front of her blouse and ripped it open. Steven eyed the fork holstered in her bra, grabbed it, and lunged forward. He gripped the trucker's wrist and with a violent force slammed the tines down into his forearm, before adding an effective twist.

With a yowl, the trucker released Eve, spilling her into a heap on the rock below. He reared up to his knees and, with his knife raised, plunged at Steven. The force of his weight sent both of them tumbling over the edge to the rocks below.

As Eve struggled to her feet, a sharp pain shot through her ankle and didn't stop until it reached the top of her head. She blinked in bewilderment. "Steven?" She pivoted on her heel. "Steven?"

She limped to the edge of the rock, to look below. "Nooooooo!"

## Chapter Nineteen

The sounds of their struggle brought her some reassurance. At least the noise told her Steven was alive. She looked around for a weapon, the fork, something, anything to help. In the next heartbeat, she heard a night bird off in the distance, and then everything was dead quiet. She bit hard into her lower lip until she tasted blood.

“Oh, please, please,” she whispered. “Let him be okay.” She gathered a deep breath to call out to him, then decided not to for fear it would distract him.

“Ahhhh!” The scream pierced the air, like a trumpet at daybreak. Eve, insane with fear, leaned out to see the men rolling across the rock below and then disappear over the edge. She thought she saw the knife in Steven’s hand, but she wasn’t sure. She grasped Blanca’s protection stone and said a quick prayer.

She limped back and forth, barely noticing the pain as she paced. She gazed up at the edge of the plateau just feet from where she stood. With palms burning and raw, she brailled the rough surface of the rocks as they tested her strength with each trembling movement. A pain-filled yelp helped her swing her ankle onto the rim of the plateau, to pull her weight up and over the edge. She rested there a moment, collecting her thoughts and breath. She frantically scanned the rocks below for a glimpse of Steven. “Where are you?” she whispered, rubbing the soreness from the back of her head. “Please, God, let him be okay.”

She glanced back over her shoulder and saw the trucker’s cab parked at the top of the road. Her ankle throbbed madly, and it took longer than she had hoped to cover only thirty feet. She reached up to grasp the door handle just above her shoulder and tugged hard to swing the door open. The harsh smell of stale beer assaulted her as she gripped the handle to pull herself up and into the seat. She knocked a six-pack of hot empty cans from the seat with a clatter and found herself settling into the indentation made by the trucker’s butt. Yuck.

The steering wheel was hot and greasy, the worn brown seats cracked and mended with duct tape now melting in the late afternoon sun. She tried to rub the stickiness from her hand as she skimmed the worn dashboard -- so many knobs and so little time. *I might as well be aboard the alien mother ship. Okay, Steven needs you to be calm, so just relax, and figure this out. You're a smart girl. Dear God ... Steven ... I have to get to him!*

Everything was weird. The keys dangled from the ignition on the left. That must be a starter button just like the one on Uncle Al's boat. She had a lot of memories of visits to the lake with Blanca and dear old dad. That's where she learned to swim, a kind of swim or die situation. She could still hear the echo of her father's maniacal laughter. Not at all like the family vacations she had always dreamed about.

As Steven said, that was then and this is now, and her problems were more immediate than her dysfunctional family at the moment.

At least there was only one clutch to push, for the umpteen gears this sucker must have. *Where the hell is reverse? Probably ... well ... maybe. Oh, screw this. Just start the damn thing!*

She jammed in the clutch, turned the key, and pushed the button. The giant engine sprang to life. The exhaust stack breathed hot fumes and smoke into the air. Afraid to release the clutch, she grabbed the gear stick and rammed it down. The ghastly grinding noise made her teeth ache, and she sent the stick in another direction, getting the same chain-saw-against-metal effect. She whimpered and used both hands to shove the gear stick up as far as it would go. The machine groaned painfully, but willfully stood its ground.

She pounded on the dash furiously, then pulled and pushed at every knob within reach. As she slammed her palm against one of the knobs, the cab bucked backward.

"Oh, my God!" She gripped the wheel fiercely in anticipation, keeping her foot solidly on the clutch, but the wheels stopped again.

"So that's the way it's going to be!" She raked both hands through her hair and brought her fists down solidly on the steering wheel. "Bastard!" She began repeating her previous pattern, striking every gauge, turning every knob.

"Whoa ... jackpot!" Eve's eyes grew large, and she anxiously leaned to the side to see into the side mirror, guiding the cab as it crept along the road. Her knuckles were white from the death-grip she had on the steering wheel as she picked up speed. Her slender arms quivered like rubber bands as she steadied the wheel. The massive tires crunched across the sand pulverizing everything in their path. She could understand why this mass of vermicular steel could make a man feel powerful. She wished it would do the same for her, but all she felt at the moment was small and indefensible.

The slope of the road sucked the heavy cab backward a little too fast for her liking, and she hit the brake. Pain shot up her right leg. "Damn!" Time to choose ... clutch or brake; she only had one good foot. God, her heart was racing. She lifted her left foot from the clutch to apply the brake, and the engine immediately pitched powerfully, sputtered, and died.

She grasped the wheel, adrenaline surging, heart pounding, mind reeling. The steering wheel developed rigor mortis, and stubbornly resisted Eve's frantic tugs and turns. The power steering was gone! The cab shuddered, groaned, and creaked as it rolled steadily toward the base of the road. Too frightened to restart the engine, she continued to yank helplessly at the unyielding wheel.

Eve stared uncomprehendingly into the side mirror, as the truck headed for the edge of the butte. With a bloodcurdling yell, she wrenched the steering wheel, but it was too late. She felt the sudden jerk as the back wheels rolled over the edge. The cab shuddered with a chain of earsplitting screeches.

"Steven!" If she was going to die, she wanted him to be the last thing on her mind.

She locked her hands around the steering wheel, and ducked her head. The noise of chassis against rock was deafening, and then came moments of weightlessness before the crash. The monster cab was overturned, and Eve was thrown violently against the opposite door. The sound of shattering glass was followed by a series of shrieking scrapes and then metal against wood.

Endless minutes went by. Eve coughed back the thick smell of fuel and opened her eyes. Dear God, every inch of her body hurt. The cab, now on its side, dropped again, sinking deeper into the pile of debris surrounding it. She clutched the seat and struggled to see out the windows.

With all the glass shattered, she expected to feel a gust of wind from outside, but the air was quite still. Miraculously, none of the truck windows were broken -- cracked, but not broken. Wide-eyed and heart pounding, she seized the gearshift to tow herself to an upright position. What on earth? She gazed at the piece of wood propped against the windshield for several moments before she realized what it was. It read, "Who killed the Cook?" Her breath tore on a strangled sob. "Oh, my God! Sara! Oh, no, Sara!"

Panic gripped her throat as she crawled to reach the driver's door. Its window now faced the sky, framing a dust-swirled sunset. She jiggled the handle furiously, but it wouldn't budge. With a scream, she slammed her palm against the glass. The thought of dying entombed in the repulsive cab of Tommy Barnes's truck sent a wave of nausea through her aching body.

She must have passed out for a few minutes from the shock of the crash. She came to with a gasp for air. Using both hands, she painfully cranked the window down, inch by inch, as plumes of dust wafted into the cab. She choked and held onto the steering wheel as the truck dropped again, crushing its weight against the foundation of the cabin.

She let out a sharp scream when she looked up to see a hand shoot into the open window. One eye was red and swollen, and there was a trickle of blood running down the side of his face. The hair on one side of his head was flattened and matted with blood. His shirt was ripped and filthy with dirt, sweat, and blood. He was gorgeous.

"Steven! I ... I w-was trying to get to you, and I ... I lost control. A-And I was s-so s-scared!" She sobbed as she grasped his hand. "Oh, God, I was so afraid you were d-dead!" She bumped her head painfully on the door as she struggled from the cab. "Sara! We have to get to her!"

Bracing himself, Steven eased her slowly out to sit on the door. He crouched down to put his arms around her shoulders and scanned her body for trauma.

She cupped her hands around her mouth and called out, "Sara!" Her eyes scanned back and forth.

"Can you walk?" he asked hoarsely.

Her breath hitched. She bit her lip and shook her head. Steven turned slowly to find the easiest way off the mound of rubble.

"Okay, climb up." He turned around and motioned for her to mount his back.

"Steven, you can't! It's too hard." Her eyes stung, as she scanned the wreckage.

He looked back at her. "Trust me."

She rose, one-footed, to press herself against his back. Reaching back, he grabbed a leg in each hand and shrugged her onto his back. She kissed the side of his neck, as she slid her arms around his shoulders.

"Hold on tight." He took a step out onto a wheel and then tested a tangle of boards with the toe of his boot. Slowly he stepped out and quickly took another step before the boards caved in. Eve inhaled sharply and tightened her grip.

"Okay?"

"Uh-huh," she answered, with her eyes closed tightly.

Eve was aware of every muscle in Steven's back as they strained to carry her weight across the debris. Nails and boards scratched their skin and hooked their clothes as they descended the heap of rubble.

"Is the trucker ...?"

"Dead." His voice jerked as he took another step down.

"We have to look for Sara!"

Steven stumbled, and she gripped his shoulders tighter.

"We need to get help." He panted. "If she is alive under all this, there is no way we could get her out by ourselves. We have to find Judd's car to radio for help." His voice was husky and torn.

Eve released a ragged breath. "It's all my fault," she cried softly.

"It was an accident," Steven answered through clenched teeth. A last jarring step and they were finally on solid ground.

Steven stopped to shrug her higher onto his back, then turned toward the cabin, now resembling a lumber-lined bird's nest with a semi-truck cab perched in the middle of it.



“Stop. Let’s just listen for a minute,” Eve whispered. “Maybe we can hear something.”

A night bird chirped, then more snaps and pops as the cab settled deeper into the ruins.

“Sara!” Eve shouted toward her used-to-be room. “Sara!” Her voice cracked. Not a sound came from the cabin -- at least, no human sound.

“Sorry, sweetie.” Steven sighed. “Let’s get to that radio. We can have a rescue chopper here in less than an hour.”

“She’s just a little girl,” Eve cried softly.

Steven didn’t answer, but instead took quicker steps toward the car. He couldn’t bear to tell Eve that no one inside that cabin could possibly be alive.

Eve saw as they approached the car, even in the dusky light, that Michael was right where Steven had left him. All trussed up like a hog-tied calf, with his hands cuffed behind his back and ankles secured just below them.

“Where the hell have you been?” he screamed, red-faced, sweating and furious. “And what have you done with Susan?” He lifted his head and violently shook his bound wrists. “Take these goddamned cuffs off me!” He spit in their direction.

Eve quickly wriggled from Steven’s back and hopped toward Michael to stare at his face.

“Did you hear what I said, you moron? Tell your suck-shit boyfriend to take these goddamn cuffs off!” He glared at her with those ice-cold blue eyes.

“You’re in no position to be shouting demands!” Her rage spilled out, and with her teeth bared, Eve flew at Michael. Her arms flailed away, slapping at first, then pounding her fists into his stomach, shoulders, chest, and back. The sound of her yelling drowned out Michael’s grunts and groans. Her damp hair danced wildly in all directions as she delivered one punch after another, thoroughly draining her adrenaline overdose. Her face was finally set with a bold look of triumph.

Steven watched in admiration as she worked out her raw emotions, making a mental note never to piss her off to this degree.

Panting and spent, she finally rose and hopped back from Michael, wishing her ankle didn’t hurt so much. She would have taken great pleasure in kicking the hell out of him. She snorted like a prizefighter as she jerked the edges of her mini-blouse together and retied the knot.

Steven walked over and reached down to grab Michael by the collar, lifting up his limp body.

“Missed a spot.” He pointed to Michael’s nose.

Eve sneered and swung her fist back to strike.

“Wait!” Steven held up a hand.

She gave him a confused look.

"If you're going to hit someone in the nose with your fist, the first thing you want to do is curl your thumb over the top of your knuckles. That way you won't break it," Steven explained. "Your thumb, that is."

Eve looked down at her fist and repositioned her thumb. "Like this?" She held it up.

"Yeah, like that."

She drew back and gave Michael a harsh punch to his nose. He snarled as his head jerked back and blood spurted down his upper lip.

"You're right. I hardly felt a thing." She wiped her bloody knuckles down her jeans.

Steven gave him a shake. "Where is Judd's car, Michael?"

Michael gave him a disgusted look.

"Eve, where would you like to hit him next?" Steven asked dryly.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this now." She doubled her fist as her gaze drifted down and locked on his crotch.

"All right! It's parked about a half a mile down the road." Michael coughed and jerked his head in the general direction.

Steven let loose of Michael's collar, and he fell to the dirt with a thud.

"You'd better be telling the truth, or else I'm gonna let Eve have her way with you again."

Steven wrapped a supporting arm around Eve's ribs. "Let's go."

At first the sound was too distant to make out, pots, pans? A muted bell? They turned to look up the road, but in the early evening shadows, they could barely make out the strange-looking configuration.

The figure moving toward them slowly took the form of Mel Gillis walking his donkey. The cowbell around Polly's neck was softly tinkling. Her sides swayed back and forth. The tinware softly clinked in time with her hooves. Mel adjusted his worn hat as he walked toward them and then turned to adjust the donkey's load.

That's when they saw each other.

"Sara!" Eve screamed.

Sara nearly missed Mel's hands helping her down, as she jumped from Polly's back to race up the road.

"Mama!" Her little legs paddled madly beneath her.

Eve gasped. How on earth would Sara react when she realized she wasn't her mother?

Sara nearly knocked Eve off her foot as she leapt into her arms.

## Chapter Twenty

“It’s okay, baby, I’ve got you, and you’re okay now.” Eve cupped the back of Sara’s head. Steven helped her ease herself to the ground. She settled on her knees and rocked Sara’s frail body tightly against hers.

Steven stepped back. He didn’t want to scare the poor thing. He must be a sight for sore everything.

Mel started to confess before he reached them. “I heard some gunshots, so I stayed close to the cabin. Kind of thought the cops would be here by now. I knew I best get Sara away from there when her dad threw a fit over someone breakin’ in.” He crouched down to pat Sara on the back. “I snuck her out when he was in the kitchen slammin’ dishes.”

Steven motioned for Mel. “Must be some kind of miracle that you got her out of there, I’m pretty sure her dad is dead. He got hit by a truck, back at the cabin.” He spoke in low tones. “You didn’t happen to see a black utility vehicle up the road, did you?”

Mel looked in the direction of the cabin, a cloud of dust and smoke hung in the air. He jammed his hands into his pockets. “Can’t say that I did ... He’s dead, you say?” His blue eyes twinkled, and he dipped his head to wince back a smile. “That a friend of yours?” Mel nodded toward Judd’s body next to the rock. “And what about him?” His eyes drifted to Michael.

Their heads jerked up when they heard the waffa-waffa-waffa sound overhead. The noise grew louder and louder, and then a searchlight exploded the dimly lit evening into a bright panoramic view of the magnificent desert terrain. The swash blades whipped up whirls of dust, biting at their skin like a million red ants. Judd’s jacket was swooped up and hurled a good thirty feet away, exposing the rankled expression that remained carved on his ashen face.

“Stay where you are.” A voice commanded from the loud speaker. “FBI.”

Steven stepped closer to Eve and held his hands up and away from his body, then signaled Mel to do the same. Eve held Sara's head tightly against her chest and shielded her own eyes. The wind blew their hair wildly, stinging their cheeks and whipping cruelly against their throbbing ears.

"Everything is okay, sweetie." She knew she couldn't possibly hear her above the noise of the rotors, so she pushed her lips to the top of Sara's head.

In moments, several black vehicles thundered up and surrounded them. Eve squinted to see a well-dressed man exit one of the vehicles.

He walked toward Steven, brashly shaking his head. Steven cocked his ear down to hear what the man was saying. He was quite animated as he made chopping gestures to the air and then circled Steven, briskly pacing one way and then the other. She couldn't hear any of the words, but she was quite familiar with angry sign language. The man pointed to Judd and yelled something. Steven pointed to Michael and yelled back. She could only guess that Steven was trying to explain that Judd was a traitor and had gotten mixed up with the wrong people. So had she.

Eve shifted from knee to knee. They had gone numb from the pain some time ago. She kept Sara's head firmly pressed against her chest. The last thing she needed to see was Judd's humorless expression laughing at the stars, or Michael straining at his cuffs.

Steven began to walk slowly toward her.

"I have to go to headquarters!" Steven shouted.

Eve nodded and attempted to get to her feet.

Steven shook his head. "You have to go with them!" He pointed to one of the vehicles.

Eve felt her chest tighten. "Alone? What about Sara?"

"She can go with you!" He kneeled down and stroked Sara's head.

"Steven! When will I see you again?" She traced a light finger down his cheek.

"I wish we could go together." She wrapped her arms tight around his neck, squishing Sara in between them, and kissed him before he could go. He kissed her back, then pulled away quick. He cupped her neck and leaned his forehead against hers, then kissed her temple. He ignored the impatient agents standing behind him and said something to her, but she couldn't make out what it was.

The noise was deafening as the helicopter descended.

"I love you, Steven," she mouthed against his cheek.

He paused, then stood and surrendered his hands behind his back. The strip of fabric she had tied around his wounded arm fluttered defiantly as an agent handcuffed him. His gaze didn't leave hers until the agents turned to escort him to the chopper. The three of them walked hunched over to the door, and in the next moment, Steven was inside. She tried to see him, but all the windows were tinted black, just like the hole in her gut.

The blades spun faster, and the helicopter lifted in a cyclone of dust. Eve tried to watch as it moved from sight, but her eyes refused to stay open. She felt as if she just lost an arm and wondered if she would ever see Steven again.

A female agent approached her with a staunch posture, flashlight in hand. "Miss Ryan, you'll have to come with us."

Eve looked around to see Michael being shoved into one of the vehicles, and a van had magically appeared to remove Judd from the desert floor. Mel was nowhere to be seen.

"I don't think I can walk."

The agent nodded and motioned for a car. She lifted her wrist and said something into her transmitter, then pressed her fingers to her ear.

Just like in the movies. Eve thought as another vehicle rolled up next to them. Sara tightened her arms around her neck when the agent leaned down and tried to pull her away.

Eve squeezed her arms around Sara. "Couldn't I just hold her?"

Another agent opened the back door of the vehicle, and Eve and Sara were lifted together into the backseat. These two agents looked exactly like the ones who had escorted Steven to the chopper. They all looked alike to her. All except for the woman, that is.

"Yes, sir, no problem." The female agent was talking into her wrist again. The efficient tone in her voice annoyed Eve.

"You didn't happen to see a blond with a pocket full of rough diamonds and a bug in her hair, did you?" Eve's voice slurred with fatigue. "She was driving a white Lexus."

"Not that it's any of your business, but she is in custody," the female agent snapped.

Eve yawned. Somewhere in the middle of searching for diamonds, driving a truck off a cliff, and beating the shit out of Michael, she had run out of steam. Sara's hair brushed lightly against her chin. She hadn't looked up since the girl had jumped into her arms. Eve gave her a gentle squeeze and stroked her fingertips across Sara's shoulders, then leaned her head back against the seat.

The gust of cold wind woke her as the door of the car opened. She rubbed her eyes to clear her vision and squinted back the glare of the neon sign.

"Starlight Motel? Where are we?"

"Indio. You can stay here tonight. We'll have a doctor look at your ankle." The dome light bathed the agent. She was attractive, young, and very athletic-looking.

The driver slipped around the car and peeled Sara from Eve's chest. He carefully carried her limp body into the room and placed her gently on one of the beds. Eve wrapped an arm around a thick neck. The grunts the agent made with each step annoyed her. He was only carrying a hundred-twenty pounds, for God's sake. Steven could lift her as if she were feather light. She peeked behind him to make sure the female agent followed them into the room. The two men turned, nodded politely, and left them alone.

"I'm Tanya McCray." She handed Eve her purse as she walked to the phone. "I thought you might want this. I already searched it."

"Thanks." Eve winced, as she looked down at her ankle. "Why are we staying here? Don't we have to go to headquarters?"

"It's late, and the child needs rest," she answered curtly, with a peripheral stare. "By the looks of it, your ankle is broken. I don't think you'll be running off anywhere. An agent will be posted at your door all night"

Tanya made a call using only operative words. "Starlight. Yes ... Room eleven ... Doctor ... No ... Yes ... Dinner." Placing the receiver in the cradle, she slowly turned to face Eve.

"So, you were going to run away with Steven Malloy?"

"I just met him. We weren't running anywhere. He was being framed, you know."

Tanya folded her arms across her chest and lowered her head. "The pictures I saw didn't look like you just met him."

"Well, don't believe everything you see," Eve snapped back.

Tanya gave her a holier-than-thou look. "Look, I didn't just wake up from a coma. You spent the night with him last night, didn't you?"

Eve glared at her, then slowly untied her shoe and brought her foot up to the bed. She stripped the sock down to uncover her badly bruised ankle.

"I really can't remember; it seems so long ago. Everything is a big blur now." She poked gently at the tenderness and sharply drew air in through her teeth.

Tanya opened the door and took the tray of food that was delivered. She set it on the foot of Sara's bed and turned to stare at Eve.

"You're pretty." It sounded more like an observation than a compliment.

"Thanks."

"If I had known he was past his period of mourning, I'd have gone after him myself." Tanya's blue eyes shot her a glance as she walked over to look out the window.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean." Eve felt like Tanya had just kicked her in the gut.

They stared at each other.

"He's a great guy, you know, different, not like the others. He was really in love with his wife, and when she died, it almost killed him. He has a heart ..."

"And two arms and two legs and a brain!" Eve said, thrown off guard by the jealousy riding sidesaddle up her spine.

Sara whimpered, and Eve hopped to her bedside to tuck her in. "Shhh, go to sleep, honey."

Tanya opened the door again, and a man Eve guessed to be the doctor entered.

"Are you able to get everything you want this fast?" Eve sat down in the chair at the foot of the bed.

Tanya reached for the door and swiveled back to stare at Eve. Her eyes narrowed, and she straightened her posture. Reaching up, she removed the clip from her thick dark hair, allowing it to spill down past the shoulder pads of her navy pinstripe suit. She ran her fingers through it and shook it loosely.

"Everything." She walked out and closed the door solidly.

"Whew, that's some woman!" The doctor chuckled, then turned back to face Eve.

She squirmed. "Yeah, some woman."

He smelled of cigar. "I'm Dr. Baker," he said, and wheezed ever so slightly. "So ... tell me, where does it hurt?"

Eve's stare lost focus as she gazed at the closed door. She rubbed her hand over her chest.

"I didn't think doctor's made house calls anymore."

"Well, whatever the FBI wants, the FBI gets." He grunted as he bent to examine her ankle.

"That's what I'm afraid of." Eve sighed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eve took a speed-breaking sponge bath, carefully washing around her bandaged ankle. She held up the clean tie-dyed sweats that were delivered to the room. *Could you have selected a less attractive outfit, Tanya?*

She peeked around the door to see Sara sleeping soundly. Eve dreaded the moment that Sara would realize she wasn't her mother, although Eve kind of liked being a mom -- so far, anyway.

She wobbled on crutches to the phone and dialed Blanca's number.

"Hi, sweetie!" she whispered hoarsely. "I'm okay! But I have so much to tell you. Really? They called you? Who? Tanya, yes, an FBI agent. Uh-huh ... she is nice, isn't she?" Eve rolled her eyes. "Did she ask about me? Yeah? She mentioned him? Did you happen to notice the incredibly dingy appearance of her aura?" Eve paused. "Oh, Blanca, I'm just kidding. Sure. In the morning? Yeah, the Starlight motel in Indio. Okay, then, I'll see you at eight. Drive carefully." She snapped the phone back up to her ear. "Wait! Would you bring me some clothes?" The dial tone hummed in her ear.

She gently replaced the receiver. "And some little girl's wear?" she whispered.

Eve lingered over Sara, sleeping so innocently. Her porcelain-doll cheeks were blushed with a hint of pink that matched her lips. She shifted restlessly under Eve's gaze, and a silky blond lock snaked around to make a thatch necklace. Eve bent over to kiss her cheek and

reached down to push the tendril back, fingering its velvety softness. Sara deserved to be loved; she didn't need to earn it or pay for it or trade her integrity for it. If given the chance, Eve would teach her that she didn't need to spend her life proving herself to others. Most of all, she would teach her to recognize the people to stay away from. Charming people like Michael Beckard and evil people like Tommy Barnes, so different, yet so alike, because neither one would have a problem stealing a life jacket from a drowning man or kicking her crutches right out from under her.

Suddenly impassioned by her emotions, Eve doubled her fist and crooked her thumb over her fingers. She looked down and recalled how good it felt to feel her knuckles strike Michael's face. He would never abuse her again. She smiled. And no one would ever ... E-V-E-R ... abuse Sara again, she would see to that.

Blanca would be proud of her. She had just experienced a rare poignant moment. Realizations, insights, discernment ... wisdom born of courage. Either that, or it was just a plain and simple case of vengeance with a virtue.

Eve slid the dinner tray from Sara's bed and removed the cover. Cold tomato soup, a greasy grilled cheese sandwich, and peach cobbler for dessert. Tears sprang to her eyes. The way she missed Steven was far worse than any aching part of her bruised body.

He must know where we are by now. She glanced over at the phone. She sat her untouched dinner on the dresser, turned off the light and lay down on the bed. Tears spilled from the corner of her eyes, her breath hitched a couple of times just before she fell into a deep sleep.



## Chapter Twenty-One

“Blue or brown?” a baby voice whispered softly.

Eve awoke, startled by a small, warm hand on the side of her face.

“Hi, baby. Hmmm ... blue or brown what?” Eve glanced at the clock.

Sara poised her elbows on the edge of the bed, her little chin cupped in her hands.

“Are your eyes blue or brown?” Sara whispered again.

“You tell me.” Eve smiled at Sara.

“My mama had blue eyes. Who are you?” Sara’s lower lip trembled as she rose to her feet.

“Eve. My name is Eve. Do you remember me from the bathroom of the restaurant?”

A light of recognition washed over Sara’s face. “You combed my hair!” Sara’s chin wobbled and tears rose in her eyes. “I thought you were my mama.”

“Oh, sweetheart, please don’t cry. I promise we will do everything to find your mama.” Eve slid back the covers and threw her legs over the edge. She held her arms out for Sara, but she took a step backward.

“Mr. Barton said Mama didn’t want me anymore, and that’s why she left me.” Sara bowed her head and twisted at the hem of her worn blouse.

Eve leaned forward to take Sara’s hands in hers. “Who is Mr. Barton? And why would he say such a thing?”

“He’s my stepdad.”

“Oh. You know, I can’t believe that your mama could live without you for even one minute.”

“She promised me that we were going to leave Mr. Barton. She said she made a mistake. Then one day she was gone. She left without me,” Sara sobbed.

"Would you please sit here on my lap, sweetheart?" Eve held her arms out again, and Sara slowly inched forward. Eve lifted her to sit across her knees, and she looped her arms tight around Sara's shoulders.

"Sara, I want you to know that I will never lie to you. I also want you to know that if your mama left, then it was for a very good reason, and it was not because she didn't want you anymore."

"Mr. Barton says I am so ugly and so bad that nobody will ever love me," Sara cried woefully.

Eve clutched her tighter and rocked her. "No, Sara! That is just not true! Mr. Barton is wrong. Your mother did love you, and I love you, too." She tucked her hair behind her ear and kissed Sara on the cheek. Tears were now beginning to sting Eve's eyes. At least Sara's mother had recognized her mistakes and had intended to protect her daughter. Certainly more than Eve's mother had.

She felt the burning pain in her chest when she remembered her own mother hiding at the first hint of trouble. The first yell, the first hit, the first accusation, and she would retreat to the safety of her bedroom. In many ways, her mother's offense was far worse than her father's was.

"Sara, I have to tell you something." Eve gently squeezed Sara's shoulder and stifled a sob.

Sara snapped her head up. "About my mama?"

"No ... it's about Mr. Barton."

"Please don't make me go back there! Please!" Sara dug her tiny fingers into Eve's forearm.

"Sara, when I brushed your hair in that restaurant bathroom, at that very moment, I absolutely fell in love with you."

Sara smiled weakly, reached for a lock of Eve's hair, and twirled it in her fingers. "You did?" Her breath hitched.

"Yes, and if it is okay with you and okay with the court, I would like for you to come live with me while we look for your mama."

"You want me?"

She was tearing Eve's heart out.

"What's a court?"

"Well, it's a place where they make really big decisions for people."

Sara was quiet for a moment. "Can I say what I want?"

"I'm sure you can."

Sara reached up and hugged Eve's neck tightly. "Then I want to stay with you," she whispered in her ear.

Eve squeezed her eyes shut. "Sara, Mr. Barton had a bad accident. I don't think you will be seeing him again," she blurted.

"Okay." She slid off Eve's lap and went into the bathroom.

Eve blinked and shook her head. She reached over to grab her crutches and caught a glimpse of herself in the dresser mirror. Yikes! With her tie-dyed sweats and crutches, she looked like a circus performer with bad luck.

The door swung open, and Tanya McCray stepped in and closed the door behind her.

With a meaningless social smile, Eve leaned forward on her crutches. "I know you're with the FBI, and you're probably really good at what you do, but do you think you could knock before you barge in?" She met Tanya's blue-eyed gaze with an indignant look.

Tanya gave her a noncommittal shrug. Her hair was attractively pinned up, and she was dressed in a gray suit identical in cut to the blue pinstripe.

"I need to have a talk with the little girl," she said in her annoying professional tone.

Eve imagined a huge explosion, and Tanya burst into a thousand flaming chunks of raining 007 debris. *Explosion ... McCray ... Clean up ... room eleven.*

"Sara ... her name is Sara," Eve reminded her.

Sara was standing at the bathroom door. She ran to Eve and wrapped her tiny arms tightly around her waist.

"Sara." Tanya glared at Eve. "Sara, we need to go have a talk."

"Go?" Eve asked as she lifted Sara to her hip.

"It's just for a little while. I'll bring her back."

"I want to go with you," Eve demanded.

"Sorry," Tanya said smugly.

"I'm going to ask for custody of Sara, and I think I have a right to go."

"I said I would bring her back." Tanya's eyes narrowed as she stepped forward to take Sara. There was a knock at the door. Tanya sighed and turned to open it.

"Blanca!" Eve squealed. "I'm so glad you're here!" She extended her hand for Blanca to enter.

Blanca blinked and hesitatingly entered the room.

"I know you ... I had a dream about you!" Sara smiled.

"Sara, this is your Aunt Blanca." Eve placed a grateful arm around Blanca's shoulders. Blanca returned a questioning frown.

Tanya sighed impatiently.

"Aunt Blanca?"

"Just call her Aunt B." Eve chuckled.

"Well, hello, Sara. You look familiar to me, too."

"I need to question the girl!" Tanya shouted angrily above the accolades.

Dead silence reigned in the room.

Eve lowered Sara to the floor and crutched to within inches of Tanya's face.

"Fine, Miss McCray, you question Sara, but then you bring her back, and you either charge me with something, or you let me go. Got it?"

Eve was about to bump bellies with the agent.

Tanya gave her a curt nod and motioned for Sara to follow. Sara looked sadly up at Eve.

Eve kneeled down and reached for the chain around her neck. She pulled it over her head, and gently placed it around Sara's neck.

"This is a very special necklace, and it is very precious. My sister, Blanca, gave it to me."

"Aunt B?" Sara asked, exploring the stone.

Eve smiled. "Yes, Aunt B. I want you to wear it to remind you that you will see me again. That is a promise." She flashed Tanya a look and then gave Sara a kiss.

"I'm going to have breakfast with my sister, you can have your android agents follow us if you want, but we are going to eat at Orville's, alone. I will expect to see Sara back in this room by eleven o'clock"

"Really." Tanya smirked.

"Yes, really. I think you know you don't have a reason on earth to hold us here, and if you don't want to deal with me -- and believe me, you don't -- you will release us."

"Really."

"Is there an echo in here?" Eve glanced around the room. "Yes, really." Her eyes flashed.

Tanya paused briefly, started to say something, then guided Sara out of the room and closed the door.

Eve crutched by Blanca on her way to the bathroom, and reached out to give her slack jaw a nudge. Her mouth had been hanging open ever since she arrived.

"Honey, I'm not sure you should be talking to an FBI agent like that." Blanca shadowed her to the bathroom.

"Yeah? If I'm lucky, she will arrest me and take me to headquarters."

Eve looked at Blanca's reflection in the mirror and then her own. If there were such a thing as an aura, Blanca had a brilliant one. It encircled her petite five-foot-two-inch frame, though to Eve she seemed much taller. Her short blond hair framed a heart-shaped face, illustrating her exceedingly youthful appearance. To see them together, you would never guess they were sisters; there was hardly a resemblance. Having different mothers most likely had something to do with that.

Eve sighed and twisted her hair up on top of her head just to see what she might look like as an agent.

“He hasn’t called. I don’t know where he is, and I miss him so much I can hardly breathe.”

Blanca hugged Eve for a long moment. “I wish our visit was surrounded by happier circumstances.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Blanca allowed Eve to cry all the way to the restaurant.

Except for the party of eight by the front window, Orville’s looked pretty much the same. Grace was busy bustling around in her queen-size pantyhose. Eve could almost hear them swish from where she stood.

Grace greeted them at the door. “It will be a ten-minute wait,” she said rudely as she gaped at Eve’s psychedelic outfit.

Eve gave Grace a challenging look. “We’re just going to be over here, in one of those window booths, okay, Grace?” She hobbled past her in a whirl of circus colors.

Grace gave her an amenable nod and rushed off without comment.

Blanca stared at Eve across the table.

“What?” Eve smiled.

“It’s like you’re a totally different person. Even your clothes are different.”

“Your mouth is open again.” Eve laughed out loud. “This is Tanya’s idea of interrogation wear.” She unfolded her napkin, wiped her eyes, and smoothed it across her lap.

Eve raised two fingers, and Grace responded reluctantly, menus in hand.

“Can I start you out with a cup of coffee?” she asked.

“Yes, Grace, and make sure the cup isn’t chipped,” Eve said from behind the menu.

Grace gave her a confused frown. “Yes, ma’am.”

With a curious expression on her face, Blanca lunged forward.

“So what happened? Where did you find Sara, and why are you being followed by the FBI?” She glanced around to check the booth behind them.

“They’re over there.” Eve nodded toward the bar. Two suited men wearing sunglasses were perched on the barstools, right where Tommy Barnes sat just a couple of days ago. They glanced over casually.

Blanca fidgeted with her silverware and leaned forward. “Eve, what kind of trouble are you in?”

"It's Michael; he's the one they want. I just happened to be with the wrong man at the right time."

Blanca gave her a quirky look. "What did he do?"

Eve sighed. "It's a long story, but the condensed version is that he was smuggling diamonds, teamed up with an FBI agent and ..."

"Diamonds! I hope not the agent you are involved with?" Blanca interrupted.

"No, that's the crazy part. The one I'm nuts about is actually a good guy."

Her eyes scanned the restaurant for her Calvin Klein ad. "You don't suppose my picker's been fixed do you?" Eve smiled and rose half way to her feet. "Is the spot on my aura gone?"

Blanca motioned for her to sit down.

One of the couples at the large table began to sing a harmonized version of by the light of the silvery moon. It was the old couple she met the other day. Eve watched with a wistful smile as their hands waved over their heads to an imaginary moon and animated the words. Their mouths formed perfect O's when they sang the word "moon."

The two agents laughed and pushed back from the bar to slowly walk toward them.

"Let's change the subject." Eve presented them with a relaxed version of herself and fingered her menu.

They walked together in step, and she felt a sleeve brush her arm as they passed the table.

Blanca glanced around nervously and cleared her throat.

"You're never going to guess who called me last night."

"Who?"

"Nat!"

Eve frowned. "Nat who?"

"Our brother, Nat."

"Oh? Does he want money?"

"No, he said he hasn't had a drink in three days and decided to go back to a twelve-step group. He said he just can't live on the edge anymore and called to apologize."

Eve choked on her sip of coffee. "Geez, now that is a miracle, especially since he's ninety-eight-percent edge."

"He said he is going to call you, too. It's part of his program, to make amends."

"I can't wait," Eve said flatly.

"Have you decided?" Grace politely interrupted.

"I'll have the chicken-fried steak platter," Eve announced.

Grace nodded. "How would you like your eggs?"

“Scrambled soft, and could I have a biscuit with that?”

Grace nodded again. Her tongue curled out the corner of her mouth as she wrote.

Eve glanced back to the large table. Another couple was playing a Bonnie Raitt tune with soupspoons and a guitar backup.

“And you?”

“Just some fruit.” Blanca nervously watched through the window as the agents stood next to her car and talked. Angels or devils, they were sticking around.

Grace turned to walk away.

“Oh, Grace?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“What are those people doing over there?” Eve pointed with her teaspoon.

Grace glanced back at the table. “Oh, they’re practicing for the Indio amateur talent contest. They meet here every year, and they all try out together. I don’t think they’ve ever been selected, though.”

Eve’s attention turned to the old couple, all wrinkled up with interchangeable skin. Knowing each other’s successes and failures, secrets and desires, lovers from the beginning and lovers until the end. What she couldn’t imagine was living life without Steven, anymore than she could imagine the sun not rising in the morning.

“Tell me about your agent,” Blanca said, squinting against the sun’s glare from the cars in the parking lot.

Eve held up her palm. “Read this. Can you tell me where he is right now?” Her chin slightly quivered.

Blanca sighed. “You like him, don’t you?”

“I think I love him. I also think he’s the reason they haven’t arrested me.”

Blanca frowned. “What do you mean?”

“He knows I’m innocent. He must have told them. Just another stupid woman, getting involved with the wrong guy. They will see his file has been tampered with and know that he was being framed.”

“Eve, you are not stupid.”

“Yes, Blanca, I am, and I’m afraid that Steven has had time to think and realize that he doesn’t want to be involved with a stupid woman after all.” Prickles nipped at her nose and behind her eyes. She swallowed hard to clear the thick lump forming in her throat.

“Blanca, I don’t want to be stupid anymore. I’ve decided to quit my job.”

Blanca gave her a disbelieving look. “That could be interpreted as stupid by some.”

“I want to start my own advertising agency. I’m going to sell my house and move closer to you. That is, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, sweetie, how exciting!” Blanca gushed. “When have you had the time to make all these decisions?”

“You’d be surprised at how many thoughts you can have in a free-falling truck cab.” She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “Besides, I’ve taken weeks, months, and years to make dumber decisions.” That realization struck a painful chord, and she straightened her spine.

“I want to try to get custody of Sara and get on with my life. Who knows? I might fail and end up a lonely old food demonstrator in some out-of-the-way supermarket.” She shrugged. “All I know is, if I don’t try to follow my dreams, I will regret it for the rest of my life.” She looked down at the fork clutched in her hand and caught her breath.

Blanca sat stone still, with tears standing in her eyes. “My God, Eve, I knew you might be facing danger, but I had no idea how much.” She blew her nose and beamed at Eve. “You’ll make a beautiful mother; I can’t describe how strong and beautiful you look to me right now.”

Grace delivered their food with the talent show tryouts trailing directly behind her. They patiently waited for Grace to set the plates on the table. Eve recognized the older woman who stepped forward and cleared her throat.

“Julia, dear, we all have seen your movies, and we love you very much,” the old woman explained. Eve glanced around at the looks of encouragement from the faces in her group.

“But I think I speak for all of us when I tell you that we think it isn’t fair for you to try out. I mean, being a professional and all.”



## Chapter Twenty-Two

Eve couldn't wait to check out of the Starlight Motel. The walls, the color of old ivory, made her skin itch. If it weren't for her broken ankle, she would be pacing, something she had a penchant for when coming unstrung. It came from the countless times she felt trapped as a child. She stared at Blanca, then at the clock, and shook her head. Pulling at the corner of the bag of new clothes they'd bought on the way back, the items spilled onto the bed.

"She'd better bring her back is all I can say." Eve raised her cotton rose-colored tank top and snipped off the tags.

"Eve, don't get your hopes up too much. This is the FBI that you're dealing with. I think they can do pretty much whatever they want."

"I think they are supposed to find missing persons, not create them," Eve retorted, then shook her head and sighed. "Sorry, Blanca, I'm not mad at you. I just don't think they have the right to hold us here." She lowered her head.

Blanca put her hand on Eve's shoulder, then walked to the bathroom. "Why don't you take a restful bath? It will make you feel better."

Eve knew how much Blanca believed in baths. She believed that baths could console, heal, inspire, and lift the spirit. In fact, she believed that there was very little on earth that couldn't be corrected with a warm bath, soft music, and a few lit candles. Blanca would just wear holes in any resistance to the idea, so she quietly resigned herself.

"You hardly touched your breakfast, are you hungry?" Blanca asked as she tested the temperature of the water.

"I needed to make a point."

"Don't you feel the least bit guilty about forging autographs?"

"Absolutely not. I made those folks happy. I made me happy ... hell, it sure beats Valium."

Eve smiled and held up the yellow sundress she'd bought for Sara.

She barely heard the knock at the door above the sound of the running water.

"Miss Ryan? May we come in?" It was Tanya and another woman with Sara's hand loosely held in hers.

Eve threw open the door and bent to hug Sara, happy to see her.

"Come in." Eve stepped back one-footed, then drew her crutches back.

Sara was headed straight to the bed when her eye caught on the sundress. She cautiously sat down next to it, giving it a sideways glance.

"Is this for me?" She lightly fingered the hem.

"Yes, sweetheart, and Aunt Blanca just fixed you a bath. Why don't you take your new dress into the bathroom?"

Sara snatched up the dress and gave it a furious bear hug. "Thank you so much, mama!"

Eve caught her breath; her throat tightened as she watched Sara skip to the bathroom.

"Miss Ryan, this is Mrs. Farley from CSS."

Eve extended her hand. "Yes, nice to meet you."

"Child Social Services." Mrs. Farley clarified and reached out to shake Eve's hand. She looked deeply into Eve's eyes and tilted her head. "Miss Ryan, it's rare to come across a case where a child takes to someone as quickly as Sara has taken to you." There was tenderness in her expression, which encouraged Eve to relax.

"Well, I've grown very fond of Sara, too." Eve smiled.

Mrs. Farley tugged at an earlobe as she stepped in and slowly walked around the bed, eyeing the contents of the clothes bag.

She was a far cry from the social workers Eve remembered. Her short red hair was combed neatly and looked as if it were cut using a bowl as a guide. She was dressed in a soft-blue floral three-quarter-sleeve dress. Her wide navy-blue belt was cinched tight around her waist, which Eve thought brought a little too much attention to her ample hips.

"Tell me, Miss Ryan, would you have any objections to bringing Sara to a case-manager once a week?" Mrs. Farley brought up the clipboard she was carrying to jot something down.

"Of course not. I'll do whatever is necessary to ensure Sara's well-being."

Tanya stepped forward. "I have some papers here. I will need a signature and your fingerprints."

Eve stiffened and imagined the deep bell like clang of a cellblock door slamming behind her. She could envision the sullen expression of the armed guard walking her toward her five-by-seven cell, past the jeering faces of the captive welcoming committee.

She sucked in an apprehensive breath and slowly sat down on the edge of her bed.

"What exactly am I signing?"

"These are temporary custody papers for Sara. It has been decided that you are in the best interest of the child, at least for now." She snapped open the paperwork and held out a pen. She appeared as a humble sibling being made to apologize by an angry parent.

"That is unless you have changed your mind." Her lids drooped down as she tilted her head back.

Eve blinked in disbelief. "This is a little out of the ordinary, isn't it?"

"Is the Pope Catholic?" Tanya drawled.

Eve snatched the pen and quickly scrawled her name.

"And here." Mrs. Farley turned the page. "There will be a hearing in two weeks in Riverside. Here is the address of the courthouse." She handed Eve the information.

"A hotel room has been booked for you; it's just around the corner, walking distance from the courthouse. Your car will be delivered to you the day before the hearing."

"What? Wait! You mean I can't go back home now? I can't go to my sister's?"

"These are the conditions, take them or leave them. If you don't want custody of Sara, then you can leave now, and we will see that she is delivered to Social Services. Mrs. Farley will assign her to a proper foster home."

Eve stared back at Tanya. "Did Steven have anything to do with this?"

Tanya's expression immediately turned smug. "I'm really not at liberty to say. Miss Ryan, do you agree to the conditions?" Tanya insisted.

Eve stared at the forms and heard the ticking sound of her biological clock.

This was probably Steven's way of saying goodbye and thanks, but thanks for what? The memories? The fork? The only thing she had to offer him was her durability. She had plenty of that. She bit into her lower lip. No way would she let Tanya see her cry.

She wasn't about to turn down such a miraculous gift, even if it wasn't tied up with the ribbon she had always hoped for. Husband, home, family ... the chance to make up for all the things she had missed. She questioned her ability to be a good mother. What could she offer Sara other than love and understanding? What type of a mother role model did she have to draw from anyway? Eve's eyes drifted to her sister, standing in the bathroom doorway. Her lips slowly curved into a satisfied smile.

"Yes, I agree. Can my sister drive us to the hotel?"

"We have to deliver you directly to your room, but she can follow."

Eve glanced back at Blanca and nodded in admiration. "Is that okay with you? Will you follow us?" Eve asked.

"I will, if you promise to give me an autographed picture to hang up in my studio." Blanca's eyebrow raised in jest as she kissed the air.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

The room was the typical billet. Two queen-size beds with floral spreads, starving artist paintings, straight-panel crystalline drapes in an undefined cool color covering the sliding door leading to the balcony. Better than the Starlight Motel in Indio, and since all expenses were paid courtesy of the FBI, there was little to complain about.

Sara gently bounced cross-legged on her bed, waiting for Eve to don the black, one-piece swimsuit she felt she had been living in for the past ten days.

"How long do I have to wear these PFDs to go swimming?" Sara called to Eve.

Eve looped the cord to her terrycloth robe around her waist, cinched it tight, then stuffed a couple of towels in her tote.

"What are PFDs?" She came around the bed to slather sunscreen on Sara's back and shoulders.

Sara let her shoulders sag, and the straps of her deep-purple suit fell down.

She tugged at the bright yellow buoyancy cuffs she wore on each arm. "Josh says that's what these are, personal floating devices."

"Didn't you just meet him in the pool three days ago?"

"Yes, and he said he stopped wearing these when he was two years old."

"And how old is the wise Mr. Josh now?"

"He's nine, and he can dive off the high board." Sara pointed to the ceiling.

Eve stood with a squirt of sunscreen in her palm and signaled for Sara to close her eyes. She dipped into the lotion and finger-painted the bridge of Sara's nose with short Van Gogh like strokes, dipped again and made Starry Night swirls to massage her satiny soft cheeks.

"Okay, open."

Sara batted her golden eyelashes. Her guileless smile melted Eve's heart.

“Well, you tell Josh that you have to wear the PFDs until your mama says you can go without them.”

Sara giggled at the gentle tweak to her slippery nose, then stared up at Eve with a serious expression.

“Was the world in black and white when you were a little girl?”

“What?” Eve blinked back her surprise regarding such an odd question. “What would make you ask that?” Eve chuckled as she smoothed the sunscreen on her own legs.

“Sometimes Mr. Barton watched television, and he would only watch old movies that were in black and white, so I thought that’s how the world used to be.”

It was the first time since they had arrived that she had even mentioned his name. Eve hoped he wouldn’t live in Sara’s memory too long; he didn’t deserve to.

“You think I’m old, do you?” Eve patted under her chin with the backs of her fingers.

Sara’s impish grin was priceless. “I’m afraid so,” she chirped.

Eve’s lips curved up in a contented smile.

Eve already had enough pictures of Sara to fill an album and wished she had just one of Steven, although she carried an image of him in her mind. It wasn’t fair. He had so many pictures of her, a whole file full. They were probably stowed away by now, locked in some FBI storage facility where they kept records of suspects and their stupid ex-girlfriends.

Worse yet, Steven and Tanya could be looking at them together at this very moment. Tanya would be pointing out her wide hips, skinny legs, and grotesquely long neck. Steven would have told her about her toe deformity by now. She could almost hear the echo of Tanya’s laughter. Eve sighed and raked a hand through her hair. Trying to forget Steven was like tap dancing in molasses.

“Can we go swimming now?” Sara handed Eve her crutches.

“Has it been an hour since breakfast?” Eve teased.

Sara reached out to hug Eve’s waist. “Yes.”

“Lead the way, my pretty.”

With her sketchpad tucked under her chin, Eve stretched out on a chaise lounge. She squinted back the sun and watched Sara bobbing in the shallow end of the pool. Her golden hair was molded to the top of her head, and the long, wet strands floated out like a fringed cape behind her back. Sara was struggling to embrace her fat and elusive beach ball.

She pushed it down hard under the water and rested her narrow chest against the top. Abruptly the primary colors blurred as it spun to escape her grasp, skimming the surface of the water. She squealed with delight as Josh jumped into the pool and gave it a punch, sending it floating high into the air. His big-toothed grin made her bubble with glee when the ball touched back down on the top of his head.

Eve smiled and understood. Steven had the same effect on her.

“Marco!” Several kids piled into the clear blue water splashing and screaming.

“Polo!” a burst of voices called back.

Eve lifted herself up with her hands. “Hey, you guys, be careful!”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Ryan. I’ll make sure she’s safe.” Josh tugged Sara to the edge of the pool.

“Marco!” The It boy looked to be about twelve and roamed about the pool with his arms outstretched, Frankenstein-style, while blindfolded with a wet t-shirt.

“Thank you, Josh.”

“Polo!” they resounded.

Eve drew Sara’s portrait, her eyes flicking quickly from Sara to her paper. She was hoping to capture that expression of veritable joy on her face with only the aid of a number two pencil, a tough assignment.

Ka-plunk! She sheltered the drawing with her arms as cool plops of water accompanied by a refreshing spray landed on her back. The kids splashed each other with hands and feet thrashing out a whitewater spume. Sara bounced up and down, clapping her hands with excitement.

“Marco!”

A large shadow moved slowly over her page, and she waited for it to pass before she shaded in the whorls of Sara’s ear.

“Polo!”

“Nice likeness,” a voice rang over her shoulder.

“Thanks,” she answered without looking. She was used to compliments on her work and no longer felt self-conscious when people watched her draw.

The shadow stayed centered on her pad. Eve froze.

“Marco!”

There was something familiar about that voice. Then she smelled the rich fragrance of sandalwood. Thoughts flashed through her mind, faster than she could focus. She had practiced what she would say thousands of times, but at the moment she couldn’t think of a single word. Her heart pounded so furiously her first impulse was to bolt, but on crutches?

“Polo!”

Oh, for God’s sake, what was the purpose of that stupid game? It was making her crazy. She watched the waiter coming toward her from the restaurant area, tray in hand, with a clean white towel draped neatly over his arm.

“Would you care for a drink?”

“No, thank you.” Her tongue felt as if it was made of granite.

“Hello, Eve.”

She felt his gaze hot on her back. Her skin tingled for him to touch it, and just hearing him say her name increased the throb of her racing pulse.

“And you, sir, would you care for a drink?”

“Maybe later.”

“Would you like to see a lunch menu? We have a lovely poached salmon on special today, served with grilled vegetables and fresh sourdough bread.”

Eve wanted to Marco Polo the waiter right into the pool and turn the Frankenstein-kid loose on him. There was no answer, and she watched as he returned to the bar.

She desperately wanted to take out the clips holding her hair back from her face. At least she had acquired a deep tan during her stay. All except for her wrinkly white foot snuggled inside the overly decorated white cast. She glanced out to the pool again to see Sara getting a swim lesson from Josh. The sound of the iron legs of the patio chair scraping across the cement next to her made her teeth ache.

Slowly, turning on her side, she brought an arm up to shield her eyes. Brilliant sunlight encircled his silhouette, giving him a saintly appearance. There was nothing saintly about her gaze as it slid from his chest-hugging t-shirt down to the worn jeans. She ordered it not to hesitate at his crotch, with zero luck. She also lectured her heart to stay impersonal, but it was as willful as her gaze, and it opened wide with a sweet ache in her chest.

“Mind if I sit?” He slowly lowered himself into the chair. He was more handsome than she remembered, lethally handsome. His hair was a tiny bit longer, thick and clean, just begging for her fingers to furrow through it. She wanted to hold him, to slip inside that comfortable embrace that made her feel so complete.

He reached out to help her sit up. She took his hand softly and swung her legs over the edge of the lounge. She opened her fingers to release his hand, but he held on, giving hers a gentle squeeze.

“How is your hand?” Eve turned his hand palm up to look at the bandage.

“Almost healed. How’s your ankle?”

Eve looked down at her cast and tried to wiggle her toes. “Just a couple of fractures. Three more weeks, and the cast comes off.”

“How about another signature?” He reached down to bring her foot up into his lap. Sara’s drawings covered nearly all of it. “Looks like I’ve already signed it.” He tugged his sunglasses down an inch to look at her.

“I signed on your behalf.” Her composure was slipping. She clutched her sketchpad to her chest.

“Hmmm, and you had a visit from Julia Roberts, too. Is she working on any new movies lately?” His smile was making her dizzy. He turned her foot from side to side, admiring the artwork, then lowered it, running his hand leisurely up the soft backside of her leg. Nerves zinged as he stroked the silky skin behind her knee before pulling back.

She tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry. The best she could do was clear her throat.

"Why didn't you call?" Damn she didn't mean to ask that. She turned her face toward the pool to check on Sara.

"Sara, sweetie, stay close to the steps." Eve rose from the chair to watch her. She and Josh were batting the beach ball in some sort of championship play-off.

"I had to straighten some things out at headquarters." He stared at her through his sunglasses.

"You mean, things with Tanya?" She meant to sound only mildly curious.

Steven frowned. "Tanya? Tanya who?"

Eve's head tottered to the side from the whack of the beach ball.

"Sorry, Mrs. Ryan!" Josh held his arms up for her to return the ball. Sara stood on the steps, giggling helplessly, with her shoulders hunched up to her earlobes and hands squished tightly over her mouth.

Steven pushed back a smile and returned the ball with a swift hit. "Here you go, champ."

At least it gave Eve an excuse to reach up and remove the clips holding her hair. She gave her head a shake and raked her fingers through the long auburn locks. She thought she saw a muscle in Steven's jaw twitch.

"Tanya McCray." She said as she continued to finger comb her hair.

"Agent McCray? What would I have to straighten out with her?"

Eve sighed deeply. "So ... did you get everything straightened out?"

"Yep, I'm out. That means I'm unemployed, at least until I decide what I want to be when I grow up." He clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back with his face to the sun.

"So they believed that you weren't involved?"

"They already suspected; they just needed to investigate some of the details. My boss said he was glad I retiring. He was getting tired of me playing the Lone Ranger."

"Really? I suppose that makes me Tonto?" She made a war paint gesture.

"Absolutely not. You know what 'tonto' means in Spanish, don't you?"

"Tell me."

"It means foolish."

Eve raised an eyebrow.

Steven leaned toward her and motioned for her ear.

"We found Sara's mother." He spoke in hushed tones.

Eve's eyes widened, and her breathing turned shallow.



"The bastard buried her under the porch, at the cabin. She might never have been found if you hadn't hit it with that truck cab."

Her hand flew to her mouth, and she stifled a cry. She looked back at Sara, and her chest clenched tight.

"You okay?" He brushed the hair from her temple and kissed it. Eve jerked back and sat up straight. Steven leaned back and studied her.

"What about Michael and Susan?" Her voice broke.

"Oh, they're going to be detained for a very long time. They both could be facing the death penalty for murder. Then there was the smuggling, extortion, bribery, tax evasion. I could go on and on."

Eve dog-eared the page of her sketch and rubbed hard at the crease. "Guess I could have had the crew from *60 Minutes* bursting into my house at any moment."

"Susan confessed she was with Michael the night he murdered Benjamin Boyd."

She whispered with a tight voice, "You know, I still can't picture Benjamin getting involved with Michael."

"I can't picture you getting involved with Michael, either." He reached out to touch her, but she shifted out of his reach.

"You know, we never did find those last six diamonds," he said.

"Do you think Susan was able to get to them?"

Steven shook his head. "I went to visit Mel Gillis, out of curiosity."

"And?"

He shrugged and smiled. "He said if he found any spare change, he would share it with us."

Steven waved at Sara.

"So, the custody hearing is tomorrow. How do you like being a mother?"

Sara giggled and waved back.

"I love it, but it scares me a little."

"You don't sound any different than any other parent in the world."

He leaned forward and reached for her hand. She pulled back and turned toward the pool again. She was just as confused by her behavior as he was.

"You mind if I show up for the hearing?"

"Why are you suddenly so interested? I mean, we haven't heard a word from you in two weeks. I thought you were in jail or in ..."

"In what? I had to report to headquarters."

"You could have called, just to say you were okay."

"Eve, honey, I couldn't. They were investigating everything. It just wouldn't have been the smart thing to do."

"Do you always do the smart thing? Haven't you ever done a dumb thing in your life?"

Steven leaned forward with his elbows resting on his knees. "I see what you're doing."

"What I'm doing? I'll tell you what I'm doing. I'm sitting in a hotel room for two weeks, waiting on pins and needles to find out if Sara can come home with me, all the while painting horrible pictures in my mind of what might have happened to you!" Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Eve, you're running." He took his sunglasses off and locked his gaze onto hers.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The possibility of us ending up together terrifies you, doesn't it?"

Eve stood up and bent to grab her crutches. "I don't have to listen to these accusations."

She looked over at the pool. "Sara, honey, let's go now."

Sara groaned and slapped her hands together in a praying gesture. "Just a little longer, please?"

Eve sighed and plopped down on the lounge, avoiding Steven's perplexed expression.

"So how's your job?" He replaced his sunglasses and straightened his posture.

"John Hanson has called me every day; he can't wait for me to come back to work." She took a deep breath and looked down. "I'm quitting next week and selling my house."

Steven looked startled. "Where are you going?"

"I'm thinking about moving closer to my sister, maybe somewhere in Sedona. Start over, start my own agency."

"Well, Eve, I think that's a fine idea." He pulled his feet back to stand up. "I wish you all the luck in the world." He stood and bent down to pull the back of her hand to his lips.

She went limp. Just like Cinderella and Prince Charming, except in this version the prince was leaving. She watched, defenseless, as her future loomed before her, cold and dark. The thought of losing him was steely and sharp, bursting her dreams like some bladdery water balloon.

Okay, so she couldn't have Steven. At least she would have Sara. Maybe. Her eyes stung as she watched him turn to walk away. Her eyes shifted between Sara and Steven.

"Sara! We have to go now."

"Hi, Mom!"

Josh's mother waved and walked over to sit next to Eve.

"Hello, Eve, nice to see you again. My Josh has taken quite a fancy to your Sara."

Eve smiled and nodded, then nervously glanced toward the lobby. "I'm sorry, I just lost ... I mean, he ..." She pointed toward the lobby.

"Are you okay?"

"Could you watch Sara for a moment? There is something I have to do. I'll only be a minute."

"Of course, dear, take your time."

"Sara, Mrs. Frazier is going to watch you for a minute."

Sara waved, then resumed her game of fetch with Josh, who was diving for action figures.

Eve grabbed her crutches and made her way to the lobby. Wearing only her bathing suit, she went all goose bumpy as the cool air washed over her skin inside the door.

The desk clerk raised an arm. "Miss Ryan, this was just delivered for you." It was a bouquet of a dozen helium balloons. She looked up in amazement. *Congratulations ... I'm so proud of you ... I love you ...* They all spoke to her loudly.

*Tonto! Tonto! Tonto!*

"Who sent these?" Eve gripped the edge of the desk.

"The card says Steven. Let's see, yes, it's the same party responsible for your room. Oh, yes, he left these keys as well."

She blinked. "I thought the FBI was paying for my room."

"No, ma'am, it is being billed to a Mr. Steven Malloy."

Eve burst into tears and bumped her forehead on the desk. The clerk looked around helplessly as if searching for someone who might know CPR.

He addressed the top of her head. "Can I get you something, Miss Ryan?" The poor man was clearly shook up. "A glass of water?"

"Did you see Mr. Malloy come through here?" She sobbed and pointed to a box of tissues at the end of the counter.

He nearly fell down to reach them for her. "I believe he went that way to the parking lot." A shaky finger pointed to the door.

Her eyes desperately scanned the parking lot. It was the blue handicapped placard hanging on her rearview mirror that caught her attention. How apropos. Her Mustang was immaculate, detailed and settled on a brand new set of radials. She leaned in the passenger side to open the glove compartment and grabbed a box of tissue. A paperback book fell onto the seat. *Peninsula of Lust*. She snatched it up and clutched it tightly to her chest.

"Want to know how it ends?"

Eve froze and took in a sharp breath. She turned back slowly. Steven was leaning against the building. She nodded slightly with her eyes glued to his.

"I think we owe it to ourselves to find out," he said as he pushed away from the wall. In the next moment, he was standing in front of her. "Don't you?"

She nodded and lifted her hands to rest her palms on his chest. He reached out to thumb a stray tear from her cheek.

"I have a present for you." He bent to brush his lips to hers.

"Isn't this enough?" She sniffed and looked at her car.

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded document. "This is what I've been doing for the past few days."

Her brow wrinkled with a confused glance. She slowly unfolded the pages. "Termination of parental rights?"

"I found Sara's biological father. He was more than happy to sign off his rights. You shouldn't have any problem getting custody now."

Eve blinked in disbelief and threw herself into Steven's arms. "Oh, my God, Steven, how did you find him and then get him to sign? Where did you have to go ...?"

"Eve, I'm an FBI agent; it's what I do. Just call me the Lone Ranger." He laughed softly.

"Ex-FBI agent. I don't want you to be the Lone Ranger, and I don't want to be Tonto anymore!" She let out a ragged breath.

He nuzzled her neck. "Did you really think I would let you run away?"

She turned weak, and with a soft sigh she slipped her arms around his waist and snuggled her cheek against the soft white cotton. She inhaled deeply the scent of laundry detergent and sandalwood.

"Thank you, Steven."

He fingered her hair and tilted her face up to his. "I might have given you a head start, but I can run faster than you can crutch." He grinned, then captured her lips with his, taking charge of the emotions running rampant through her heart. Her crutches clattered noisily to the ground, and she closed her eyes in total surrender.

 THE END 

## Venita Louise

Venita Louise is a Southern California writer who collects books, dust and thoughts. Lots of thoughts. So many, that she keeps a list of them on her Just for Laughs page at [www.venitalouise.net](http://www.venitalouise.net).

She grew up in the San Fernando Valley, and was raised in a family where a sense of humor wasn't just handy, it was necessary. Aware that her alarming affinity for Quantum Mechanics could only take her so far, she set out to hone her talents as a fine artist. She sketched pet portraits for the almost rich and famous for twenty-plus years, and that was fine, but she still wasn't satisfied.

Delivering mail didn't seem to fulfill her, nor did serenading her pets with acoustic guitar. Who would have ever guessed that sitting alone for hours on end, researching, plotting, planning and typing until her carpal tunnel could accommodate a two-lane highway of honking cars would bring her the happiness she was searching for?

Venita won an award for best first quarter sales in 2005 for *Mixed Nuts*. Set in the mid-sixties, this comedy/romance novel depicts family dysfunction at its finest. Her short stories, essays and poetry have appeared in several venues. *Dead on the Money*, a mystery/romance novel set in the 1940s, will be released in trade paperback by Vintage Romance Publishing in December of 2006.

Venita resides in Santa Clarita, California.