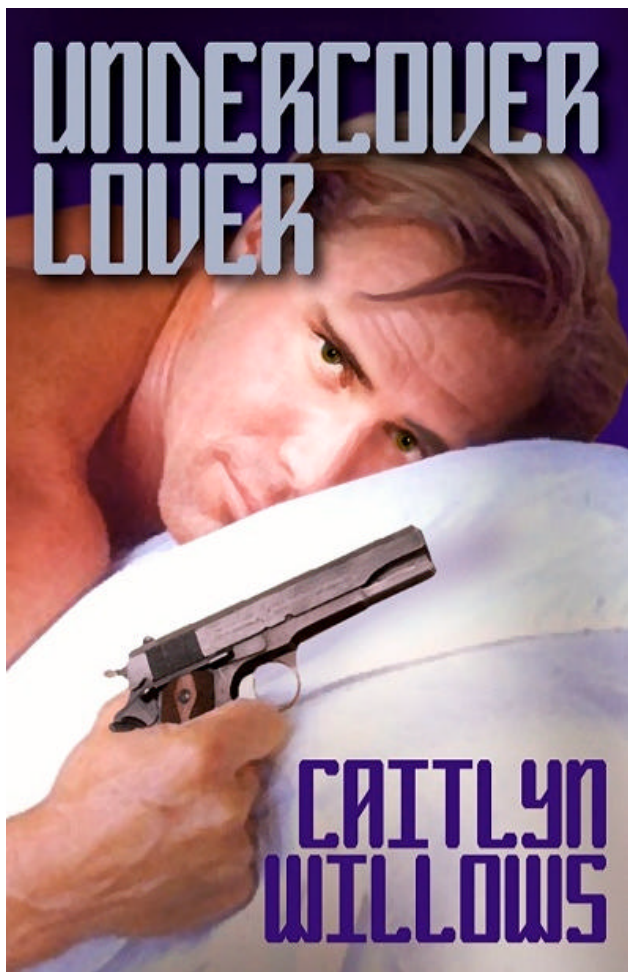


UNDERCOVER LOVER



CAITLYN
WILLOWS

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BY

CAITLYN WILLOWS

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To Jamin Marshall...because you asked me.

CHAPTER 1

Blythe Smithers didn't know whether to bless the week of freedom from her boss or curse it. Stephanie Cambridge had piled up as much work on Blythe's desk as if she were actually there. Maybe even more.

She rifled through yet another mismatched stack of papers and notes Stephanie had left—the fourth she'd found since she arrived at work three hours before. Heaven forbid the woman use a computer. She depended heavily on Blythe for that type of thing—maintaining the accounts, researching suppliers on the internet, drafting proposal layouts, and handling the billing.

Stephanie's mind worked too fast for the electronic world...or so she claimed. Blythe wisely kept quiet about Stephanie's obsessive need for a cell phone. She couldn't have a computer, but she had to have a cell phone? The woman didn't make sense. In any event, a note or idea scribbled on the nearest piece of paper was good enough for Stephanie. Blythe swore coffee ran through the woman's veins. She also didn't

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have the patience to sit and learn something new and was always darting around like a hummingbird on speed.

It wasn't the best way to organize a business, and if Blythe didn't know better, she'd swear Stephanie was constantly distracted. But her system, such as it was, worked for her. Very successfully, too.

Crazy as it was at Cambridge Designs, Blythe was lucky to have a job with the designer. She'd learned more about interior design in the six months she'd been with Stephanie than she had in all those years of college. The stress was enough to make a saint swear, but Blythe was determined to keep up with her boss or die trying. Disorganization was Stephanie's middle name, but somehow it all fell into place seamlessly in the end—probably due to Blythe's organizational skills and Stephanie's boundless energy.

She flipped the stack over to start at the bottom—Stephanie's first instructions. Stephanie must have spent the weekend writing them. At least she wouldn't have to worry about her boss adding to the list. Stephanie wouldn't slow down long enough to call, and Blythe avoided calling her cell phone like the plague. Dealing with Stephanie in person was hard enough; on the phone, it was impossible.

Fabric swatches Jensen's living room furniture.

Order drapery fabric Dr. Sanchez. Two orders—home, office.

Earth to Stephanie. That was last week and the fabric was already here—a beautiful cream damask for the office, blue-violet for home.

Confirm delivery Carters.

Blythe sorted each note into the piles she'd started earlier. "There has to be a good five hundred messages here."

"At least."

Blythe jumped at the sound of the man's voice. Papers exploded from her hand and scattered to the desk.

She flashed a scowl his way. Tony Driscoll merely smiled.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

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Blythe forced herself to look away. The man was eye-candy that was for sure. Blond hair dusted his collar and complemented his brown eyes. He had a body that looked sculpted to perfection and made for exploring. A ready smile, pleasant personality, and quick wit only added to her distress.

She hated the effect the man had on her. At least she didn't go all quivery in the knees when she saw him anymore. That was one saving grace. But she still craved his body more than she cared to admit. And she hated herself for that.

She shuffled the papers back together to sort once more. "What are you doing here?"

He braced his forearms on the edge of her cluttered desk and leaned closer. "You're joking, right? I come here every day at this time."

How could she forget? For the first few weeks she worked here, she'd waited with breath held for his arrival. That lasted as long as it took her to realize things just wouldn't work out. He was for play, not for keeps. And Blythe didn't have time for games, especially with a man who settled for being a masseur. She needed a man with a little more ambition than that. Someone to match her. A man she could be an equal with, not someone she could control. This charmer was about one thing only—taking the easy road.

"Stephanie's gone this week to a conference." Blythe tried her best to ignore him, but the scent that was uniquely his— a hint of spicy aftershave and male—wafted over her, making her tingle in places she wished she could ignore.

"Odd. She normally lets me know so I can schedule someone else in her place."

"She decided to go at the last minute when her husband had the chance to go with her."

"And she didn't leave a note for you to let me know?"

Blythe sighed. What did it matter? Why the hell couldn't he take his

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testosterone laden body out of here? She fanned through the papers. Sure enough, there it was, buried deep in the mulch, written on a paper napkin.

Cancel Tony this week. Me and Gavin.

Shit.

Blythe tossed the napkin in front of him. "You're cancelled for this week."

He gave it a cursory look, then wadded it up in his big hand and tossed it to the wastebasket behind her desk. His aim was flawless. "Too bad you didn't tell me sooner. I'm still going to have to charge for today."

Stephanie was going to have a cow. She wasn't a tight wad, but she hated to waste money. Blythe bit her tongue on more than one occasion. What was more wasteful than a daily massage? But then, it was the one relaxing thing Stephanie did. Blythe couldn't fault her for that.

Still, she was going to pitch a fit. She'd rant over it, blame herself for not being more diligent, and tell Blythe over and over how it was her fault, not Blythe's. She didn't have the patience to listen to Stephanie berate herself.

"There's no need." She pulled open her desk drawer and hauled out her purse. "I'll pay your fee."

"And Gavin's, too?"

She clicked her gaze to Tony's. The son-of-a-bitch was smirking at her. She hated that come-fuck-me look in his liquid brown eyes. It never failed to stir her lust for the man. Who was she kidding? Everything about Tony Driscoll made her want him.

"That's two hundred dollars, you know."

"I'm well aware of it." It was worth every penny for the peace and quiet it would give her raging hormones. Even now her nipples rasped against her bra, pleading for his attention. It was becoming increasingly

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difficult to breathe.

She scribbled out the check and thrust it his way. “There you are. Have a nice day.”

“Not so fast there, Sunshine.” He snagged her arm and pulled her to her feet. “Tony Driscoll doesn’t take charity. You paid for a service and you’re going to get it.”

Blythe yanked free. *No, no, no!* her mind screamed. The last thing she needed was those long, thick fingers dancing over her naked flesh. And yet her body betrayed her. Heat pooled to her crotch. Dampness soaked her panties, making them stick to her...

“If...if you think I’m going to allow you to lay hands on me—”

“Grow up. I’m a professional.”

“A professional what? That’s what I’d like to know.”

“You can’t hurt my feelings by trying to insult me, Sunshine. But I’m shocked you’d think Stephanie would do anything not above board.”

He pointed to the private office and grabbed his portable table in one hand, a black leather duffel bag in the other. “Come on. Time’s wasting. She keeps a robe on the back of the bathroom door. Strip down and be quick about it.”

“I know the procedure, Tony.”

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She found Stephanie's white satin robe on a hook behind the door. A small closet beside it held empty hangers. Blythe stripped down to skin and hung up each piece of clothing with shaking hands. Her heart raced with anticipation. As she slipped her arms into the heavenly soft garment, the fabric brushed against her nipples, agonizing their plight.

She pulled in a breath and stared down. "I didn't take you out to play." But her body literally ached for attention. She was ripe for a good lay. Trouble was she couldn't find one to save her life.

Closing her eyes, she massaged her palms over her nipples. *God, it feels good.* Lower, her clit throbbed for equal attention. She brushed her fingers down her belly. A knock at the door froze her.

"I don't have all day, Sunshine."

Jerk.

Blythe smiled. Maybe he was good for something after all. Maybe a boy toy wasn't such a bad idea. A little diversion to ease the tension. Someone like Tony would do well. He'd be gone before she could blink twice. Men like him never stayed around to tangle up a woman's

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life.

But she sure as hell wasn't going to go in there begging. Let him make the moves. She never knew a man yet who turned down sex. They never needed a reason to get laid, just a place.

"I'm coming. Keep your shirt on." She hoped to be coming soon anyway, and she didn't give a damn whether the shirt was on or off. It was his pants that needed to go.

Blythe whipped open the door. Tony had pulled the gold heavy linen drapes shut in her absence and flicked on the overhead fluorescents. They hummed in unison with the hot blood zinging through her veins. His padded table sat dead center, a white sheet draped over it. Tony wore a powder blue smock that covered him to mid-thigh. Another obstacle.

Oh, well. Nothing ventured...

With any luck, she'd have him crawling all over her in less than five minutes.

"Good. You're ready."

She yanked open the robe and let it fall to a white puddle around her feet.

Tony's eyes widened. It was the only hint he gave of noticing and he masked that reaction quickly.

God, please don't let him be gay.

He patted the table. "Glad to see you're not shy. Crawl up. Face down."

Blythe brushed her backside against him as she passed between him and the table. His penis was hard...and big. Just the way she liked them. She hid her smile in the cove of her arms.

So...he wasn't as disinterested as he pretended. It was just a matter of time.

The delicate scent of sesame oil drifted to her. She heard him scuff his palms together. But nothing prepared her for the feel of his hot

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hands touching her back. She sucked in a breath through her teeth.

“Too cold?” he asked.

“No...just fine. Go on.”

“Don’t worry about being a mess. It’ll all soak in.”

She gave him a noncommittal, “Hmmm,” then closed her eyes.

He spread the oil evenly in long, sweeping motions then swooped up to her shoulders. Muscles caved beneath his kneading fingers. Her body quivered for more.

A trace down her spine loosened her vertebrae. Down to the small of her back. His thumbs melted the tension away. Up in circular formation. Down her sides, tickling her ribs.

Blythe twitched against the feeling.

“Sorry. Didn’t know you were ticklish. I’ll be more careful.”

Up to the shoulders and down again to her buttocks. Heat spread to her clit, swelling it all the more as he worked oil into her backside. Up again to the spine and down to the crevice between her cheeks, to the tip of her tailbone, then around the bottom curve of her butt.

Yes, this is working well.

She parted her legs ever so slightly.

More oil. That sound of rubbing hands. He cupped her thighs with each hand, thumbs inside. Inch by inch he wandered downward until he reached her feet. There he picked up one and massaged each digit, then did the same to the other. Working both hands on one leg, he made his way north.

He paused at her crotch, then circled her butt and worked down the other leg. Blythe opened her legs a little wider. Again, he paused before cupping her butt, and she swore he gave her a little flick before moving on.

She bit back a cry and forced her breathing to stay normal.

Tony draped his hands on her shoulders, down her sides, brushing the edges of her breasts. She swallowed hard. Lower once more. To her

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thighs, inside and out, inside and out, just barely brushing what she desperately needed touched.

Why didn't he make a move? Why didn't he...

He traced a finger to the end of her spine. Paused. Turned his hand and cupped her thigh.

Shock waves shot through Blythe. "Good God, would you just..."

He pulled back. "Just what?"

"Never mind. The massage is over. Pack up and go."

She swung down from the table and hurried to the bathroom. Jerk. He knew damn well what he was doing. Damn well. That still did little to help her.

Safe behind closed doors, Blythe sank to the black-and-white tile. The cold did nothing to shock her system to normal. She needed an orgasm and she needed it now!

She dove her hand between her legs. Hot, moist, and damn ready to come. She flicked her fingers over her clit, back and forth, back and forth. God, how she'd love to be having him do this. His long, big fingers on her, in her. Deep inside, fucking her hard.

"Ooh!"

Yes. Almost...fuck me.

Then he'd whip out that big, hard dick, spread her legs wide and...

"Ooooooh!"

Blythe rocked to a blinding orgasm, then collapsed against the door while she tried to catch her breath. It wasn't a man, but it was the next best thing.

"You all right in there?"

She jerked upright at the sound of his voice on the other side. He'd heard her! The son-of-a-bitch had heard her come! She wanted to crawl in a hole and die. Why the hell was he still here?

"Go away."

"I can't. I have to wash up."

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Jerk.

“I’ll be right out.” She washed her hands and dressed quickly. Maybe he hadn’t heard.

Oh, he’d heard all right. Believing she was alone, Blythe had really let loose. One smirk and she swore she’d punch him but good.

Squaring her shoulders, she opened the door. Tony sat on the edge of the table far away from the scene of her...pleasure. Maybe things weren’t as bad as they seemed. Still, she’d bet a dollar her face was beet red.

“Thank you. That was very nice. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow for Gavin’s appointment.”

“I do Gavin at night after work. I’ll be at your place at six.”

“Six it is. I’ll give you the address when you leave.” Blythe smiled. Maybe she’d get that fucking after all.

* * *

Tony stared at the door long after the honey-haired blonde zipped through it. The little shit had used him to get off. How selfish was that?

From about two minutes after he’d met her six months before, Tony was aware of several things about her. First, foremost, and clear to anyone with half a brain, Blythe Smithers was a striking woman. She might not be model-perfect—thank God—but there was a special something about the whole package that drew attention her way. When she walked into a room, everyone knew it. This gift was made all the more appealing when he realized Blythe had no idea of the effect, of the power she possessed. She was a dedicated professional, courteous to those whose paths she crossed, efficient in the maelstrom called Cambridge Designs, and completely oblivious to anything not work related...almost. She wasn’t oblivious to him.

Tony had seen the hunger in her eyes from the instant they met. At times he swore he could smell the desire seeping from her pores. And yet she never once acted on her need. It made Tony want her all the

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more.

But he was supposed to be here to do a job. Hard as it was, hard as *he* was, Tony fought his craving to pursue her. He didn't have time for sexual pursuits. He was here to find purloined diamonds and the people who smuggled them into the United States. Now...this.

He sat on the edge of his massage table, hard as a rock and throbbing. All because of her.

He knew what she wanted from him the second she stepped out of that bathroom and dropped the robe. It didn't help matters that his interest level had risen as it always did when he came near her. If she'd given any indication that this was going to be a two-way street, he might just have accommodated her.

But Blythe still held back. God only knew for what reason, but he hoped it wasn't so she could play the innocent victim later on. He'd be damned. When he finally had her—and it looked like his body wasn't going to rest now until he did—he wanted there to be no doubt she was an active participant.

So, he played with her, using his hands to tempt her to speak up. She was determined, he'd give her that much. Even the little brushes inside and up her thighs didn't make her crack. She came close. And for a few heart-pounding seconds he thought he almost had her.

Good God, would you just...

He should have taken her right then and there. Pride demanded more. He got nothing. Now he was stuck with a hard-on that wouldn't go away...unless he took care of it himself. The image of her perfectly rounded backside was going to haunt him for a long time.

Tony hopped down and made his way to the bathroom. It seemed he was doing way more than his share of jerking off lately because of her. Now he was doing it in someone else's bathroom. Something had to give soon.

He draped his smock over the towel bar, then eased the zipper of his

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jeans down. The motion alone aggravated his situation. He shoved denim and cotton boxers down. His cock fell free, hard, heavy, and damned demanding.

His hand, still slick with oil, made the perfect outlet. Eyes closed, Tony stroked the length, imagining himself wrapped in her heat. She'd be slick and ready. Tight, too. Yes, real tight. So tight it'd suck the cum right out of a man. Leave him drained and wanting more.

Images of her body writhing beneath him filled his head as his hand blurred. His balls tightened. The image of her hand cupping him there sent a shudder through him.

Grinding his teeth against the orgasm, Tony braced one arm against the wall and shot his wad into the smock. He leaned his forehead into the ceramic tile while he caught his breath. No doubt about it—he had to have her. She was too much a distraction now that he knew she was ripe for picking. The sooner he could get her in the sack, the sooner he could get back to concentrating on his investigation. He had one week to work magic. One week before the Cambridges got back from wherever they'd taken off to.

Tony adjusted his clothing, folded up the smock, and eased open the bathroom door. He was still alone. Blythe was probably too embarrassed to pay him much mind for now.

He chuckled at how pink her cheeks had gotten when she knew she'd been found out. At least he'd had the sense not to tease her about it. That was no way to win a lady's treasures. For once, he'd kept his mouth shut.

But the incident did give him valuable time alone in Stephanie Cambridge's office. He had a few minutes to snoop.

He scanned the room as he packed up his table. Still no computer. Looked like Stephanie had taken her day planner with her. The answering machine was in Blythe's area, as were the file cabinets and computer she used. There were several generic desert landscapes on the

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walls, but he'd already checked those. No wall safe behind them, no packets taped to them.

Bolts of material, stacks of catalogs, a jumble of supplies...it would take days to sort through them. He had one week to take care of that, too. How in the hell was he supposed to get past Blythe to do so?

He'd written her off as being part of this little smuggling racket long ago. Investigation revealed she was clean. Honors graduate with masters in design from UCLA. Volunteer at the animal shelter. Blood donor. She didn't live beyond her means, but well within it. Hell, she didn't even speed.

The perfect little angel. Almost. He grinned. "It's always the quiet ones."

Tony supposed it was the lure of working with Stephanie Cambridge that had pulled Blythe into their circle. As far as interior designers went, Stephanie was supposed to be the best. Why would picture-perfect Blythe settle for anything less?

Hell, if she thought for an instant that the Cambridges were involved in blood diamonds, she'd probably mount her own crusade to have them locked up. And there was more than a time or two Tony had thought about enlisting her help. He'd shrugged it off as being too risky. All he really knew about her was on paper. He'd seen too many resumes make scum look like royalty. Although he hated to lump Blythe into that category, he simply couldn't afford to make mistakes. Maybe once he got to know her better...

Ah, pillow talk. The treasure trove of all spies, investigators, and federal agents. He'd never felt right about resorting to such tactics. There were too many emotions involved in sex. The lines blurred quickly. This time was no different, except for those rapidly merging lines of business and personal. There was only one thing he wanted from Blythe Smithers and that wasn't information. Tony couldn't fight the attraction any longer.

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Pulling in a deep breath, he grabbed his gear, tucking his duffel bag under one arm. It allowed easy access to the nine millimeter hidden in a pouch at the bottom. One yank and it'd be in his hands. He'd yet to need it.

The bag also housed a hidden video camera. Every session with the Cambridges was recorded for evaluation. So far they hadn't slipped up. Oh, there was plenty to see, but none of it had anything to do with the case.

Tony found Blythe in the far corner of the vast room, watching the coffee pot fill. Her back was to him. It'd be easy to sneak out. But if he ever hoped to get anywhere with her, he had to ease her embarrassment over what had just happened.

"Coffee smells good," he said as he set his things to one side.

Blythe glanced over her shoulder. "Black?"

"With creamer."

She scooped a spoonful into a second coffee cup, then filled both when the pot sputtered its last. She did little more than hand it to him as she returned to her desk. So much for chit-chat.

Tony sank into the only vacant chair left in the room. "So...where was Stephanie off to this time?"

"New York," she said without looking up. "Big tradeshow."

"Don't they have those in Los Angeles, too? I'm surprised she would up and leave like that."

She shrugged one shoulder. "You know Stephanie. Free as the wind." She waved her fingers through the air.

"And just about as flighty sometimes."

A smile teased her lips. "Just about. But she gets the job done and then some."

It was the *then some* Tony worried about. "It's good Gavin could get away, too. They need a break from the routine."

"I can't say going for a business convention is much of a break, but

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I suppose it's better than nothing."

The telephone interrupted further conversation. Tony watched her work while he nursed his coffee. Professional, polite, thorough. There was a lot to admire about Blythe Smithers, besides her killer body.

Every so often she'd tuck a wayward strand of her honey blonde hair behind her ear. Shoulder-length, it still managed to curve around her neck, inviting a guy to pull it aside for a little nibble.

The thought perked him up. He had to get out of here while he could comfortably do so.

Tony waited until she ended the call, then tossed down the remains of his coffee. "Well, gotta go. You were going to give me your address?"

Blythe clicked her gaze his way, then just as quickly looked back to her stack of notes. "I remembered it's on the check I gave you. You should have no trouble finding it."

"Great. Six good for you?"

This time she pulled her head up and fixed him with a stare. "Apparently, I have little choice."

Tony braced his forearms on the desk. "You always have a choice, Sunshine. All you have to do is speak up."

A pink flush covered her cheeks. "Six is fine. Don't be late."

"Six." He gave her a wink, snagged his gear, and left before she could change her mind.

In the privacy of the agency's Dodge Durango, Tony called his office. Two rings went by before Trent Lockwood picked up. Tony didn't waste time on preliminaries.

"Our suspects took off to New York last night at the last minute. Said it was a tradeshow for designers."

"I'll check and get back to you. You gonna be available?"

Tony stared at the four-story office building, to the window on the first floor he knew was hers. Somehow, some way he had to get her to

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come to him. He'd waited a long time for Blythe to acknowledge the lust he saw burning in her eyes each time he stopped by. Now he wanted to hear her admit it.

“I’ll be out of touch for most of the evening. I’ll call *you*.”

CHAPTER 2

Blythe waited fifteen minutes before she dared a look out her office window. Even then, all she could summon the courage to do was peel back the edge of the drape to peek outside.

Was he still out there? Was he laughing his ass off over her little... God, what the hell would you call that? And where the hell had her head been? She should have realized he was still in other room. If she had to get her ya-yas off, why couldn't she have been quiet about it?

Blythe had wanted to disappear in a puff of smoke. And he was coming over tonight. What was she going to do?

Sighing, she returned to her desk. The work, the words scribbled on each scrap of paper were nothing more than a jumble—on her desk and in her mind.

At least Tony was gentleman enough not to make fun of her. She didn't know whether to bless him or curse him for that consideration. If he'd teased, that would have been the perfect turn off. But he said

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nothing, didn't even smirk. It made her want him all the more. And tonight...

Oh, screw it! Just ask him!

Yeah, right. That's what every good-looking man needed to feed his ego. She had to find a way to make him make the first move. If she hadn't been so impatient...

Blythe shoved all thought of that botched encounter away. Tonight would be a different story. She was going to be in complete control.

Work was impossible. As the afternoon progressed, she ran different scenarios through her head. Each ended with him seeing to her every need. But, as the deadline approached, her confidence faltered and her libido kicked into overdrive.

She was on her second glass of chardonnay when he rang the doorbell to her apartment. Her hand shook as she reached for the knob. A last minute tug at the belt on her pink chenille robe ensured she was protected for the moment—even from herself.

He'd showered and shaved since she saw him last. She could smell the clean, fresh soap smell around him. It mingled with his aftershave—an elusive, spicy scent she couldn't place.

Navy blue twill trousers and deep yellow golf shirt replaced his jeans and T-shirt. Neither did anything to hide the sculpted planes of his body.

Blythe swallowed hard. Her throat had gone dry. Swinging the door wide, she waved him in.

"Would you like a glass of wine?"

"No, thanks. I don't drink on the job. And I certainly don't drink and drive."

So, just invite him to spend the night and we'll polish off a drink or two.

Tony glanced around. "Where do you want me to set up?"

Blythe slugged down what was left in her glass as she pointed to the

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far wall. It was the only place that didn't hold any furniture, just her small collection of Bev Doolittle prints all neatly hung in a row.

She tucked herself into her over-stuffed burgundy velour chair while she watched him prepare. God how she'd love to dig her nails into the cleft of his tight ass. There wasn't a man alive who could hold himself in when she did that. They'd come a heartbeat later every time. Not that she had a wealth of experience along those lines. But she'd been with her share of men, and so far they'd all been about the same.

She passed a slow gaze over Tony. He was so not the same as the others, at least not psychically.

Blythe swallowed. Her heart pounded in her ears. She clutched her hands in her lap to hide their shaking. All she had to do was insist he leave. He'd go. Her body wept at the thought.

* * *

Tony set the massage table away from the wall so he could work behind it. He hated having his back to the door, for professional reasons. If Blythe minded the arrangement, she didn't say. She watched him from her perch with a steady gaze like a wary Persian on a pillow.

He glanced around, familiarizing himself with the layout of the living room. Not too big, not too small. Burgundy trim highlighted the cream colored walls. Two big chairs matched a long burgundy velour sofa. A single glass coffee table was set in the middle. Light came from recessed niches in the ceiling.

She had the obligatory entertainment center on one wall, a bookcase on the other, and knickknack shelf on another. This was the only wall empty of furnishing. Needlework decorated her walls, except for this one where dozens of what he'd call nature prints were aligned in precise order according to size.

He tilted his head to one side as he studied one, then smiled. The artist had skillfully camouflaged an eagle among the trees. His gaze traveled to the next print. Each one was of similar fashion—the surface

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picture with an animal cleverly disguised in its depths.

"Nice." He pointed to one. "I like these."

"Bev Doolittle."

"She's very talented, clever." He glanced away from the display. Her deep brown eyes were wide, like he had surprised her by expressing his appreciation.

"Who did the needlework?" He waved his hand toward one of the pictures.

She tucked her feet further under her while she tugged the edges of her robe closer. "My mother and sister."

"And where are they?"

"Not here."

Translation—*none of your business*. That made him laugh. She merely lifted one eyebrow.

He pulled a clean sheet from his duffel bag. "I like the furniture."

"Thanks."

Still noncommittal. Tony liked a challenge. "Where'd you get it?"

"Stephanie gave it to me. A client cancelled after he ordered it."

"That was generous of her."

She shrugged a shoulder. "Not really. He paid for it, but didn't want it. Didn't want his money back either. Guess he had it to spare. Stephanie didn't have room for it, so she gave it to me."

"And you decorated around it." He cracked the sheet open. It fell neatly into place over the table.

"Of course... You're awfully chatty tonight."

"Just trying to put my client at ease."

* * *

Blythe hugged her midriff. She'd be plenty at ease if they could just move a little quicker. All this delay was more effective than foreplay. Her body literally crackled with desire. She could barely speak without her voice quivering.

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She studied the curve of his backside as he bent down to the duffel bag once more. He covered her view with his smock, then retrieved something else. Her eyes widened at the sight of the hand vibrator.

“What do you intend to do with that?” The words sounded breathless coming from her. She prayed he didn’t notice. Anticipation was more than she could bear.

Tony plugged it into the nearest outlet then stretched to his full height. “Since you’re paying for Gavin’s time, I thought you’d like the same thing I give him.”

Blythe bit back a sarcastic response, despite the thousand naughty images that flitted through her mind.

“He says it helps him relax. You always seem so tense. I thought...” He patted the table. “Come on. If you don’t like it, I’ll stop. I won’t do anything you don’t like or don’t want.”

That sent a shiver up her spine. He had no idea...or maybe he did. Only one way to find out. So, why had her courage suddenly failed her? She clutched her robe around her like it was a suit of armor, not a flimsy chenille drape.

Two long strides brought him before her. Flashing that oh-so-charming smile, he caught her fingers. “Come on.”

A gentle tug pulled her to her feet. Blythe’s shaking fingers loosened the belt on her robe, but it was Tony who slid it slowly down her shoulders. It fell to a pink puddle around her feet.

Tony ducked ahead, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles from the white sheet. When he bent to retrieve the bottle of oil, Blythe stretched out. She tingled with the first brush of his hand on her flesh.

It began just as it had earlier that day, a gentle kneading that melted the tension one place and built it somewhere else. Blythe closed her eyes on a sigh and willed herself to be still. Patience. He must make the first move.

Yet she couldn’t help but part her legs just a little when he moved

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to her thighs. He traced the outside, then in. Up and down, around and over. Every so often, he brushed just a little closer to where she truly needed it.

“Ready to try the vibrator? Or would you prefer not?”

Blythe swallowed hard, struggling for control that was rapidly disintegrating. “Yes, let’s try.”

A gentle hum reached her ears, not unlike the sound of the one she used herself. Tony re-mapped places already under his spell, bringing them alive in Blythe’s quest for fulfillment. Down her back, to her buttocks. Skip to her feet, up her calves, then her thighs.

Good God, her thighs! The vibrations were like tiny arrows zinging straight to her clit. He was so near, so close. She spread her legs wider.

“Are you trying to get me fired?” His softly spoken words caressed her ear.

Blythe grappled for the sheet as she tried to sit up. He gently, but firmly, held her in place.

“I...I...” Words wouldn’t come to her lips. She laid there mortified, while his hand still vibrated against her ass. Damned if she wasn’t close to coming just like this. Blythe felt her cheeks flame. “No. Of course not.”

“Then what is it you want?”

Each exhale he made was warm against her neck, evidence of how close his lips were.

“I...I don’t know.”

“Oh, I think you do.”

She swallowed hard. “I...it was... It’s all a...misunderstanding.”

“Hmmm...I don’t think so. It was pretty clear what you wanted.” He traced a line down her crack right to the top of her thighs.

Blythe pressed her lips tight in an effort to keep her groan inside. It came out as a soft squeak, betraying her.

“I don’t like playing games, Blythe. I’m well aware of what you

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want, even if you don't want to say so. I'm not a gigolo and I won't be treated like one. I have a reputation to uphold—mine and my employer's."

"I'm...I'm sorry."

"I'm afraid that's not good enough."

Jeez, he was going to report her for sexual harassment. Within days she'd be nothing more than a laughingstock in her circle. No client—no *female* client—would hire her out of fear she'd go after the husband. And the men? They'd be after her, hoping to score.

"Please, Tony." She pressed her palms into the table. "I said I was sorry. I don't know what got into me. Can't you just forget about it?"

"Is that what you really want?"

He skimmed up her spine, then left her. She heard the vibrator click off. Her body chilled in the absence of the warmth of his touch. She dared a glance over her shoulder and saw him pulling his wallet from his back pocket. His gaze captured hers. Not once did he look at what he was doing. He obviously knew what he was after. Her eyes widened when she saw him pull out the check she'd give him earlier.

After tossing his wallet on top of his duffel bag, he tore the check into tiny pieces then let them filter to the floor.

"Why did you do that?"

He was back at her side, reaching for the vibrator again. "The time for games is over, Blythe. I've wanted you from the second I laid eyes on you. I've seen the hunger in your eyes. You want me. You don't want to, but you do. I'm not leaving this apartment tonight until we're both satisfied. I want it clear this was mutual and not a service you feel you paid for."

"I would never—"

Her protest was cut short by a sharp swat to her backside. Blythe suck in a breath. Heat raced to her crotch.

"No more games. We've already wasted too much time."

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His tone meant business. Her heart pounded. The earlier pulsing ache between her legs was nothing compared to now. One swipe of finger against her clit now and she'd come.

"Relax." He flicked on the vibrator and pressed her back down to the table.

By slow degrees, she stretched out slowly, curling her fingers over the edge of the padded table in anticipation of what was to come.

* * *

Tony passed his gaze over the creamy offering laid out before him. Pre-cum wet his trousers. She was glorious. It was all he could do to keep his hands off her. He wanted to sink his flesh into her hard. Even his balls hurt from the wait.

He rubbed his hand over her buttocks and swore she quivered with each stroke. Her legs were parted, toes curled around the sides of the table. Her blonde hair hid her face. He slid the vibrator close to her crotch.

A low groan tore from Blythe's throat as she tossed back her head.

"Tell me what you need, Blythe." He tucked his fingers straight to where she needed it, letting the vibrator attached to his hand work its magic.

"Oooooo."

Tony yanked it away. "Tell me." *Touch...*

"Oooooo."

Again he pulled away. "Tell me." *Touch...*

She clamped her legs around his hand. He was too quick. "Please, Tony, please!"

"Tell me." *Move, touch. Move, touch.* "What do you need?"

"I need to come! Good God, I need to come."

He cupped his fingers around her clitoris. Blythe ground into his hand and came...once, twice, and a third time. Then she collapsed, panting for breath.

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“No more games, Blythe.” He pulled her to her feet.

“No more games,” she said through gasps of breath.

“What do you need?”

She draped her arms around his neck. “You. I need you.”

“To do what?”

“To fuck me.”

He’d thought she’d never ask. Now all he needed was the stamina to last more than ten seconds. Slipping his arm around her waist, he scooped her up and carried her to the back of the couch, then turned her around.

Blythe draped her upper body over the couch and stuck her butt in the air. She had to know she was killing him.

“All your clothes, Tony. I want you completely naked.”

“And if I don’t?”

She smiled. “You know what happens to naughty boys.”

And she’d be just the woman to do it. And damned if he wouldn’t let her. He stripped to skin and tossed his clothes wherever they landed. Blythe wiggled her ass, urging him onward.

Tony seated a condom over his erection and squeezed hard to force himself down. It didn’t help. Grabbing her hips, he stabbed himself into her heat.

Tony fought for control. It wasn’t easy. She had the tightest, hottest, wettest pussy he’d ever been in. Maybe she was right. A few whacks on the ass would put him back in place real quick.

He ground into her. She arched her back toward him on a deep groan. His fingers found her clit. It was so swollen, you’d never guess she already come three times.

Tony pulled back a long stroke, then eased in again. It was no use. He couldn’t hold back.

* * *

Blythe tossed back a groan that matched his. The man was as big as

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a horse. He slid to the hilt and paused. His hard balls tickled against her, bringing her up to fever pitch once more.

She longed to urge him on, to beg for harder and faster. But she knew one word from her could very well be his end, and ending was the last thing Blythe wanted. So she gave him time to gather his wits and luxuriated in the feel of his big dick throbbing within.

Blythe writhed against Tony's hand with every stroke he pounded into her. Her orgasm came quickly, ripping her in two. She cried out and reared back to touch him, to look over her shoulder and see his face, to watch him come. A grimace twisted his features, a silent cry, and then a long, long groan as he spewed himself.

They collapsed together, draped over the couch, each struggling to catch their breath.

"I think I'll take that wine now."

"You have to let me up to get it, you know."

A chuckle rumbled deep in his chest. Slowly, he pulled free. Blythe padded to the kitchen for a fresh bottle and a second glass. She returned to an empty living room.

"Where'd you go?"

"Bedroom," he called out.

She found him propped against her maple headboard. He was far from flaccid.

Blythe crawled up beside him. He snagged the bottle and filled their glasses. But the sight of him sitting there hard and ready was too good to resist. As he handed her glass to her, Blythe straddled his hips and joined them.

Tony sucked in a breath through his teeth. "God, you feel good."

"I'm glad." She tucked her legs around his waist and sipped her wine.

Tony did the same, but mischief backlit his brown eyes. Dipping his finger in the golden liquid, he traced a line across her collar bone, then

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lapped it up with his tongue.

Blythe sighed. He did the same to the other side, then moved on to the curve of each breast. Catching her around the waist, he eased her back while still wedged tight within her.

He flicked her nipples to hard nubs, then twirled one gently between his teeth.

“Yessss. I like that.”

Tony pulled back. “We should drink the wine before we spill it.”

Instead, he poured a line down her body. Blythe gasped from the cold, then melted from the warmth of his tongue dancing down her skin to catch it. When it was gone, he rained kisses to her breast then suckled it hard.

She arched against him, sloshing wine to his shoulder.

Tony pulled back and smiled. “Your turn.”

Blythe licked him dry as she slowly pulled off him. Following his lead, she traced his sculpted chest through the sprinkling of light curls down to the well of his belly button. She looped thumb and forefinger around his penis—the two couldn’t touch he was so thick. Lifting her glass, she poured three drops on the tip.

* * *

Tony waited, breath held. The first flick of her tongue around his dick dissolved that intent. This was heaven, pure heaven. She sucked him deep, cupping his balls as she did so, twirling that wondrous tongue around him until he swore he’d die if he didn’t come soon.

He caught her head and eased her back. “Please...not yet.”

Blythe sat back on her heels and downed her wine. Tony followed suit. As she set their glasses aside, Blythe reached for the wooden hairbrush on the bedside table. The bristles looked too soft to use for hair. Was she asking for something or intending to dish it out?

“Trust me?”

Tony wasn’t sure, but he was damned intrigued. “I don’t know.”

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She smiled. "Just relax. We won't do anything *you* don't like or want. Lean back."

When he did as she asked, Blythe straddled his hips once more, joining them as she had before. She danced the brush lightly over his chest, smoothing the sparse matting of hair over and over. Then she flicked the bristles over his nipples. Arrows of pleasure shot straight to his dick.

Blythe smiled. "Yes...just relax."

She taunted and teased, over his nipples, down to where their bodies met, then behind her to stroke his thighs. Tony twitched from the sensation. Each time he did, she gyrated on him. She pumped him slowly, taking control. But when those bristles touched his balls...

Tony snatched the brush away and popped her ass. A moan ripped from her throat. She stretched out on top of him, lifting her ass high.

"Fuck me, Blythe. Fuck me hard. Fuck me until we both come."

He grabbed her hips and guided her movements. She rode him hard and fast. He felt her tighten around him. Her climax started as a low growl, then built as she shuddered with completion.

Tony grabbed her by the waist and tossed her to her back. Catching her behind the knees, he drew each one over his shoulders.

He pounded her hard, watching her reach the edge of climax once more, then yanked away.

Blythe clawed at the bedcovers and glared up at him. "Tony!"

Smiling, he dipped his head between her thighs. Blythe fell back, legs wide. He traced each fold, each valley, avoiding that special place that most needed attention.

"Oh, God, please, Tony. Don't tease me."

"I would never tease, Sunshine, just please."

He plunged two fingers inside and up, mimicking what he planned to do to her soon while he flicked that little button beneath his tongue. She exploded beneath him, then struggled to pull his body into hers.

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This time Tony couldn't hold back. He stroked slowly, enjoying the feel of her around him, the way she still got turned on no matter how many times he'd made her come. Harder, faster, until all he could feel was the orgasm building.

He cupped her buttocks, lifting her high and seated himself hard.

* * *

Blythe rocked with his orgasm, then held him close in the aftermath of sex. She was hot, sweaty, and completely sated. And all she could wonder was if he'd want to do it again.

Tony levered himself onto his elbows. "I could use a shower. How about you?"

She cocked her head to one side. Tony didn't give her much more time to think about it. In one leap he was out of bed and had her at his side. Before she knew it, they were lathering each other to orgasm under a warm stream of water.

Afterward, they sat side by side on the bed while they towel-dried their hair and finished the wine. It all seemed so normal, so intimate, not like they'd just fucked each other's brains out.

Blythe laughed lightly.

Tony cocked his head her way. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Just wondering..." A thousand different things, none of which really mattered for the moment. She'd wanted a fling, and it looked like she'd gotten one. Nothing this hot and heavy could last for long. She'd just enjoy it for the duration and resurrect it in the years to come when she was married to Mr. Nice.

"Just wondering which side of the bed you like to sleep on."

"As long as you're in it, I don't care." He cupped the back of her neck and covered her lips with his.

The kiss did more to her undermine her emotions than all the sex in the world.

CHAPTER 3

The alarm pierced Blythe's sleep way too early. She peeled open one eye. Tony was gone. She wasn't sure if that made her happy or mad. Facing him this morning could be awkward, especially after the sex-filled night they'd had. But the least he could have done was say good-bye.

She hugged his pillow to her chest. His side of the bed was still warm. He hadn't left long ago. She wondered what the rush was. Did he have clients this early? Did they fall to pieces under his touch as she had?

Blythe refused to think about it. She was after fun and games, not a relationship, and she'd be doing well to remember that.

What did she care who he slept with as long as she got hers? But the hell of it was—she did care. For the first time in her life she'd found a man with whom she was completely compatible in bed, and she sure wasn't ready to let that go, much less share it.

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Groaning, she stretched her muscles awake. The scent of coffee reached her. At least she'd remembered to set the automatic timer. She tossed on her robe and shuffled to the bathroom. A splash of cool water on her face, a toothbrush, not to mention being able to pee, and finally she felt ready to face her day.

What she wasn't prepared for was the sight of Tony sitting at her kitchen table poring over the *LA Times*, dressed in nothing more than white boxers. Morning beard shadowed his face. He glanced up with a ready smile, devastating her all over again.

"'Mornin', Sunshine. Coffee's ready. Hope I made it all right for you."

So much for remembering to fix it the night before. At least he was useful for something else besides screwing her senseless. Still, the endearing gesture put her on guard. He was for sex, nothing more.

She poured out a cup and freshened his. Tony caught her hand before she could sit.

He pulled her fingers to his lips, licking the tips of each one before he selected a digit to pull into his mouth. He twirled his tongue around her index finger, then nipped his way to the underside of her wrist as he pulled her astride his lap.

"Sleep well?" he asked as he nuzzled his face into the top of her robe.

Her reply was swallowed on a gasp as he raked his whiskers over her tender nipples.

Blythe furrowed her fingers through his thick, blond hair, holding him in place. He suckled one breast, and then the other, pulling each deep into the warmth of his mouth as he gently kneaded them. She edged her hips closer, spreading the robe wide. One hand cupped her buttocks, while he pulled his dick free. It already sported a condom. He'd obviously been waiting for her. Another potent aphrodisiac.

He lifted her ever so slightly and eased her onto him. The elastic

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waistband of his boxers rasped against her swollen clit. Each long stroke pulled her closer to climax.

It was gentle love-making, unlike the unfettered animal sex of the night before, but no less supreme. Blythe arched her neck to his questing lips. Soft cries accompanied their simultaneous orgasm. They clung together in the after-glow for several minutes until he planted one of those marauding kisses on her. His mouth tasted of coffee with the barest hint of toothpaste. No morning breath here.

Blythe longed to cuddle against him for the rest of the day. She was definitely getting too close, too fast.

“Would you like some breakfast?” she murmured against his chest.

“That would be nice. Got a razor I could borrow?”

“Why bother to ask? You’ve obviously already borrowed my toothbrush.”

He patted her bottom as he lifted her from him. “Nope. I always carry one with me.”

She laughed lightly and tied her robe closed. “Ah...an obsessive, compulsive brusher.”

He laughed with her. “Good dental hygiene is never obsessive.” He gave another gentle pat to her rump, then gathered his clothes from where he’d tossed them the night before.

Blythe watched the view as he made his way to the bathroom. He fit too nicely in her life, her home. If she didn’t watch out...

No, no, no! She refused to even consider the possibility of falling for the guy.

She hauled out a carton of eggs and the frying pan. To the scrambled mixture, she added diced onion, cheddar cheese, and ham. By the time he returned fully dressed and freshly shaved, she was dishing it onto the plates.

“Smells great.” He plopped into his chair. “I’m starved.”

“Wild monkey sex will do it every time.”

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He tossed back a laugh and scooped up a forkful of eggs. His eyes widened appreciatively. "Very good."

She shocked herself by reveling in his approval. After topping off their coffee mugs, she joined him.

"So, where would you like to go for lunch today?" he asked.

Blythe clicked her gaze his way. "Don't you have to work?"

"I usually do Stephanie at noon and she's gone."

She arched her eyebrow. "So you figured you'd do me instead?"

A wicked grin cut across his face. "Something like that."

"Sorry, I have lunch plans with a friend. Your libido will have to go on hold until tonight."

"I'm devastated, of course."

"Of course." *Smart-assed charmer.*

"Give me a break. I haven't had sex in at least nine months. I'm trying to catch up." He shoved another load of eggs into his mouth.

Blythe cocked her head to one side. A man like Tony could have any woman he wanted any time. Why the dry spell? She longed to ask, but wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer. Knowing he had morals—another plus in his favor—wasn't going to help her resolve any.

"It's been a long time for me, too." She danced her toe up his leg to his crotch. "But don't wear me out."

He hardened under her caress. "Look who's talking. You keep that up and I'll make sure you're late for work."

Blythe gave him a smirk and moved away.

"Okay, you've got lunch plans." He polished off the rest of his meal. "That leaves tonight. Where would you like to go for dinner?"

She chewed slowly before she dared to look at him. "You mean like a date?"

He braced his forearms on the table. "Of course like a date. It'd be pretty coldhearted of me to just want you for sex."

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Blythe glanced away. That's exactly what she wanted him for. She shoved her half-eaten meal away. "I think we need to set some ground rules, Tony."

He leaned back. "Rules? Sounds like someone's playing games again."

She lifted her hands. "No. No games. I'm very serious."

He tucked his arms over his chest. "All right, what are these rules?"

Blythe chewed on her lower lip while she tried to come up with something. "No spending the night?"

"No deal. You can't wear a man out, then expect him to crawl home to his own bed."

That got her laughing. He had a point, and she really did like having him sleep with her afterward. Liked the warmth of his body beside her, the feeling of comfort, the respect he showed by not up and leaving. True, it nestled too close to her heart. She could handle that okay. It was those kisses that tore at her determination.

"No kissing."

He screwed up his face in puzzlement. "What?"

"No kissing. It's too intimate."

His confusion doubled. "You'll put my dick in your mouth, but not my tongue?"

She mirrored his position. "Any more smart-assed comments and I won't put that in my mouth either."

Indecision warred in his face for what seemed an eternity. Finally, he dropped his arms. "All right, no kissing. What else?"

Blythe fought a snicker. *Men. They'd do anything for a blow job.* "That about does it. And you? Any rules you'd like?"

That mischievous grin was back in all its glory. "Yeah." He leaned toward her. "Never turn me down."

As if she could. Blythe tilted a nod his way. "That'll be interesting when I have my period." She laughed as his grin faded.

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“Okay, I’ll agree there are some exceptions here.”

“Too bad.” She braced her chin on her palm. They were no more than a breath apart. “You could’ve bargained for a blow job during that time, too.”

“Doh!” He smacked his forehead.

Blythe giggled. “Too late.”

His humor faded. “Why won’t you let me kiss you, Blythe? I love the taste of your lips, your mouth. I just want to crawl inside you and drown. I’ve wanted to from the second I laid eyes on you. How can you take that away from me? Why?”

Because I don’t want to fall in love with you. Who was she kidding? She was halfway there already.

She tickled her fingers up his arm. “A girl has a right to her secrets, doesn’t she?”

“I suppose so. And it does give me something to aspire to.” He caught her hand and nipped at the underside of her wrist.

“If you keep that up, we’ll never make it out of here.”

“Can’t have that, can we?” He kissed her palm, then shoved to his feet. “I’ll pick you up right after work.”

“Make it six again,” she called over her shoulder as he left the room. “I have to take care of Stephanie’s cats after work.”

He grabbed his gear. “I’ll go with you. I don’t like the idea of you rambling around in that big house by yourself.”

Blythe didn’t argue. The place was a cavern. She was constantly seeing things in the shadows. Another plus in Tony’s column.

She was screwed...in more ways than one.

* * *

Trent Lockwood waited for Tony just outside his bank of offices at the FBI building. Gray lightened his black hair at the temples. A frown accentuated the furrows in his brow. Tony hoped he looked as distinguished when he reached his mid-fifties. He still had twenty-three

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years to go.

His boss looked up at the sound of footsteps coming his way. His frown deepened. "You never called last night. I was worried."

Tony cursed his thoughtlessness. In the wonder that was Blythe, he'd forgotten his responsibilities. No wonder Trent was worried. He'd probably imagined any number of tragic scenarios while he waited for the promised phone call.

"Sorry, I got tied up and didn't get the chance. Any news?"

"None of it good." Trent swung the door open, ushering him inside.

"Let me guess...no designer tradeshow in New York."

"No Cambridges in New York either." Trent worried his fingers through his wavy hair while Tony helped himself to the communal coffee pot.

"Do you think they fled the country?"

"If they did so, they used assumed names."

That was a given. These were determined smugglers they were dealing with. They left little to chance. He sipped at his coffee, wincing as the hot liquid coursed down his throat. *Why did they always make the coffee so damned strong?*

"They'd have to have a buyer before they moved. Unless they went to Africa for more diamonds."

Trent paced a groove in front of Tony's desk. "I don't understand how they can manage to sneak that many diamonds into the country. We've got people watching."

But Stephanie and Gavin were masters at disguising themselves. Even when they didn't, they were such high-profile celebrities they couldn't be thoroughly checked without arousing not only the Cambridges's suspicions, but that of the press following them. All the FBI needed to ruin this case forever was to have it blasted all over the tabloids. Nope, they needed solid proof before they could move.

Tony crumpled his paper cup and tossed it into the trash can. "I've

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got the chance to search her office during lunch today. The place will finally be vacant. I might also be able to get inside the house every night while they're gone."

Trent's eyebrows became exclamation points. "With all that security?"

"I've got an in. I just need to find a way to use it without arousing suspicion."

"Just keep me posted." He took a step toward the exit. "And don't leave me worrying about you again."

Guilt jabbed at Tony's gut. He imagined Trent *was* worried. An agent working alone? Anything could happen.

He passed his morning with massage clients, longing for the day when he could put this undercover assignment behind him. Most of his clientele were rich, pasty white, and overweight. The only bright spot in this whole business had been Blythe, and she had been since day one. His problem now was how to hang on to her once his work here was done.

More guilt tweaked him. He was using her now to get to the Cambridges and he sure didn't feel good about that. Plus, once they were behind bars, she'd be out of a job. He didn't feel good about that either, and knew he definitely wouldn't be one of her favorite people after that happened. Somehow he had to find a way to tell her what was going on. Trent would have a fit, thinking he'd compromised the investigation. But Tony's instincts told him he could trust Blythe. With her close connection to the Cambridges, she might be able to help. That also meant putting her at risk, so she had the right to be informed.

Tony kneaded a roll of fat on the middle-aged woman before him. She grunted like a pig. With every day that passed, he hated this work more and more. Trent wasn't the only one who was impatient for results. Right now, the only woman he wanted to lay hands on in any manner was Blythe.

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“Okay, Mrs. Powell, all done for today.” He wiped his hands on a length of toweling while he gave her wide berth.

She tucked the sheet around her. “So soon? Feels like you just started.”

Felt to him like he’d been there for hours. Tony forced a smile he didn’t feel. “I know what you mean. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He couldn’t get out of there fast enough.

A little before noon.

Just enough time to get to Stephanie’s office building before Blythe left.

Tony parked on the far side of the lot while he waited for her to come out. His breath caught with his first glimpse of her. A raging hard-on shot to life seconds later. He shifted in his seat as he palmed it, trying to find a more comfortable position that simply didn’t exist. Blythe always had that effect on him. In the months before, he’d been able to handle it. But now that he’d had her? Misery. It was all he could do to stay in the truck and not rush her.

Tony smiled. The image of him dragging her to the SUV, throwing her in the back seat, and fucking her until the struts cracked under the pressure was sweet. Something to definitely put on their to-do list—when it was dark and not in a public place. Although forbidden sex and the danger of being caught would certainly make things hotter. He bet he wouldn’t have to do much talking to convince Blythe.

He pulled his wandering thoughts to a screeching halt and tried to focus on the job.

Blythe stood just outside the office building. She was dressed in hot pink capri pants with a matching floral camp shirt. White sandals graced her slender feet. Sunglasses covered her eyes. A quick look in both directions, and she crossed the street to her car.

Now all he had to do was get past the security guard, who was what had made entering at night impossible. Blythe’s presence during the

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day hindered Tony's chance to search Stephanie's office then.

He waited until he saw Blythe's cherry red Sentra turn the corner, then strode into the building like he did every weekday—ready to give Stephanie her daily massage. The guard never challenged him and building security didn't require anyone to sign in. It was almost as if the guard was there for show, a visual deterrent to anyone coming in who shouldn't. Tony nodded a greeting the man's way then continued on. So far, so good.

The hallway was deserted, just like all the other times he came here. In less time than it took to think about it, he had the lock picked and was in.

Tony stowed his table and bag near the door. Where in the hell should he start? He had one hour to hit pay dirt. A sign on Blythe's desk invited customers to ring the bell because she was in back.

He glanced that way. Light from an open closet door caught his eye. He edged toward it, scanning piles of papers, files, and samples as he went. Nothing looked promising.

He pushed open the closet door and smiled. It wasn't a closet after all. It was a huge workroom cluttered with furniture in various stages of upholstery. Rolling steel doors covered the delivery entrance. It wasn't the safest place to hide diamonds, but Stephanie sure didn't lack for niches to do so.

Tony aimed for the work bench against the wall. His foot hit something hard in his haste. Metal skittered across the tile...a tack hammer...apparently from Blythe's latest project. He glanced around to the black Naugehyde sofa. Each seam was edged in sparkling gems.

"It's too simple. Too obvious." And perfect. No one would ever guess they were diamonds. The smuggled gems were supposed to be rough. There was nothing to say they hadn't been polished. Stephanie did have acquaintances in the jewelry business. Someone could be convinced to do her a favor...for the right amount of money.

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He retrieved a jeweler's loupe from his duffel bag of tricks then hurried back for a closer look. Rhinestones, every single one, even the ones in the bowl holding Stephanie's supply.

Back to square one and time was running out.

* * *

Blythe pushed her lettuce around her plate. She'd been like this most of the day, unable to concentrate. At least at the office she could mindlessly do finish work on the Caplin sofa. Every other thought focused on Tony.

She missed him, couldn't wait to see him again, craved him more than the richest chocolate. And here they'd only been involved less than a day. After watching him all these months, trying to avoid him now was useless. He was every fantasy come true and then some.

Fling, my ass. She was already stuck on the guy. For all she knew, she had been all along.

Blythe cursed herself a thousand times over. He wasn't what she wanted. Yet the idea of ending it tore her in two. She didn't know what the hell to do.

"I swear you haven't heard a word I've said."

She looked Eileen Cronkite's way. A frown had pulled her perfectly arched eyebrows together. Frustration darkened her blue eyes as she flicked back a wayward strand on her long, black hair. They went to lunch once a month, jabbering the hour away. Eileen sure got a raw deal this time.

"Something's on your mind. Give it up."

They'd known each other since high school, and had always shared their darkest secrets and desires. Why should this be so different?

Sighing, Blythe set her fork aside. It was different. It felt too private, too special to share. "All right...I've met someone. No...I've met *the* someone. We are absolutely, positively sexually compatible in every single way. He's charming, considerate, funny, great looking..."

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“But?”

God love her, at least Eileen didn't cheer. “He's lacking on the career issue.”

They waited while the waiter cleared their plates.

“He sounds like everything you've ever wanted.” Eileen's voice was low, for Blythe's ears only.

All she could do was nod. The memory of him set her body thrumming for attention, and not just for the sex. Their camaraderie over breakfast kept tugging at her heart.

“Is his job so important?” The question was softly spoken.

Blythe had been asking herself that same question all morning. She gave a light laugh. “I guess I wanted someone with a little more ambition.”

“What does he do?”

“He's a masseur.”

“Doesn't mean he doesn't have any ambition. They can make good money. Maybe it's what makes him happy. Isn't a happy sex god more important than a self-centered, power-hungry maniac?”

“I'm afraid, Eileen.”

“Of what? Of falling in love?”

She nodded. “Of being hurt. Of making a mistake. Of having a broken heart. You name it.”

Eileen stirred her straw through her iced tea. “You've never mentioned any man before. Obviously, this is someone you've just met. Aren't you jumping to conclusions?”

“I've known him for about six months. I've just avoided him.”

“Until now.”

“Yeah...I caved. I couldn't help it. I was like a time bomb ready to explode. And he...” Blythe couldn't put it into words.

“Tell me about him. Besides the sex stuff.” She flicked her long fingers through the air. Blythe had always admired her friend's hands—

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smooth, long fingers with perfect nails. Eileen took care of them, too, sometimes to obsession, changing the polish every day or several times in one day.

Blythe pulled in a breath as she struggled for the words to explain about Tony. How she wasn't afraid in his arms. The comfort and warmth she felt curled beside him at night. How thoughtful he was to have coffee ready. His consideration and respect in not rushing out, in wanting to date. She was offering free sex and he wasn't biting. Damn it, Tony wanted more. But the only thing she could say was—"His kisses make me want to melt."

Eileen rolled her blue gaze heavenward. "Oh, boy, you've got it bad."

"I told him I don't want him to kiss me any more."

Eileen laughed so hard heads turned their way. "And you think that's going to help?"

Blythe covered her eyes. It sounded ridiculous, even to her ears, even knowing how one kiss destroyed her senses. "What am I going to do?"

"Why try to analyze it? Why not just take what comes? Enjoy the great sex, the princess treatment I assume he's offering you, and let nature take care of the rest."

Easier said than done. It wasn't Eileen's heart they were talking about here.

"It could also be that you're so horny, anything will get you going. It's been forever since you've gotten any."

Blythe shrugged. "No one's caught my interest."

"Well, I'd say you're plenty caught right now. Take advantage of it before the next long dry spell...if there is one."

Sound advice. Maybe she was over-analyzing this. It was just that Tony was so different from what she'd expected. She'd seriously misjudged the man. Every bad thing she thought about him was wrong.

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He was caring, funny, charming, attentive, and right now she sorely regretted having blown him off for lunch.

Blythe laughed to herself. *There's an image for you.* She should have "blown him off" for lunch. It sounded much more intriguing than picking apart a relationship that may or may not exist. This was new, fun, exciting. He was everything sexual she craved in a man and had never found. And here she was missing out on a great nooner to complain to Eileen.

With any luck, she might just be able to catch him before his next client. Surely Stephanie had his phone number somewhere.

She tossed some bills on the table. "Sorry, Eileen, gotta run."

"I bet I can guess what you're about to do."

She smiled. "Then I'll leave that to your imagination."

Luck was with her. Every light was green on the way back to the office. Excitement pushed the accelerator just beyond the speed limit. Once she arrived, it was all Blythe could do to keep from running into the building. She nodded a greeting to the guard, then hurried down the hallway.

Please let him be available.

She shoved the key in the lock, ducked inside, then froze. His massage table and bag were propped against the wall.

"Tony?"

* * *

Shit. He was caught. He glanced at his watch. She was back early...way early. He had to think of something fast.

Tony grabbed a length of drapery tassel. "I'm in the back. Are you alone?"

He looped the ends over brackets in the wall, then twisted his wrists through the silken cord and waited for her like a sacrifice.

"I am. How did you..."

Blythe stopped short of the door. Her smile was quick as she raked

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her gaze over him. "I'm liking this."

"I stopped by on the off chance you might've changed your mind. The door was unlocked."

Considering how distracted she'd been, Blythe could believe that. And here he was, ready to make her wishes come true.

"I'll be right back. I need to make sure that door is locked this time."

By the time she returned, Tony's hard-on pulsed for freedom.

Smiling, she knotted his wrists to the brackets. A flick of her fingers opened his jeans. The zipper hissed down.

"Now, Mr. Driscoll, about that blow job. You are about to have the best one of your life."

She jerked jeans and boxers down far enough to expose him, then slithered down his body until her mouth reached him.

Her tongue teased and twirled around the tip until Tony's knees quivered from the effort of standing there. He tugged on the bindings. She had him good. He was truly hers to do with as she wanted.

"Oh, honey, please..."

A throaty chuckle left her throat. She knelt before him, taking him deep within her mouth. Tony groaned and bucked forward. One of her hands slipped to his buttocks, another to his balls. Nails dug deep into his ass. She sucked hard, that tongue of hers like a little flame around the tip, into the slit.

That feeling curled in his belly. She sucked again, harder, deep into her mouth until he swore she was going to swallow him whole. Her nails carved crescents into his butt cheeks. The hand between his legs cupped his balls tighter, squeezing, massaging. Fire shot up from his loins, through his dick, and into her mouth. He thrashed against the bindings, one long cry echoing off the walls. Still her tongue danced until he was spent.

Blythe rained kisses to his thighs, his balls, his belly, his navel, then

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released him from his bindings.

“My turn.”

He seized her waist and bent her over the arm of the Naugehyde sofa. One yank bared her from the waist down. He spread her legs wide, draping them over his shoulders, and dove his head into her moistness.

Tony wasted no time on preliminaries. He went straight for her clit, sucking it like it was candy. A blinding orgasm tore from her. Still he didn't relent. Minutes later another rippled through her.

“Tony, please, no more. I...I...”

He suckled hard, ramming two fingers deep within her. Blythe grappled for a handhold. Harder and harder, deeper.

“Oh, God, I...I...oooooooooh.”

Bigger, stronger than the last two orgasms, Blythe writhed beneath his mouth. Then, and only then, did he release his hold on her.

Blythe grabbed his face between her hands, pulled his lips to hers and kissed him hard and deep.

“I thought you said no kissing,” he said as they sealed the kiss.

“I lied.”

He smiled. “I can't wait for dinner.”

“Screw dinner. I can't wait for dessert.”

“So I see,” he said with a soft laugh.

Smiling, she wrapped her fingers around his erection.

Tony swallowed hard and reluctantly peeled her hand away. “Unless you're willing to jerk me off or give me another blow job, we need to stop. I don't have any condoms with me.”

She wrapped her legs around his waist and nudged him toward her with her heels. “I'm on the pill. I'm safe.”

He hesitated. He'd never trusted a woman before, always erred on the side of caution. She was different. She was the exception. His gut screamed to trust her with everything.

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Tony grabbed her hips and seated himself in a hard thrust that arched her back. He pulled back and shoved in again, harder and harder still. A soft moan beckoned him on. He wedged his hand between them, letting each pivot press his thumb against her clit. Her muscles clamped around him as the tension built, yanking control from him. She was hot, wet, tight, and damn glorious. Tony never knew a woman could feel so great this way, so sweet, so...perfect.

He came in a flash so blinding he swore he almost passed out. His body quaked as his seed dumped itself deep into her. Then her legs locked him in a death grip as she climaxed, too.

Still entwined, they collapsed together in an exhausted heap on the sofa. He'd trusted her with more than his body just now. Whether she realized it or not, she also held his heart. Now it was time to tell her the whole truth. He just needed the words to do so.

CHAPTER 4

The Cambridge house never ceased to amaze Tony. Set in the hills above Malibu, it was something you'd expect a movie star to have. He supposed that was fitting, since Gavin earned his living as an actor. From what Tony could uncover, though, Gavin's roles were no more than secondary at best.

Oh, he was good...Tony wouldn't deny that. In fact, he ranked as one of the best character actors Tony had ever seen and he'd made a lot of films until recent years. The man immersed himself in the role, making his disguise a true extension of himself. Obviously he earned enough to afford this luxury because Stephanie didn't. Her company might be well on its way to the top, but it was far from there yet. Of course, with Gavin's salary there was no need to worry—as long as the roles kept coming.

Tax records estimated the sprawling house and surrounding two acres to be valued at ten million. Fine and large as it was, it was

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location that put that price tag on it. The house was paid for and the property taxes up to date. That was why the smuggling seemed so out of character. The Cambridges had money. Why do it?

Ten-foot white walls hid the house from the world. Tiny spikes of razors and shards of broken glass were imbedded in the concrete at the top. A black wrought-iron security gate locked it away. Security cameras caught all angles of the yard. Lighting camouflaged throughout the grounds was motion activated. Everything was monitored and caught on tape by a security company miles away.

Yet, for a couple who took such precautions with the outside of their house, they weren't so diligent with the house itself. At least not from what Tony saw so far. Maybe they felt there were enough obstacles outside to keep intruders from the house. With any luck, he might be able to do a little snooping tonight to see where he stood before searching the place.

Blythe pulled up to the gate, reached over, and punched in the code. Seconds later, the gates swung open. She pulled her car through and they were closed in once more. A laser beam on the outgoing bend of the circular driveway would activate the gates when they left. Every movement was monitored, which is why they were in her car. Security expected her there to feed the cats, not him. The last thing they needed was to arouse suspicion.

She pulled to a stop at the head of the drive. A winding pebbled concrete path edged with low pyracantha bushes led to the front door. Plants hung from the eaves of the porch, each with its own drip system to water it.

Tony stepped from the car with Blythe. The scent of freshly mowed grass reached him. Another expense—a gardener. They also had a pool service and maid service. A lot of people went through those gates when the Cambridges weren't there, which was another good reason Tony had to be especially diligent in finding evidence that linked the

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Cambridges to smuggling. The Cambridges could pin hidden diamonds on any number of people—even Blythe.

He followed Blythe up the path and couldn't resist grabbing her perfect little ass halfway there. She merely smiled and glanced over her shoulder.

"Trying to give the security company a thrill?"

He laughed. "I could be persuaded. I'm sure they'd appreciate the break in their routine."

"Maybe later." She gave him a wink and went on.

Once inside, she wasted no time punching the security code into the panel near the door to deactivate the interior system. Then she set her purse on a mahogany Queen Anne console in the foyer.

"I won't be long."

"Are you sure there are cats?" he said as he looked around. "I've never seen any."

"Neither have I," she tossed back over her shoulder. "But the food's gone every day."

"Litter pan? The place doesn't smell."

"There's a small pet door they squeeze through to go outside."

Cats might appear like they didn't give a damn about you, but Tony hadn't seen a one yet who didn't come squalling when their owners were away. "Still, maybe we should try to find them just to make sure they're all right."

Blythe paused in the arched alcove that led to the kitchen. "Well, I suppose you're right."

He waved her on. "I'll poke around while you fix them up."

He waited until she ducked into the next room, then turned toward what he guessed would be the bedrooms. It couldn't get any more perfect than this. The electronic beeper in his pocket would vibrate if it detected any active surveillance equipment. If things were clear, he'd get a better look tomorrow night.

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Finding the first door locked, Tony moved on. All the others were wide open.

As with the vast living room, cathedral ceilings dominated the bedrooms as well—four in all. Each was decked out with California king-sized, four poster beds. They were only slightly larger than his.

Man-oh-man, what he and Blythe could do to each other in a bed like that. Tony couldn't wait.

He shook the image from his mind and pressed on. So far nothing had triggered the detector, but he did notice video cameras mounted in the corners of each room pointed toward the beds. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what those were for. Considering how blatantly Stephanie *and* Gavin had come on to him during massages, this didn't surprise him in the least. Stairs at the end of the hall leading to a basement verified his suspicions.

The area was divided into several entertainment sections—pool table, bar, and a big screen TV at the end. Double-wide theater chairs sat in front of this in a semi-circle. Ten to one, this was where the Cambridges and their friends viewed their films. A locked walnut cabinet was where they probably kept the tapes.

Tony snickered. Or maybe they gave them out as hostess gifts.

Or used them for blackmail?

These people were generating way more questions than answers.

He trotted back upstairs. Bedrooms clear, bathrooms clear, living room, too. Tomorrow night he'd start a more in-depth search.

Blythe lounged against the kitchen entrance, arms tucked under her breasts. "I was beginning to think you'd found the secret passage where those cats are and I'd have to put out the search for you."

"I'm telling you, honey. There are no cats in this house. Unless they're locked up in that room back there. Maybe we should open it."

"I don't have a key. Besides..." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Three empty food bowls say different."

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“All right. We’ll find out pretty quick.” He brushed by her on his charge to the kitchen. “I haven’t met a cat yet that could resist the sound of a can opener.”

Blythe merely turned around to watch him. A smile teased her lips.

Tony pushed the lever down. The whirr never failed to bring them running. This time...nothing.

“I don’t understand.”

Blythe looped her arm through his. “Okay, Colombo, can we tear this mystery to shreds while we eat? I’m starving.”

* * *

Blythe watched the furrow between his eyebrows deepen and tried her best not to laugh...or be impatient. Obviously, he was one of those guys for whom logic was important.

She had to agree. It was odd that in all the times she’d been to Stephanie’s house, she’d never seen these cats. The only evidence was the food bowls. Cats were solitary and reclusive, but they were also intensely curious. The least they would have done was stroll into the kitchen to eye her with disdain.

Now Tony had her frowning. Stephanie never talked about her pets either, never mentioned them by name. They’d always been so busy, Blythe had never paid much attention. Any functions at the Cambridge house were crowd-filled events, no place for a pet.

“This place is huge.” Tony craned his neck back to look at the vaulted ceiling. “I’m surprised she never offered the place up to you in her absence. Seems she’d feel more comfortable about her cats if someone was here all the time.”

Blythe waved that notion away with the flick of her hand. “You know how cats are. They never need anyone.”

He glanced down at her. “So she never offered.”

Blythe maneuvered him toward the exit. “She’s offered many times. I just never accepted. I prefer my own place, my own bed.”

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Plus the place gave her the creeps. It was so big, a person's breath echoed back. She felt like she was being watched at every step. Every time she came over to feed the cats, Blythe was in and out quick.

"Probably a good thing you refused," he said as she set the alarm and stepped outside. "They have video cameras pointed toward every bed."

That was a little more information than Blythe wanted to hear. It certainly explained the being-watched feeling. She plopped the keys into Tony's palm.

"You drive. I think my appetite just got ruined."

He opened the passenger door for her. She expected some smart-assed comment, but he seemed just as stunned by his revelation as she was.

"Maybe they're a security measure against theft."

He slipped behind the wheel and snapped his seatbelt in place. "Didn't look like there was much in any of the rooms to steal. Their room is another matter. There is one room that's locked. Might be something of value in there, too. But why lock it and not their room?"

"When I think of all the times..."

He draped his arm over the seat, brushing his fingers against her shoulder. "Don't think about it. Everyone has quirks. If it's enjoyable between two consenting adults, what does it matter?"

He nipped at her earlobe, sending shivers down her spine.

Blythe glanced toward the house. But were all the parties involved in there consenting? She was beginning to have her doubts.

Tony nuzzled his way to the top of her blouse, flicking his tongue over the rise of her breast.

"If we don't get some dinner soon," he murmured, "I'm going to have to eat you."

Blythe giggled and gave him a playful shove. "Promises, promises."

"So—" A twist of the key started the engine. "—where to?"

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“I’d be happy with Chinese takeout and a movie.”

Tony grinned. “You are just about the perfect woman.”

Blythe traced the shell of his ear with the tip of her finger. “Just about? I’ll have to work a little harder.”

“Careful, Sunshine. I’m pretty close to falling head over heels for you. Are you prepared to deal with *those* consequences?”

Laughing, she motioned him onward. “Just drive. I’d hate for the Cambridges to come home and find two wasted skeletons entwined in a coital embrace in front of their house.”

He gave her a wink, then eased down the driveway.

Safe. His driving made her feel safe. Blythe nearly laughed out loud at that, but it was true. He was a careful, attentive driver, not a maniac from hell who had a point to prove. She could relax, not worry. Just like when they slept together.

As for the head over heels comment? She tried not to analyze whether it was made in jest or fact. She grabbed onto fact—it validated her feelings.

Blythe had known she was doomed the second she saw him trussed up in the workroom. Love hopped around her, waiting for final approval to grab her. Each second she spent in his company made her crave more.

So much for being stand-offish. Blythe had to be out of her mind to think she could ever approach this as sex only. She’d never done so in the past in any of her relationships. Why would she even think she could get away with it now when Tony was pretty close to all she’d ever wanted in a man?

They stopped for Chinese food at her favorite place not far from her apartment. The hostess and both waitresses greeted Blythe with a smile and an appreciative nod Tony’s way. If the blatant flattery pumped up his ego, Tony hid it well.

While they waited for their order, they sat in the alcove near the

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front door, his arm draped over the bench behind her, fingers lightly brushing her shoulder. He was hers and hers alone and not afraid to announce it to the world. It made her want to jump his bones all the more. She couldn't wait to get him home. Within fifteen minutes they were out the door.

Halfway to her car, a pathetic whimper pulled them to a stop. They turned in unison and spotted a scruffy, little dog huddled near the corner of the building. Little more than skin and bones, the poor thing shivered and looked at them through big, sad, brown eyes.

Tony gave Blythe the bag of food and crouched down, hand extended. The dog rolled to her back, exposing her belly to him. He passed Blythe a gaze just as woeful as that of the dog.

"I'm sorry, honey. I can't leave her here. I also can't have pets at my place."

Blythe knew how he felt, but what could they do? "I can't have pets in my apartment either. Is there some way we can sneak her inside without my nosy neighbors seeing her?"

He gave a slow nod as he scooped the little dog into his arms. "I think you'll just about fit in my duffel bag."

The pup slapped one kiss against his chin, then snuggled down into his arms. She did the same when Tony placed her in Blythe's lap for the trip home.

Blythe stroked her dirty, matted fur as he pulled into traffic. The dog was asleep before they'd gone a half mile. She was too exhausted to even worry about the food in the bag.

Blythe decided the pup was a terrier mix, young judging from the white teeth, and from her condition, she'd been on the streets a while.

"Poor little thing. It's enough to break your heart."

They never heard a peep out of her. Not when Tony pulled to a stop in Blythe's allotted parking spot. Not when he tucked her into his duffel bag. Not when they waltzed through the front door right past nosy Mrs.

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Watson. Not even when Tony finally set her on Blythe's living room carpet.

She trotted to where Blythe placed a bowl of water for her, drank until it was empty, then sat by the kitchen table waiting for someone to open the carry-out bags as if to say, "So...what are we having tonight?"

Tony laughed. "Don't worry. You'll get your share."

Piece by piece, he picked the chicken out of his chow mein and passed it along. With each bite, the dog wagged her tail a little more. Finally, he scooped out a healthy portion onto one of Blythe's china plates and let her have at it. He chuckled softly as he watched her.

Emotion slammed into Blythe. That he would lavish such care on an animal said volumes about the man. He could have left her on the street. He could have taken her to the night drop off at the shelter. But no...he snuck her in, then fed her most of his dinner. How could a woman not love a man like that? She shoved whatever reservations she had aside and let her heart open. Who gave a damn what he did for a living? He was a good man, a wonderful lover, and all hers.

"Don't worry, little girl. You're going to have a good home. Soon as we eat, I'm taking you over to my mom's house. No one loves dogs more."

Blythe arched one eyebrow. "Oh, I can think of someone." She pushed the remains of her food his way. "I'm stuffed. You finish this."

"You sure?" He waited for her to nod, then pulled the carton his way.

They watched the dog lick the plate clean. Belly full, she settled down to work on her paws.

"I think she looks like a Lucy, don't you?"

He offered a noncommittal shrug.

Lucy looked their way and sighed.

Blythe laughed. "Lucy it is... Do you think your mom will mind?"

"She'll fuss," he said around a mouth full of food. "That's why I'm

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not going to give her advance warning.”

Blythe lifted Lucy. “Then let’s not give her any reasons to say no. We need to put our best paw forward. Bath time for you, Lucy girl.”

* * *

Tony watched Blythe dote on the dog. There was something about a woman who plucked a scruffy stray off the streets and bathed it in expensive shampoo and conditioner. She never once blinked an eye. Not even when he used a fancy china plate as a dog dish. She talked quietly to the little canine waif, telling her what a good and pretty girl she was. Lucy soaked in the praise, glancing up at Blythe with adoring eyes.

The dog endured the pampering which progressed to blow drying her wiry fur, picking the knots out, and a clip job with Blythe’s toenail scissors. By the time Blythe finished, Lucy pranced around like she knew she was hot shit. Blythe, however, looked a little bedraggled and worse for wear.

Her damp pink shirt hugged her breasts. Tufts of Lucy’s fur stuck to her in random splotches. Her blonde hair defied a pony tail, drifting in wisps wherever it pleased. She’d never looked more desirable. He pictured her years from now, smiling down at their children.

Yep, that’s exactly where they were headed if he had anything to say about it. Rather than be alarmed at the rate they’d progressed in such a short time, the thought warmed Tony. Fortunately, he had the common sense to keep his plan to himself. The last thing he needed was to frighten her off. The first thing was to come clean with her about who he really was.

“Come here, you.” He snagged her around the waist and pulled her onto his lap.

“Tony, I’m a mess,” she said with a laugh.

He peeled her shirt up. “Uh-uh...you promised to never refuse me.”

“That I did,” she whispered and brought her lips to his in a kiss that

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seared his soul.

Lucy jumped up and down for attention.

Tony laughed and scooped her onto Blythe's lap. "Okay, little girl, off to your new home." He patted Blythe's rear. "You coming?"

She plucked at her shirt and made a face. "I might be great enough for sex, but not to meet your parents. I'll stay and clean up." She slithered closer. "Who knows? You might have a little surprise waiting for you when you get back."

"I'm intrigued."

"I knew you would be," she said in a husky tone. "Don't be long. I'd hate to have to start without you."

Another deep kiss parted them. She slipped him her keys, then locked the door behind him.

Lucy whined. He scratched her behind the ears before he tucked into his duffel bag. "Don't worry, girl. With any luck, we'll all be sharing a new home soon."

* * *

Blythe blinked back tears as she tried to busy herself cleaning up the mess from Lucy's bath. It was silly to get so misty-eyed over a dog she'd just met. Sillier still to miss her so much after having her here for just a couple of hours.

But Blythe knew it was much more than sentimentality over Lucy that made her so emotional. Love had hit her hard.

She blotted a fresh batch of tears as she laughed at herself. "This is ridiculous. All he needs to see is me crying. That'll fix things but good. Back to work."

Or play.

After a quick shower, Blythe zipped through her apartment lighting every candle she could find. Soft music added atmosphere. A hot bubble bath. A bottle of wine near the tub. All she needed was Tony. A trail of her discarded clothing created a path to the bathroom.

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Her heart pounded against her ribs when she heard the key in the lock. His soft chuckle filtered her way. She counted the seconds, the steps. When he finally appeared in the doorway, he was naked and fully erect.

"I thought you'd never...come." She traced the curve of her breast.

"Oh, I'm going to take care of that right now," he said with a laugh as he slipped into the tub opposite her.

Blythe crawled over to him and wrapped her hand around his penis. Tony's humor faded. He caught her wrist in a gentle hold.

"You've been crying. What's wrong?"

"Absolutely nothing. Just watching you with Lucy...well, you're just a big softy."

He gave a playful wince. "Not something a man likes to hear from his woman."

Blythe giggled. "Only in the heart. Definitely not anywhere else." She ran a finger over the length of him.

"And you're about to find out just how hard it is." He pulled her with him as he stood. In one quick motion, he had her impaled against the tub wall.

He kept her there. His dick hard and throbbing. How he kept from thrusting was a mystery and a delight to Blythe. Each second he pierced her, pleasure grew. Her clit spread over his length, begging for attention.

Tony grabbed her leg and wrapped it around his waist. Blythe cried out, grinding herself against the log inside her.

"You want it bad, don't you, baby? Tell me."

She nodded through gasps of air. He pulled back, lifting her higher, and thrust deep.

"Oh, God, Tony...more!"

Blythe twitched while he worked himself in and out. Her orgasm built fast, strong, exploding on her in a rush so blinding she'd swore

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she'd pass out.

Greedy as she was, Blythe expected another. Instead, Tony braced his arm against the stall with a long growl as he came. They sank into the water still joined.

"I think we need a bigger tub." He eased free and tucked her beside him.

"There's a hot tub at Stephanie's not being used. I have an open invitation."

"We'll have to take her up on that tomorrow night." Tony flicked up the stopper.

"Is our bath over?" she murmured against his shoulder.

"Not quite." He grabbed the handheld shower massage. "Someone made me come too soon."

"Really?"

"Really." He tested the temperature against his chest then danced the head over her body.

Held in his arms, all Blythe had to do was lay there and enjoy it. Pulsing fingers of water brought her to tingling life again. He teased her to a fever pitch before directing a harder burst of water against her crotch. Blythe came fast, then again.

He flicked the water off and gathered her in a towel. She felt like a noodle, all limp. He blotted her dry, then himself before he lifted her in his arms and carried her to bed. He draped her across it like a precious fur, unwrapping her like she was fine crystal.

Blythe reached for him, holding his head to her breasts as he suckled each over and over again, pulling the nipples long and flicking them under his tongue before suckling again. Braced on forearms, he eased himself deep into her warmth. He stroked her long, deep, slow, each time growing harder, bigger.

Thrust, pause. Thrust, pause. Until she felt it in her womb.

He caught her knees and bent them gently to her chest as he levered

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upright.

“God, you’re tight,” he growled. “It’s all I can do to keep from coming.”

Blythe raked her nails down his chest. “Don’t hold back. Give it to me...hard.”

And he did just that, pounding stroke after stroke into her. Blythe grabbed his shoulders. All she could do was ride with him, giving as good as she got. He wedged his hand between them, making her come yet another time.

She reached for his waist, determined to dig her nails into his ass and help him along. Tony laced his fingers through hers, pinning them on either side of her head.

He was in control and she loved every second of it. She watched his face as he came—the rapture, the pleasure. She gloried in the shudders that rippled through him.

They collapsed, exhausted.

“I hope you realize I have my limits,” she said through pants of air.

“Really?”

She saw the mischief in his eyes.

“Tony...” Her voice warned him off.

He chuckled and tucked her close. “Just teasing. Sleep well, honey.”

* * *

Tony waited until he heard her slow, measured breathing before he slipped from bed. Guilt made sleep impossible for the moment.

He was a coward, plain and simple. All his good intentions to come clean with her when he got back had been wiped away the second he stepped into the apartment and saw the candles. He hid behind sex, an old ploy. And why? Because he was afraid of losing her.

So he fucked her over and over again. Maybe in the primitive recesses of his mind, he thought if he made it the best she’d ever had,

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she'd forgive anything. His heart knew different, and the truth still nagged. But the words refused to come.

Tony poured a glass of wine and returned to the bedroom to watch her sleep. With each sip, he prayed for the courage to tell her, and prayed doing so wouldn't wind up being the biggest mistake of his life...and his career. His instincts hadn't let him down before; he was counting on them now more than ever.

He downed the wine and crawled into bed beside her. Even in her sleep Blythe curled against him. God, he loved her. Maybe he had from the start. Each second he delayed telling her made the inevitable harder to explain.

So why didn't he just spit it out?

Coward.

Tomorrow morning. First thing. He swore it.

CHAPTER 5

The smell of coffee and bacon pulled Blythe awake right before the alarm went off at six. Looked like Tony had awakened before her again this morning. It wouldn't take much to get used to being spoiled this way.

She stretched like a cat and crawled out of bed, then made her way to the bathroom. Would he greet her today as he had yesterday—by pulling her onto his lap and a hard-on ready to please? She laughed to herself. Why wait for him to make the move?

As she ran a toothbrush around her mouth, Blythe marveled at the difference one day could make. Yesterday she approached the kitchen expecting him to be long gone, only to be greeted by his smile. Bone-quaking sex aside, Tony didn't waste any time worming his way under her skin and into her heart.

Frankly, she couldn't wait to see him this morning. To wrap her arms around his neck and just hug him close. Her heart fluttered like a

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teenager's with a full-blown crush. Love had her hard. Eileen was right. Tony's job didn't matter. He was perfect just the way he was—perfect for her. And to think he'd been right under her nose for the last six months. All that wasted time.

Blythe shook her head as she laughed softly. Well, no more. If the last day-and-a-half were any indication, they'd make up for lost time soon enough.

She snugged her robe belt around her and wandered to the kitchen. Pausing in the doorway, she watched Tony work. He whipped a fork through the eggs in the bowl and poured the mixture into the sizzling pan. He sprinkled cheese and onion on top with the same attention to detail decorators give to wedding cakes. Blythe had never seen a man so absorbed in his work, even if it was only an omelet.

Step by soft step she crept up behind him, then jabbed her fingers into his ribs.

“Stick 'em up.”

Lightning reflexes whipped him around. Before Blythe could blink or move, he seized her wrist, yanked it to the small of her back, and had her face down on the table. Just as quickly, he released her and sank into the chair.

Clutching her wrist, Blythe scooted to the safety of the refrigerator. “What the hell, Tony?”

He scrubbed a hand down his face. It didn't mask the fear, the horror of what he'd done from his expression. Blythe couldn't be sure, but she'd swear he was actually shaking. She forced herself to return to the table, to his side.

“Tony?” She lightly touched his shoulder.

He caught her hand and pulled her fingers to his lips, then cupped it to his cheek.

“God, honey, I'm so sorry.” He kissed her wrist and gently rubbed his thumb over the red marks left by his grip. “I'd never intentionally

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hurt you. You have to know that. Please don't sneak up on me again." He kissed her wrist again.

That was a no-shitter. Blythe combed her fingers through his hair as she dropped kisses to his forehead. "It's okay."

"No, it's not." He pulled her to his lap. "I could've broken your wrist."

"But you didn't."

That didn't seem to appease him any. He still looked haunted.

"I think we need to talk," he said in a rush of breath.

The stench of burning eggs reached them. Muttering a curse, Tony jumped up and slid the pan to one side.

"I'll make another." But when Blythe reached for the carton, he pulled her back to his lap.

Long fingers found their way into the folds of her robe until they were against her flesh. He drew lazy circles against her breasts, but moved no further. Pulling in a deep breath, he forced his gaze to hers. "I need to tell you something."

Judging from the despair in his eyes, Blythe wasn't sure she wanted to hear it.

"I'm not going to lie or hold anything back from you any more. I'm just praying you'll understand."

Blythe's heart sank. He was married.

"I wanted to be with you from the second I laid eyes on you. I tried to push it aside, but..." He shrugged.

Yep, married. Tears clogged her throat.

"I can't get enough of you, Blythe. Far as I'm concerned, you're just about the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"But?" she forced herself to say.

"No but. It's the honest-to-gosh truth."

Blythe shoved to her feet. Fists clenched at her sides, she glared down at him. "Just get to the point. Spit it out. Then get the hell out and

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get back to your wife.”

“Wife?” Confusion screwed up his face. “I’m not married.”

Now she was confused. “You’re not?”

He gave a soft laugh as he shook his head. “No.”

“Then?” She sank into the chair opposite of him.

Tony laced his fingers through hers immediately. “You aren’t a one-night stand to me, honey. Or the lay of the moment. The second I realized how things were between us—hell, maybe even before that—I knew I had to be one hundred percent honest with you.”

He pulled in another breath. “I’m not really a masseur. It’s a cover. I’m an FBI agent.”

Blythe tucked her arms over her chest. One arched eyebrow said what she could not—*Oh, pulease*.

In silent reply, Tony picked up his duffel bag from where he’d stashed it against the wall. Grabbing the sides, he pulled. Velcro ripped open, revealing a hidden pouch. Blythe watched him pull out a pistol and a wallet. He flipped open the latter. The letters *FBI* leaped out at her. After she looked away, he tucked everything back into its place.

Blythe didn’t know what to think or ask at this point. One thought perpetually tapped at her brain—he wasn’t a masseur. He had the career, the ambition, the drive she swore she wanted in a man. He *was* absolutely, positively perfect for her.

So where was her joy? Locked up somewhere in her curiosity. Why was he telling her this? Because he felt the same pull as she did and knew he couldn’t lie? If so, why did he just sit there looking at her?

Blythe brushed her arms. “What...what are you investigating?” That seemed a safe question.

Tony sighed and peeled her arms from around her body so he could lock their hands once more. “I’m looking for smuggled diamonds.”

“Who?”

“We believe the Cambridges.”

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She gave a light laugh. "And how do you know I'm not in on it?"

He didn't blink, didn't hesitate. "Because I checked you out very thoroughly."

Blythe pulled away from his gentle hold. He had to do his job, and she appreciated that. Still, the very thought he'd investigated her, checked into her life, her background made her uneasy. He knew everything about her. She knew nothing about him.

"I've always sensed I could trust you, Blythe. I thought about confiding in you a hundred times. But it seemed we were never on the same track until now."

She turned her palms up. "Why should you confide in me before? Or now?"

He splayed his fingers on the table before her. "Before? Because I thought I could enlist your help when I kept coming up empty. Now?"

She watched his Adam's apple bob up and down.

"Because you mean a lot to me, Blythe. I knew I couldn't have a relationship with you and not be completely honest."

Still, no protestation of love. Blythe had to admire him for that. Even though her heart tugged in that direction, her mind knew it was just too soon to make those kinds of declarations.

She traced his lips with her forefinger. "Thank you."

He kissed the digit, then dropped another one into her palm before he caressed her wrist once more.

"I can see now why you acted the way you did," she said. "Instinct. I won't do that to you again."

"We could've easily been at the hospital right now." His gaze followed every circle his thumb made.

"But we're not."

She slipped astride his lap and tucked his hands inside her robe. When they girdled her waist, she settled her lips over his. Their kiss was slow, sweet, binding. Once sealed, she butted her forehead against

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his.

“You said you once wanted my help because you weren’t having any luck. Since you’re still undercover, I’m guessing that’s still the case. So...what can I do? Need me to search the office?”

He gave a shake of his head. “Nope, I was pretty thorough yesterday.”

Yesterday? Blythe eased back. She’d caught him in the office. It wasn’t an accident. He’d picked the lock after he’d seen her leave. If honesty was his goal, why not say something then? Why the subterfuge?

“Weren’t you worried the place was bugged?”

“It isn’t. I checked.”

Of course he had. He wouldn’t have offered himself up as a sexual sacrifice if he’d known they were being watched. He’d done it to throw her off. To continue to hide the truth he now swore he’d always longed to tell her.

“What I really need now is a good, hard look inside their house.”

The house. Of course. The only way he could get into it without suspicion was with her. That sure explained the “heart-wrenching” decision to bare his soul. He had no other choice. He’d been using her from the start.

Blythe extricated herself from his lap. How did she even know he was really an FBI agent? The ID could be phony. How would she know the difference? He could be a thief for all she knew.

She suddenly felt stupid, vulnerable. She’d let a gorgeous body and a killer smile overtake her common sense.

Blythe slid the duffel bag his way. “I don’t like being used, Tony. I’d appreciate it if you left.”

He was on his feet in seconds, curling his fingers around her upper arms. “I was *not* using you. I wanted you. I wanted to tell you for months.”

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“But you didn’t. Not until you had no choice. For all I know...”

Should she lay her suspicions out? He was armed. He’d already proven he was dangerous. Her wrist tingled at the memory.

“Blythe, I...there’s something great between us and you know it.”

He lifted her to her toes, trying to pull her closer. Blythe resisted the tug. It was the last straw. Obviously, a last ditch effort on his part to win her over. She jerked free and hurried to the front door. Whipping it wide open, she stood to one side.

“I think it would be best if you left.”

Tony gave her a half-hearted chuckle. “You can’t be serious.”

“Very. I won’t be used in whatever game it is you’re really playing.” She thought about adding the threat of calling the police, but didn’t think that was so wise.

Tony stared at her, mouth agape for what seemed like forever. Then he clamped his mouth closed, picked up his bag, and stomped to the door.

He paused across the threshold, looking her up and down. “I can’t believe I was wrong about you.”

Blythe passed a scathing gaze down his body then up again. “And I’m not surprised to learn you’re exactly what I thought you’d be. What shocks me is how easily I was duped. Congratulations. It won’t happen again.”

She slammed the door before he said another word. Using the portal as a backrest, she sank to the floor. This was really all her fault. She was the one who let her guard down. There was no one else to blame. Still, it didn’t keep the tears from falling.

* * *

Tony stared at the door. What the hell had just happened? One minute she was thanking him for being honest and offering her help. The next blink of an eye she’s accusing him of using her and showing him the door. Now he was left wondering if he’d just compromised the

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entire investigation by confiding in her.

No. His instincts had never failed him.

They might if you were blinded by a perfect piece of ass, his conscience chided.

Tony chewed on that thought for a few minutes before dismissing it. He'd thought about telling her long before they'd tumbled into bed. If he'd listened to his instincts then, he might not be in this predicament now.

"Dumb shit." He smacked the heel of his hand into his head. No wonder she thought he'd used her. His instincts might be good, but his foot had still managed to find his mouth.

He lifted his fist to knock, then pulled it back down. There was too much at stake personally right now. He couldn't trust his mouth not to get him in any deeper. She had to cool down at some point. He'd just wait until lunch.

Tony shook his head. She'd be expecting that. He'd wait until after work before she left to feed the Cambridge cats. She'd have to listen to reason then. He'd have to find the words to make her. Because, unless he missed his guess, he was fairly certain Blythe was being set up.

* * *

All the makeup in the world wouldn't hide the fact Blythe had spent the last hour stretched across her bed, crying over the jerk. Her nose was red and puffy. Her eyes bloodshot. The best she could hope to do was pass it off as allergies. Thankfully, she wasn't expecting anyone until noon when the Jensens came by to review fabric swatches for their new living room ensemble.

Just thinking about the Jensens coming gave her a headache. They hadn't been too happy when they heard Stephanie was out of town and they'd be dealing with Blythe. It was going to take some serious ass-kissing to calm them down when they arrived.

Blythe prayed absorbing herself in her work would keep her mind

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occupied enough she'd stop crying. It was her own damn fault for letting herself get attached so fast in the first place. So what did she have to cry about?

A new batch of tears puddled in her eyes. She blinked them clear and focused on the road ahead. The hell of it was she'd really wanted Tony to be the one. His compassion with the dog, the consideration over breakfast, the killer sex pulled her heart his way. Then to discover he really wasn't a masseur. Her hopes, her love had soared.

She was a fool. Blythe should have known men like that didn't fall into a woman's lap. Of course he'd used her. He had a job to do. Hadn't she always heard that it was really about the mission for guys like that? That they'd do whatever it took to find the criminal? She was an easy target. Ripe for picking, or rather, the fucking. He'd gleaned her deepest fantasies and used them to worm his way under her defenses. Never again. No one would ever get close to her heart again, especially Tony Driscoll.

As she pulled into her parking slot, Blythe saw his SUV parked in the corner. He was watching. Let him. Hell could freeze over before she'd talk to him again.

Still, as she walked inside, there was a part of her that wanted him to trot after her and beg her forgiveness, to grovel at her feet and swear she was the only woman for him. Tears blinded her once more. The security guard looked at her funny, but kept his mouth closed. Blythe silently thanked the ineptitude of men. Any hint of concern or offer of assistance might send her blubbering over the edge.

Behind the safety of the office door, she stuffed her purse into her desk drawer. The message light flashed on the answering machine. Blythe jabbed her finger on the button.

Eileen's voice filtered out. "Just checking on last night's date. Call me."

No way. She'd made a fool of herself over Tony at lunch yesterday.

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She damn sure wasn't going to sob on Eileen's shoulder today.

The next message was from the Jensens confirming their noon appointment. Another from the Carters, changing delivery to early evening pickup. Was seven all right?

Blythe tapped her pen against her cheek. She'd have just enough time to feed Stephanie's cats and get back before they arrived. A minor inconvenience. Still, with traffic and all she might be doing better to go afterward. The invisible cats could wait an hour or so. A high-priced client couldn't.

The cats. As much as she hated to admit it, Tony was right. She'd been to Stephanie's house dozens of times, both with her and by herself. Blythe had yet to see these cats. In fact, Blythe had mentioned that on one occasion, even asking how many there were. Stephanie waved the question away with a flick of her fingers and a quick, "Three," as she zipped by.

Three cats and not a sign of them. No greeting. No cat fur. No smell. Of course, Stephanie did have a maid come every day so that would account for the cleanliness.

"This is stupid." She punched the erase button on the answering machine. Why would Stephanie lie about having cats?

Her conscience hurled another question at her. *Why would Stephanie have cats? She's never home.*

It wouldn't be the first time someone had a pet just to have one. Still, the thought nagged at her. Tony had planted the seed of doubt deep. She had to know.

Blythe peeked at her watch. Sneaking over there to catch the elusive cats had its appeal. She tossed that notion aside, then yanked it back. She clearly wasn't going to get anything done until she found out. If she left now, she'd be back in plenty of time for the Jensen appointment four hours away.

After scribbling a note and posting it on the door, Blythe snagged

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her purse and left. A quick glance around revealed her watchdog was gone. Thank goodness. Knowing Tony, he'd most likely follow her to the Cambridges.

Blythe snorted. All the better. He could see the damn cats for himself.

As she zipped along the freeway connections and winding streets up to the Cambridge house in Malibu, Blythe kept checking her rearview mirror for some sign Tony had followed. Victory was much nicer to savor when the other party was there.

In less than thirty minutes, Blythe was punching the security code at their house. The gates swung open. At the head of the driveway, she saw the small van marked Crystal Clean. The maid service was here.

As she stepped from her car, Blythe also heard the muted putt of a lawn mower. The gardener was here, too. She heard another vehicle pull through the gate and saw the pool man turn toward the garage. The Cambridge house was definitely humming with activity.

The door opened as she approached. A tiny Philippina blinked up at Blythe as she tried to block the entrance.

"Yes? I help you?" she asked.

Blythe smiled down at the young woman. "I'm a friend of the Cambridges. I came to check on the cats."

"You wait. I check with boss."

She returned in seconds with her supervisor—a towering bulk of a woman Blythe silently dubbed Hilda. Hilda acknowledged Blythe with a brief nod. "Can I help you?"

Blythe pasted on her smile once more. "I'm Blythe Smithers. I work for Mrs. Cambridge. She asked me to take care of her cats. I honestly can't remember if I came by last night or not." She jingled the keys, then demonstrated to the women that one of them fit the lock.

Satisfied, Hilda stepped back. "Sorry, ma'am. We can't be too careful. As for those cats, they're a picky bunch when Miz Cambridge

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is gone. They never eat. I'm always throwing out their food come morning. Like this morning."

"Ah...so I was here last night." Blythe hated anyone thinking her a feather-head, but not expecting a challenge to entry, she hadn't thought of any other ruse.

Hilda nodded. "Looks like it to me. We're here every day."

Blythe stepped over the threshold and craned her neck for a look. "Maybe we should check on them to be sure they're all right."

The older woman motioned her helper back to work. "Good luck finding them. Been cleaning this house for years and I've yet to see a cat."

Blythe turned her way. "Cats are their own boss."

She gave a soft laugh. "I'll say. They have Miz Cambridge wrapped around their paws. I'm surprised she doesn't feed them albacore, rather than Little Friskies. Or maybe that's the problem—too much spoiling makes them picky. There isn't a morning when they're gone that we don't toss out dry cat food."

"Could they have accidentally been locked in that one room?"

"I doubt it. I've never seen that room open in all the times I've been cleaning here."

Come to think of it, neither had Blythe in all the times *she'd* been here. "Aren't you concerned about them being hungry?"

She shrugged. "Miz Cambridge says to throw it out. That she doesn't want them having stale food." She pointed to the small pet door set in the patio door. "There's never been a litter box. They can come and go as they please. Who knows? Maybe they do their own hunting when she's gone."

"Maybe," Blythe said, more to herself than to Hilda. She dredged up another smile. "Well, obviously they're none the worse for it. I'll let you get back to your work."

The door closed quietly on her exit. So, Tony was right—no cats. It

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made no sense. Why lie? If you were going to lie about having a pet, why not say you had a dog? A big, ferocious hulk of a dog. Logic warred back. Or was that loyalty? Blythe refused to believe Stephanie could be involved in any crime, save that of robbing herself of sleep.

The gates swung open. Stephanie pulled out and turned right onto the street. Tony's SUV was parked in clear view. Had he followed her without her knowledge, or was he there to scope out the place? Blythe didn't care. All she wanted was to slip by and get back to work. Tony had other ideas.

Seeing her leave, he stepped from his vehicle and into her path. Blythe had no choice. A press of her finger whirled the window down.

"What?" she demanded.

Tony curled his fingers on the edge of the door. "So...did you find the cats?"

"What makes you so sure—"

"Did you?"

"Go to hell, Tony."

She hit the gas as she closed the window. She refused to believe Stephanie was anything other than the model designer and the mentor she'd always admired. If anyone was the liar, it was Tony. She had half a mind to call his bluff and charge right into the local FBI office to report him.

Blythe smiled. That was exactly what she was going to do.

CHAPTER 6

Tony stared at Blythe's taillights as she braked for the curve in the road. Following her was one thing, but he never should have thrown the cat issue in her face. She was pissed at him, loyal to Stephanie. How else did he expect her to act? Throw open her arms to him and fall weeping against him, declaring he was right all along?

Yeah, like that was ever going to happen.

He'd let male pride override his judgment. Had this been any other situation, any other possible contact, Tony would have waited until they came to him. Rubbing the facts in someone's face always made matters worse.

But, damn it, he hated that she automatically assumed the worst of him. That she thought he'd use her to get the goods on the Cambridges. The hell of it was, had this been anyone else, that's exactly what he would have been doing. And the truth of it was—he'd been doing just that until recently. Blythe was different. She had been from the second

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he'd first laid eyes on her and his dick reared up in healthy, hard appreciation. How was he supposed to explain that without getting himself in deeper shit with her? He could see it now...

"Yeah, honey, I wanted to fuck you from the minute I saw you."

That would go over well. He'd be accused of using her for sex then.

Tony smiled. Isn't that exactly what she'd had done with him, though? He *could* remind her of that. Let her get all high and mighty then. He'd love to see her squirm. To watch a pink flush creep to her cheeks. To see her nipples tighten into dots so hard her bra and shirt wouldn't be able to hide them.

Erection full blown, Tony squeezed behind the wheel of his vehicle—an uncomfortable fit in his present condition. One thing was certain—he refused to let this little rift between them last through the night. Now that he'd had a taste of her, nothing was going to keep him from her. Somehow, some way he'd have to get her to listen to reason. Even if he had to tie her up to make her listen.

The image of her spread eagle, his to explore and seduce exacerbated his predicament. As he drove to his office, he gloried in the idea of tracing his tongue and fingers across her naked flesh. She'd be his captive. His to do whatever he pleased, for as long as he pleased. And all she would be able to do was take it—one orgasm after the other.

She'd beg him to stop. She'd beg him for more. But he'd keep it up until she realized what he already knew—that they were meant for each other.

A toot from the car behind him spurred Tony through the green light. Lost in his sexual daydream, he'd gotten a mere five miles from his office with no clue how he'd done so. He adjusted his erection behind his zipper then tugged his T-shirt from his jeans hoping the hem would help hide the bulge.

Still, the two-block walk from parking lot to the back door of his

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office building only aggravated the situation. Each rub of material reminded him of how he felt when she was laid out on the massage table. He pictured her rolling to her back, her fingers dancing up and down the ridge before catching his zipper and...

Tony shook the image away.

"Two times two is four. Four times four is sixteen. Sixteen times sixteen is..."

That had him going, thank God. Nothing like running the multiplication tables. Worked every time.

He'd barely cleared the door of his office when Trent zoomed in behind him.

"Well?" Trent's perpetual frown accompanied the question.

Tony perched on the edge of his desk. He shared the office with six other agents. All of them were out at the moment. Too bad. He could have used a little support right now.

"Nothing."

"What happened to your in?"

He sorely regretted telling Trent about that now. It reminded him his original intent had been to win Blythe's support. But things had changed, damn it all! That didn't stop guilt from hitting him square in the chest.

"I've hit a big of a snag."

"What kind of a snag?"

A buzz from the front desk saved him from a response.

Tony poked the red, flashing button for the speaker. "Yes, Gloria?"

"We have a situation up front. A woman says someone is trying to pass himself off as an FBI agent."

Ten guesses who the woman was. "And would the agent whose ID he assumed happened to be me?"

There was a slight hesitation before she replied, "Yes."

"And is the woman Blythe Smithers?"

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The answer was quicker this time. “Yes.”

“Trent and I will be right out.”

Tony released the button as he stood.

“You don’t act very surprised. What’s this all about?” Trent asked.

“My snag.” He hustled out the door, leaving his boss no choice but to follow.

Trent stayed quiet until he caught his first glimpse of Blythe as they neared the reception area. She paced a slow circuit several feet away from the desk.

“This is your snag?” He jerked to a stop, out of sight of Blythe. “Doesn’t she work for Stephanie Cambridge?”

Tony stood there, admiring the flex of muscles in her slender legs as she walked back and forth. She looked casually adorable in a silky green, tropical print outfit—tank top tucked into a matching skirt. White low-heeled sandals accentuated her calf muscles. He silently cursed winter when summer dresses, skirts, and shorts would be replaced by long pants. He’d miss seeing those legs on display.

“Yes. Blythe is Stephanie’s assistant.”

Trent was quiet for several moments. From the corner of his eye, Tony watched Trent shift his focus between him and Blythe.

“I can’t believe it,” he said with a soft chuckle. “Tony Driscoll has finally been caught by the short hairs.”

He pulled his head around to his boss. “Do me a favor and keep that to yourself. She doesn’t realize she has my balls in her hands yet.”

Tony picked up the pace once more. Trent’s chuckle followed long before his footsteps did. The squeak of Tony’s rubber-soled shoes on the waxed linoleum pulled Blythe’s gaze their way. Victory faded in her big brown eyes when she saw him, but anger remained. She might realize he was telling the truth about his occupation, but that still left him open to her other accusations.

He had to admit he admired her determination in digging for the

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truth. After all, he could have been anyone—a con man, a thief. She didn't take things at face value. She needed proof, needed things to fit neatly in her world and make sense. Tony was the same way. And if someone had come up to him and told him Trent was a smuggler, Tony would have done exactly what Blythe did—look for the truth to back it up. Fortunately for him, the Cambridges were gone. If not, Blythe could very well have put herself in danger in her search for answers.

A sigh pulled her shoulders back. Her gaze focused solely on him and not his boss.

“So...you really are an FBI agent?”

Tony slipped his arm to the small of her back. “This is Trent Lockwood, my supervisor. Trent, Blythe Smithers. Let's go to my office so we can talk.”

He glanced the receptionist's way. Gloria monitored their activity with the golden-eyed gaze of a hawk, ready to sound the alert and take Blythe down herself if there was a problem.

“Gloria, could we get a visitor's pass?”

She handled it without question. Once Blythe had signed in, she clipped the badge to her blouse. She didn't kick up a fuss, didn't burst into feminine hysterics, and didn't shrug off his hand. Tony didn't know whether to bless the silence or fear it. He concentrated on his instincts, not the primal urge to cup her ass and yank her to him. The man-in-love part of him wanted to beg her forgiveness on bended knee while he nuzzled his face in her crotch. Thank God common sense prevailed.

He was still a federal agent with a job to do. Hard as it was to say, he needed Blythe's help to get it done. Hopefully, her sense of justice and her need for answers would now work in his favor. And everything they'd experienced in their short time together would make her realize one had nothing to do with the other.

“Have a seat.” He motioned to the visitor's chair perched in front of

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his desk.

Blythe slipped into it without a word. Tony resumed his former position—sitting on the edge of his desk rather than in his chair behind it. He wanted no obstacle between them. Trent hauled a chair from the neighboring desk, then turned it around and sat astride, using the back as an armrest. It was another old ploy meant to put a witness at ease.

“I told Blythe everything,” Tony said.

“That’s obvious, or she wouldn’t be here.” Trent’s gaze remained locked on Blythe as hers did his.

She shifted to the edge of her chair. “Tell me, Mr. Lockwood, what would you have done? Accepted everything as fact without a blink of the eye?”

“Not even when it comes from a man you’re sleeping with?”

A pink flush crawled up her neck to her face. “Especially when that’s the source.”

“Because it makes the entire seduction suspect?”

The flush deepened. Blythe’s lips thinned.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Miss Smithers. If seduction for information was the goal, Stephanie Cambridge would have been a far better target than you.”

She dared a sidelong glance Tony’s way. “Stephanie’s married. She’d never do something like that.”

Blythe had a lot to learn about people, especially people like the sainted Stephanie Cambridge.

Tony leaned forward to her. He needed to make her understand. “You think you’re the first person to pull a stunt like you did? Do you know how many subtle and not-so-subtle invites I’ve had the last six months? From men and women, including your wonderful Stephanie.”

She clicked a glare up his way. “Then why—”

“Because I didn’t want them. I wanted you,” he snapped out. “I only wanted you,” he added more softly.

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Her gaze darted away. He watched her nipples tighten seconds before she wrapped her arms across her chest.

* * *

Desire quivered through Blythe of its own volition. She hated herself for it, for letting those four words wiggle their way to her heart. An ache grew in her crotch as her nipples strained for attention only Tony could give. She longed to cross her legs to quell the sensations building. Fear the men would realize what she was doing kept her still.

"It's obvious the two of you have some issues to work out," his boss said. "Do it on your own time, not mine."

"You're wrong about Stephanie," she somehow managed to say. "I've known of her for quite some time, worked with her for six months. She'd never do something illegal."

"Evidence suggests differently," Lockwood replied.

It didn't sound like it to her. "If your evidence was that strong, you'd have arrested them by now." She jerked her head toward Tony. "First he goes snooping around the office. Now he wants to tear through her house? Don't the words illegal search and seizure mean anything to you people? Or are you above the law?"

Lockwood's back stiffened. "What are you? A closet lawyer?"

"Let's just say I watch a lot of *Law and Order*." *Smart-ass*.

"Then you should know, Miss Smithers, that smuggling isn't something to sneeze at."

Blythe hiked her shoulder. "Big deal. We're talking diamonds. Who does it hurt? It's not like drugs."

Lockwood's expression clouded over. Anger darkened his eyes. His jaw clenched. In one fluid motion, he swung from the chair.

"Tell that to people enslaved to dig for them. To the villages whose children have had their arms and legs hacked off during takeovers of diamond mines. To the victims of terrorism these blood diamonds have financed." He turned to Tony, opened his mouth, then clamped it shut,

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tossed up his hands, and strode from the room.

Blythe was just as speechless. She turned a pleading gaze Tony's way. "Stephanie wouldn't be involved in something like this."

He squatted before her. "Then help me prove it."

She stared into his deep brown eyes. Part of her wanted to melt into his arms, to believe everything he said was true. But to do so meant all she knew about Stephanie was a lie. Where was the truth? She'd worked closely with Stephanie for six months. The only fault the woman had was being a workaholic. Blythe's relationship with Tony wasn't even forty-eight hours old. Yes, she'd known him, studied him, watched and wanted him for those same six months. Who was he? Not the carefree, lackadaisical masseur she'd thought. He was a deadly serious undercover agent bent on getting the criminal—at any cost.

"If you needed my help, why wait until now to ask?"

His eyebrows lifted. "Honestly?"

"That would be nice," she replied sarcastically.

He curled his hot hands over her bare knees. "We normally don't involve civilians. I've played hell these last six months trying to avoid you and any entanglements from mixing business with pleasure."

"A noble sacrifice." She tightened her arms around her. Heat from his hands scoured up her thighs.

"More than you realize. I wanted to be with you. Every time I came near you, I had a raging hard-on. Then, to actually have the chance to touch you, even under the guise of an innocent massage..."

"There wasn't anything innocent about it." She scooted back in her seat, trying to put some distance between them.

Tony's hands gently nailed her in place. "No...there wasn't. Not when I knew you wanted me just as badly as I wanted you."

He circled his thumbs against the inside of her knees. "I still do. And so do you."

Blythe swallowed against the shiver that wiggled to her crotch. Her

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thighs parted ever so slightly on their own. Tony seized on the invitation, dancing his thumbs higher.

“I wasn’t out to use you, Blythe. Or to fuck you and move on to the next in line. Can you honestly say the same thing?”

Shame muted her. That and the delicious sensations building at her crotch. A rush of dampness moistened her panties. He moved higher, bunching her skirt to her hips as he went. His thumb brushed her hot mound before worming its way under the elastic at her panty leg.

Blythe spread herself wider, silently begging for the mind-numbing pleasure only he could give. A gasp escaped her at the first touch of his thumb to her clit. An electric shock wouldn’t have had as much power.

She was conscious of him pulling her hand to his shoulder, of her curling her fingers into those hard muscles while each gentle swipe flicked around her core brought her closer to orgasm. One finger plunged deep into her heat, then another, slowly fucking her while his thumb danced over her. She came in a blinding flash, biting back the urge to cry out as the orgasm rode over her.

He swung her around, replacing her in the chair. A flick of his wrist, a fumble for the erection inside, and his dick was free—hard and pulsing and waiting for her. Yanking the crotch of her panties to one side, he stabbed his flesh into hers.

Blythe gasped from the sensation. He filled her to the core. Each thrust stabbed against her cervix until she swore he’d found his way inside. Cotton rasped against her tender clit, swelling it once more. And all she could do was hold on to those massive shoulders and take the pounding ride to another rocketing climax.

It burst on her as it had before—hard. But they came together. She felt his jism pump hot and deep inside. How he kept from crying out—how she did—was a minor miracle.

They sat there joined for several minutes until their heartbeats slowed to normal with their breathing. A sound in the hallway finally

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pulled them apart. The last thing they needed was to be caught this way. He'd lose his job and she'd be the subject of office legend from this day forward.

"Blythe, honey—"

She lifted her hand. "I need time to think. Could you just give me that much?" She grabbed her purse and left before another word, another touch stopped her.

He froze in mid-step. "Fine. I'll pick you up after work."

Blythe yanked the door open. "Don't. I'll call you."

"But you don't have my number."

"Consider it a test." She tossed the words over her shoulder, then darted out.

* * *

Tony watched her tight, little ass twitch down the hall. *A test of what?* Did she want him to wait or be there after work? Why the hell couldn't women just say what they really wanted? It would sure save a lot of headaches.

One thing Tony did know—his instincts were useless in a situation like this. The best he could hope for was to keep bumbling along just like every other man and pray he did the right thing. And if not, sweet talk and hard loving were still his weapons of choice in this battle of the sexes.

Tony pulled in a breath. There was one thing that might just sway Blythe to their side in the investigation. He hated like hell to use it. God only knew what she'd accuse him of. But time was running short. It seemed he had little choice.

CHAPTER 7

Blythe stared at the computer screen. She couldn't read another word. Until this moment, she'd never thought much about diamonds beyond the fact they were a pretty no-no she couldn't afford. Learning all...this...

She pushed away from her desk. She'd never wear a diamond now. How could she be certain a child hadn't died to mine it? Yes, reputable companies were diligent about ensuring their product was untainted. Thank God for that. But the thought of the bloodshed that went on to mine the dirty diamonds would always haunt her. It was truly a cutthroat business.

Blythe dusted a nonexistent chill from her arms as she wandered around the office. How could Stephanie be involved in something like this? She didn't want to believe it was possible. Yet, the Cambridges traveled extensively to all parts of the world. A weekend here, a week there. Stephanie claimed getting the feel for other countries helped her

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give her clients that special something they didn't know they wanted until she presented it to them.

She snorted. A special something like smuggled diamonds? If Stephanie had lied about this, what else?

Blythe shook her head. This was incomprehensible. Maybe the FBI was wrong. It wouldn't be the first time. But Tony had devoted at least six months of his life to this investigation. Six months he'd been with Stephanie, just like she had. Funny how they'd both come up with different opinions of the woman.

Still, didn't she owe her boss some loyalty? After all, Stephanie had done so much for her.

Like what? her conscience demanded to know. She was an employee, nothing more. Plucked from a pile of applicants and interviewed. Blythe had worked hard and had gotten the job on her own merits, not from favors.

Blythe glanced toward Stephanie's office where every weekday Tony reportedly rubbed the tension from her aching muscles. No wonder Stephanie stopped her whirlwind life for an hour—she was hoping for sex. For all Blythe knew, she'd gotten it. Why was she fool enough to believe she was the only one Tony had taken advantage of?

A slight sound at the door caught her attention. Glancing that way, Blythe watched it open. She wasn't surprised to see Tony cross the threshold, massage table tucked under his arm. Blythe was surprised it had taken him so long to get here. She had a feeling not much stopped a man as determined as he was.

Feigning disinterest, she glanced at the clock. "Well, that ultimatum lasted two hours."

He didn't bother to apologize, but had the decency to look guilty about showing up after she'd asked him to wait. He tucked the table against the wall.

"I see you've been busy." He motioned to the computer.

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She tightened her arms around her. "You should know by now I'd check."

"Yeah...I know. Find what you were looking for?"

"And then some. It's sickening."

"That it is." He slipped into her seat. "I'm going to clean out your cache, empty your recycling, and defrag your hard drive. That ought to help cover your tracks. No sense alerting anyone at this point."

God, she felt like an out-and-out spy now. If she helped Tony, that's what she'd be. Blythe didn't know if she could pull something like that off. It involved lying and subterfuge.

"I'll never look at diamonds the same way," she said.

His fingers flew over the keyboard. "If it matters, I doubt you'd ever see these on the market. They are generally used to fund terrorist activities and overthrow governments."

Despite her mounting suspicion, Blythe simply couldn't believe Stephanie would be involved. She prided herself on her judgment of people. Now Gavin...

"All the evidence you've gathered points to the Cambridges. Couldn't Stephanie be innocent and Gavin be the guilty one?"

He tapped a final key as he looked up at her. A response warred in his eyes. He looked like he wanted to tell her all, but fought the urge in order to spare her feelings.

Blythe braced her hands on the edge of the desk. "Just give it to me, Tony. I can take it."

"All right." He pushed slowly to his feet. "Stephanie isn't the person you think she is. And I have proof of that."

Blythe watched him retrieve a CD from his duffel bag. "What's that? A recording?"

"Video on DVD. I taped every session I had with the Cambridges, hoping they'd say something to help break this case."

Obviously, that hadn't happened or Tony wouldn't be standing here

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today wanting her help. That could only mean he wanted her to see how Stephanie really behaved when she was alone with him. Blythe wasn't sure she could take seeing something like that. But at this point, she'd didn't know if it was because it would destroy her illusions of Stephanie or piss her off because Stephanie was going after her man.

Blythe nearly winced at the term and thanked her lucky stars she hadn't said that out loud. Yeah, she thought of Tony as hers now, but he sure didn't need to know that. She fastened a steady gaze on him.

"Did you tape us?"

"No," he quickly replied.

"Why?" she shot back.

"You weren't a party to this. There was no need."

Yes. He'd investigated her from the start.

"And...it was personal," he quietly added.

"How do I know you didn't get personal with Stephanie off camera?"

"Because I'm telling you I didn't. Here's my proof." He lifted the DVD. "Every session from start to finish. And you know for yourself how long I was in there. Do you want to look?"

Blythe shook her head as she glanced away.

"Okay, honey, here's the bottom line." He shoved the DVD back into his bag, then stalked toward her. "Neither of us are virgins. Anyone either of us slept with before each other is history and doesn't deserve discussing. You're worried I slept with you for information. I didn't. I told you, Sunshine, I don't like mixing business with pleasure."

Blythe held her ground despite the quiver in her knees. "A pity. It would save so much time."

"And cause more problems than I can count."

"And yet...here we are."

"Yes...here we are." He brushed the backs of his fingers down her

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bare arm.

Goosebumps popped up in his wake. Blythe damned every single one of the tattletales.

“I wanted you from the second I laid eyes on you.”

One edge of her mouth lifted in a smirk. “You mean, once you determined I wasn’t a suspect.”

He gave a soft laugh. “Fair enough.” He danced his fingers up her arm once more. “I’ve been fighting that want of you for six months.”

Blythe fought another quiver. “You risked a lot just for sex. Your job. Your investigation.”

Tony slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her against his hard body. “The only real risk was to my heart.”

Her gaze focused on his lips as they neared hers. He wove a sweetly sensual spell around her for certain. Blythe couldn’t help it. She laughed.

Tony pulled back. His frown made her laugh all the more.

“What’s so damn funny?” he demanded.

She punched her fingers into his shoulder. “You are. Now who’s playing games? I thought you were giving me the bottom line.”

Tony grabbed her by the shoulders and hauled her to her toes. “Bottom line? Which one? Us? Okay...down and dirty. I wanted to fuck you like crazy for six months. That’s all I could think about. *That* interfered with my concentration like you wouldn’t believe. When I finally got you alone, I caved. I thought fucking you once would be enough. But it wasn’t. A thousand times. A thousand years. A thousand lifetimes and I’d never get enough of your sweet, hot, tight pussy wrapped around my dick. Is that bottom line enough for you?”

He set her back abruptly and swung away. Bracing against her desk, he pulled in a deep breath. “Next bottom line—business. I need your help. Crazy as it sounds, I trust you implicitly and I have nowhere else to turn. I want this over with, so you and I can get on with whatever life

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we're going to have together."

"Who says we're going to have a life together?" she somehow managed to say.

He whirled around so fast Blythe jumped back, eyes wide.

"I do, damn it!" He thumped his chest like an ape man gone berserk. "And if I have to fuck you until my balls fall off to make you see that, I will."

The desire she'd felt before had nothing on Blythe like now. Each word smacked of possession and mimicked acts of rough, honest sex. This was an emotion she could believe, more easily than convenient words of love. Passion blazed from his eyes. Moisture puddled between her legs in response, her body craving something only Tony had been able to give her.

Her heart slammed against her ribs. Someone should say something, shouldn't they? Someone should *do* something. All Blythe could manage was to stand there gaping up at him in wonder.

"Damn it, Blythe, say something!"

Her jaw worked. The words were slow in coming. "I..."

The door swung open, cutting off whatever she had planned to say. The Jensens froze, their gazes sliding quickly between Blythe and Tony. A smile lit Ilsa Jensen's hazel eyes seconds before her chubby cheeks dimpled.

"Lovers' quarrel?" Her kewpie doll voice grated on Blythe's nerves. Her tight mass of auburn curls added to the illusion of youthful innocence.

His back to the couple, Tony arched an eyebrow waiting, expecting Blythe to reply.

Stephanie claimed Ilsa and Jamin Jensen were her best customers. Money was obviously no object. They were constantly refurbishing their house, constantly rejecting the work once it was finished and never once asked for a refund. The money kept rolling out. So did the

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gossip. The fact Tony was here when Stephanie wasn't would hit the streets the second the Jensens left.

Blythe swept her hand toward Tony. "I believe you both know Tony Driscoll."

He turned their way, tilting a nod to them as he did so.

Jamin flicked his fingers through a mass of salt-and-pepper hair. "Of course. We've used his services on numerous occasions."

"We weren't aware *you* knew him." Ilsa's lustful gaze traveled unchecked down Tony's body.

Something inside Blythe snapped. What had Tony said? That most of his clients came on to him? The proof was right here before her, and Blythe didn't like it one bit. She resented Ilsa's wandering eyes. Hated the way Jamin dismissed Tony as inconsequential. She didn't care how big a client they were, she wanted them gone.

Blythe positioned herself between Tony and the Jensens. "Well, of course, I know him. How could I not? He comes here every day at noon for Stephanie."

Ilsa brushed Blythe's annoyance aside with a flick of her fat, little fingers. "Stephanie never hinted—"

"I keep my personal life private, Mrs. Jensen. It's no one's business who I sleep with." Without missing a beat, she turned to Tony and cupped her hand to his cheek.

"Since the Jensens are here early, I should be able to make that lunch date after all. I'm sorry we fought over something so silly, but you have to understand my job is important to me, too."

Tony curled his fingers around hers, then dropped a kiss into her palm. "I'll wait in the work room until you're done."

She danced her free hand down his chest to his navel. "It's so dirty and dusty in there. Make yourself comfortable in Stephanie's office. I won't be long."

Ilsa's nervous titter sliced through the room. "Sounds like a liaison,

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not lunch.”

Tony pulled Blythe against him. She loved the naughty gleam in his eye. “I don’t recall there being any restrictions on what one eats for lunch.”

Ilsa sucked in a gasp. “How dare you even think of having sex in Stephanie’s office!”

Blythe fought mounting laughter as she turned to face the couple.

Tony’s arms still circled her waist. “I’m sure it’s not the first time someone’s done so, and I doubt it would be the last time.”

Outrage mottled the woman’s features. Her husband merely looked on with his usual disinterest.

“You can be sure Stephanie will hear about this.”

“I’m sure she will,” Tony said. “In just about the time it takes you to hit speed dial.”

Her nostrils flared with the fury in her eyes.

Jamin snagged her chin in a not-so-gentle grip. “Be a good girl and calm down. You can’t fault the man for being right. Anger doesn’t become you, dear. It ruins that pretty ivory complexion of yours. We both know why you’re really angry, don’t we?”

She cast her gaze downward and gave a quick nod.

“Good. Let’s go home.” He gave a pat to her ample rear end as he steered her toward the exit.

It seemed like forever before Blythe and Tony moved. With each tick of the wall clock, he grew harder against her buttocks. She wanted him to bend her over the desk and give her the fucking he’d promised earlier.

* * *

Tony was afraid to move, afraid to speak another word for fear he’d jinx himself. Frankly, he was surprised Blythe hadn’t cut off his dick and shoved it up his ass. But she’d wanted the truth, so he gave it. Funny how the well-rehearsed words from his heart had failed to sway

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her. Yet the primitive ones dredged from his gut had shifted her entire demeanor. Definitely not like any other woman he'd ever known and more proof she was perfect for him.

There'd be time for sweet, lovie words later on—once their relationship was older, this investigation was over, and Blythe could have faith he meant them. For now, if raw, sexual emotion was what it took to keep her, Tony had no problem delivering it.

He spanned his hand across her flat midriff and wiggled his erection tighter against her butt cheeks. "You were marvelous, sweetheart."

She laced her fingers over his and gave a soft laugh. "You were, too. She actually turned purple with rage."

"I hope I didn't cost you your job."

"In the grand scheme of things, does it really matter?"

She had a point. If all they suspected about Stephanie was true, Blythe wouldn't have a job anyway. Those lovie words of support popped into Tony's head. He tamped them down before they got him in trouble.

"I'm still not convinced Stephanie would do something like this," she said. "But I'd hope the FBI has better things to do than go on wild goose chases, so there must be some validity to the accusations. I know I won't be happy until I have proof for myself—either way. So...search away. Be as thorough as you need to be."

He was about to thank her when the electronic alarm at his waist vibrated.

"Phone call?" She twisted around.

"Yeah, it can wait." He nuzzled close to her ear. "Don't react," he whispered. "It was a warning. We're being taped."

She arched her neck to his wandering lips. "Oh, Tony, you do set me on fire," she said on a loud sigh.

Even though it was for show, his dick pulsed in response. "I know just how to put that out." He tugged up her skirt and squeezed her

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backside.

Blythe emitted a soft groan. “Stephanie would *kill* me if I had sex in the office.”

His hands found their way into her panties. “How would she ever find out?”

Her throaty laugh wrapped around him. “We’ve never been known for being quiet. No matter how hard we try.”

“True.” Still he tucked her into the cove of his body. “But there’s nothing to keep us from an early lunch. Your place...or mine?”

Blythe peeled away. “The closer, the better. I can’t wait another second.”

She snagged her purse as Tony grabbed his equipment. The notion they’d been spied on was more effective than a cold shower. Still, for the benefit of anyone watching, they hurried from the building looking like two lovers hot for alone time.

Blythe never once broke character. The second they were in his vehicle, she pasted a kiss on him that threatened to steam the windows even in the summer heat. She never said a word as he threaded through the streets and freeway, hoping to lose anyone who might be tailing them. Instead, she hiked up her skirt and kept that naughty, little smile flashed his way the entire time.

Once they reached his apartment, she looped her hand through his and tucked her breasts against him. To all the world, they were a couple who couldn’t wait to fall into bed.

His neighbors were nonexistent as they walked the winding, pebbled concrete path to his building. Their absence put Tony on high alert. In all his years living in the complex, he had yet to find the tree-lined picnic area between the four buildings vacant. A child’s shout eased his mind. Seconds later, six kids ran toward the superintendent as he spread out the plastic water slide.

“What a fun place to live.” Blythe laughed as one little girl squealed

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with delight. "I love all the trees around the place and the fact that the buildings are tucked away from the parking area."

"Kids need a safe place. The owners provide it." He lifted a wave to the burly super as he swung open the door.

Blythe stepped into the central stairwell. "And I'll bet you know every single one of them."

Tony shrugged.

Laughing, she dug her fingers into his ribs. "You *are* Mr. Softy."

He tugged her hand down. "Please, honey. I have a reputation. I don't need the neighbors thinking I'm less than manly."

To his surprise, her eyes misted over. "Somehow I strongly suspect they already have your number."

He chucked her under the chin. "Let's get inside before we really give them something to talk about."

Their feet scuffed the stairs in unison up to his third floor apartment. Blythe still held up the illusion without flaw. Damned if those sly looks hadn't kicked his interest back up to full staff. He'd be playing hell to keep his mind on the job once they were behind closed doors.

Hand cupping her butt, he unlocked the door. He either pushed her or she pulled him inside. The door slammed behind them. Blythe wiggled out of her panties and kicked them aside. One long leg wrapped around his waist while they both fumbled for his zipper.

"Hurry, Tony," she breathlessly said. "I can't wait another minute."

His erection fell against her moist heat the instant it was released.

Blythe tossed back a low groan. "Now, Tony. Please."

One arm wrapped around her waist, he clutched his pulsing dick in his free hand and danced the head against her hard little clit. Blythe's nails dug into his shoulders as she writhed in helpless abandon.

"Oh, God! I need you inside me!"

Tony filled her with one hard thrust that flashed her eyes wide. A

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gasp caught in her throat. He gave her no time to recover. Thumb pressed to her mini-erection, he beat himself into her. Blythe took each thrust and begged for more. The first spasms of her orgasm rippled along his dick, teasing the cum from him. There was a tickle at his lower back—her fingers.

Her vagina clutched around him. Head arched back, she pierced her nails into the flesh of his ass and let the climax take her. Hot arrows of pleasure shot through Tony over and over again. He thought he'd never stop coming.

Still joined, they sank to the floor to catch their breath.

"Sorry, honey. I didn't mean for that to happen," he said through pants of air.

"I did," she said with a soft laugh. "After the promise to fuck me until your balls fall off, what did you expect?"

Chuckling, he dropped a kiss to her forehead, her cheeks, then to her waiting lips.

Blythe sealed the kiss, then pulled away gently. "Why here and not my place?"

He adjusted her more comfortably on his lap. "They know where you live. If we'd gone there and found the place suddenly bugged, we wouldn't have much of an excuse for leaving it quickly."

She traced his lips with her forefinger. "Obviously, Ilsa wasted no time calling Stephanie."

"And the fact she can trigger recording devices remotely means she's not as far away as we thought."

"Or else it's part of the system the security company has set up."

He hadn't thought of that one. It was a possibility. It made more sense to have surveillance in the office than to have cameras ready in the event someone decided to have sex or do whatever there. Still, the cameras in all their bedrooms and Stephanie's overt attempts to seduce him left few doubts. This was a couple who liked to watch. Why miss a

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chance for fresh meat?

"I hate to go back there. How many times has she spied on me without me knowing it?"

"You've never done anything wrong." It just wasn't in Blythe's nature.

She snickered. "What about our little session yesterday afternoon?"

He spanned her ribs and lifted her. "I always have my alarm turned on."

Blythe retrieved her panties from the corner of the room. "How the hell can you search the place now? And the house? No way."

"I'll think of something."

"Maybe I can distract them by masturbating on one of the beds."

Tony laughed so hard his sides started to ache. That naughty little twinkle in her eyes didn't help.

Blythe splayed her hands on hips in mock outrage. "Well, it just might do the trick."

"It'd distract me. That's for sure." He dropped a kiss to that smirk dancing on her lips. "I've got to call in."

"I'll just duck into your bathroom, then make us some lunch."

* * *

Tony gave an absentminded nod as Blythe walked away. She never should have distracted him from his job. It was too dangerous. And, yet, she couldn't help herself. Nervous and frightened, all she'd wanted to do was cling to him as close as she could. Going at it like rabbits on speed had seemed the best way to accomplish it at that moment.

Blythe dusted a sudden chill from her arms. Spied on. She never wanted to go back to the shop again. Weren't there laws against employers doing that? She didn't know if she had the energy right now to pursue it. She felt...betrayed. All she wanted right now was to hide from the world. Tony's apartment looked like the perfect place to do that.

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The first thing that struck her was how neat everything was. Nothing was out of place or out of order. Not even a speck of dust dared to trespass. The front door opened onto a living room suffused with dark blues and deep golds. Deep blue carpeting padded her step. Comforting. Welcoming.

Two recliners sat on either side of the matching sofa. All looked soft enough to melt into. A low apothecary table sat before the furnishings. Candles sat in a deep crystal dish of sand pebbled with dark gray, river-washed stones that served as the center point. Two crystal doves were perched on either side along with one remote control, *TV Guide*, *Sports Illustrated*, *National Geographic*, *Newsweek*, and *People*. A wall-to-wall entertainment center opened before it all.

An immaculately white kitchen lay to her right. Glass-fronted cabinets displayed their contents. Tony sat at the oak table, deep in conversation with his office.

Blythe wandered toward the entertainment center for a look at his music collection. Blythe had to smile. It was a nice mix of oldies, contemporary, and rock-and-roll. Good to know she and Tony had the same tastes in music.

A short hallway opened onto the bathroom and bedroom. As with everything else, the bathroom was spotless. A wide counter of faux black marble veined with gold surrounded the sink leaving plenty of room for bathroom clutter—except there was none. Blythe resisted the urge to peek in the medicine cabinet and turned instead to the shower stall and bathtub behind her. An odd perk for an apartment. Most places had one or the other or the two combined, not two separate bathing facilities. She wondered if Tony had paid a premium price for it. If so, it was worth it. Black ceramic tile enclosed the shower stall while the tub matched the sink. Golden fixtures accentuated the effect. The tub looked like it was made for soaking in, and was much roomier than hers.

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Thick, dark red towels hung from bars along the wall. Black contour rugs padded the white ceramic tile floor. Linens were most probably stashed in the narrow cabinet behind the door.

Blythe wandered into the bedroom after relieving herself. A huge cherry-wood, four-poster, king-size bed greeted her. Here the blue dominated the gold—on the bedspread, the window, the carpeting. Nightstands with Tiffany-style lamps dotted either side of the bed. Each was a small bookshelf in its own right, stuffed with books.

She smothered a laugh. He was reading the latest *Harry Potter* book. How could you not love a guy like that?

A framed mirror sat on the gleaming cherry-wood dresser. A closer look revealed recessed lighting in its depths. Mirrored sliding doors guarded the closet. The only thing seemingly out of place was the desk and computer tucked in the corner of the room.

Blythe brushed her fingers over the faint gold swirls in the midnight blue bedspread. *Velvet!*

Mesmerized by the plushness, she toed off her sandals and crawled on top of the bed. It felt like she was lying on a cloud—a soft, fluffy cloud.

Pure heaven. Yes, she could definitely hide away here...forever.

Twilight sleep enveloped her. Blythe was conscious of movement in the room at some point and knew, in the depths of her sleep-fogged state, Tony was checking on her. Seconds later he draped a soft blanket over her. Sleep dragged her deeper into its luxurious folds. By the time Blythe pulled her lids open again, an hour had passed.

She stretched awake like a lazy cat that had lain too long in the sun. All was silent beyond her cushy haven.

Blythe folded the blanket and set it at the foot of the bed. One hand smoothed the bedspread, but the pillows needed more attention. At some point one of them had wound up cuddled in her arms.

Nothing like making yourself at home.

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After a quick trip to the bathroom, she went to find Tony. Blythe didn't know what she expected to see him doing—reading, watching TV, or maybe on the phone. But whatever it might be, she certainly didn't expect to find him tossing a salad in the kitchen.

He whipped the salad forks through the large stainless steel bowl like he was a pro. Still stirring, he dropped in chunks of chicken breast—freshly cooked judging from the dirty broiler pan on the counter. Slivers of cheddar cheese came next, followed by narrow strips of tortilla shells.

This domestic side of him tugged at her heart as it had when she caught him making breakfast. Blythe longed to slink up behind him and wrap her arms around his waist. Memory of the last time she'd done so kept her braced against the door jamb. Risk to herself aside, she'd never put him in that predicament again. His survival on the job depended on him being alert. He couldn't start second guessing his actions.

She lightly scuffed her foot against the linoleum to let him know she was there. His head ticked her way.

"Sleep well?"

"Like a baby. Your bed felt like heaven. I can't remember ever sleeping on something so soft."

A smile creased his cheek. "Maybe that will entice you to stay over."

"We'll see. I wouldn't want you to get overconfident."

Tony laughed and set the bowl on the table. "Can't have that, can we? I thought you might be hungry, so I fixed a salad."

Blythe walked forward to peer at the contents. "A salad? Looks like a full-fledged meal to me."

He shrugged. "Southwest chicken salad with chipotle dressing. No big deal. I love to cook."

"So I've discovered. And you're damn good at it." She slipped into

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the chair he pulled out for her. "Please tell me you at least have a maid who cleans for you."

"Nope. Do it all myself." He set plates and silverware before her. "It helps me relax."

Blythe rolled her eyes heavenward. "Good God, I'm involved with a nester."

"There are worse things. Eat up."

She helped herself to a generous portion, then dished up an equal amount on his plate. By the time she speared her first forkful, Tony produced a pitcher of Earl Grey ice tea and had joined her.

Indeed there were worse things than being involved with a nester who was great in bed. If his earlier declaration rang true, Tony was serious about continuing their relationship. He was her perfect, dream-come-true man. Each second Blythe spent with him sealed her heart all the more.

So why was she hesitating? Because it all just seemed to be too good to be true. After all the years of wanting, of waiting for Mr. Right, all of a sudden here he was right under her nose. Perfect as he was, sincere as he sounded, it all seemed just a little too convenient.

And, yet, here she was in his home. Wasn't that going a little far in an investigation just to prove a point? It really was his home.

"I love your place," she said as she glanced around. "Must cost a fortune."

"Not a dime," he said with that adorable twinkle in his eyes. "I do renovations on the landlord's properties and get the apartment for free."

Blythe set her fork aside and nailed him with her gaze. "Now, let me get this straight... You cook like nobody's business. Your cleaning would put my mother to shame. You're an FBI agent working undercover as a masseur—"

"I am a licensed massage therapist by the way, in case you were wondering."

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“I wasn’t.” She stuck out her tongue.

“Don’t stick that out unless you intend to use it.”

Blythe laughed. “You are impossible! And now you tell me you are a contractor? I supposed you’re licensed in that, too?”

Smiling, he braced his forearms on the edge of the table and leaned toward her. “Of course. I couldn’t do anything illegal.”

Blythe splayed her fingers against her chest. “Heaven forbid. Who are you, Tony?”

One eyebrow lifted ever so slightly. “The man of your dreams?”

He was determined, she’d give him that much. “Well, if you’re going to fuck my brains out until your balls fall off, the least I can do is get you off the streets so you are no longer a danger to yourself or another poor, unsuspecting woman.”

Tony tossed a laugh to the ceiling. “A noble sacrifice if ever there was one. Now...about that tongue of yours...”

Blythe nudged his shoulder away. “Right now it’s wrapped about this delicious salad, so you’ll have to wait your turn.”

“Before or after I take you back to work?”

Reality washed away the playfulness. Blythe stared at her plate.

Tony slid his hand over hers. “I don’t blame you for not wanting to go back. You feel spied on, betrayed. You’ll never be able to know when she’s taping you and when she’s not. If you don’t want to go back, you don’t have to. We’ll get your things and you can give her notice.”

Damn him. It was always these little things that nudged her heart toward loving him, trusting him completely. The emotion it sparked threatened to overwhelm her. A lump welled in her throat. *Great...tears.*

Blythe blinked them away and forced herself to look at him through clear eyes. “If I do that, you’ll never get anywhere. You’ve already spent six months on this. I’ll suck it up.”

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She realized the double entendre too late and waited for his inevitable comeback. Instead, he pulled back and picked up his fork.

“Soon as we finish here, we’ll head back. Maybe luck will be with us and the device was turned off once they didn’t get what they’d hoped to see. We’ll figure something out.”

* * *

Strength of character—another thing to like about Blythe. Tony wouldn’t have faulted her in the least for quitting Cambridge Designs. But she had a good sense of the mission and the job that needed to be done.

As they sat there eating and exchanging small talk, Tony’s chest puffed out in pride. She was comfortable in his home. So comfortable she’d fallen asleep on his bed with his pillow tucked in her arms. How cute was that? Then she praised his housekeeping skills, his cooking too. Subtly, of course, but so far he could tell she liked what she saw.

Now she sat here helping him devour this huge salad. Tony liked that, too. She wasn’t afraid to eat in front of him. No pretenses from Blythe.

“I’m stuffed.” She popped the last piece of chicken into her mouth. “Tell you what... You cooked, so I’ll clean up.”

“Sounds fair to me.” Who could argue with logic like that? It felt too much like a couple thing, a partnership. Tony liked it.

He watched her gather the dishes and load them in the dishwasher. She admired the cabinetry while wiping the counter top. Tony longed to tell her how he’d painstakingly sanded each section free of years of paint before he varnished the cleaned wood. Of how he set each pane of glass into its framework in the cabinets. Of the old house he craved to purchase and renovate.

He wondered what she’d say if he told her she was the first woman he’d brought here. She’d probably laugh and not believe him. So, he saved it all. Things were too perfect right now. No sense spoiling it.

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There would be plenty of time later for sharing.

Standing behind her, Tony cupped her buttocks as he nuzzled that delicate spot right below her ear.

"I can think of much better things to do than this." As a follow up, he rubbed his growing erection into the cleft of her butt cheeks.

Blythe gave a soft sigh as she turned to meet his wandering lips.

His cell phone vibrating at his side ruined the moment.

"Don't tell me we're being taped again?" she whispered.

Tony smiled as he pulled the device free. "Phone call this time. Different vibration."

She gave him a wicked smile. "If it has that many settings, maybe I should give it a try."

That set his dick humming.

"Driscoll here."

It was Trent and not with good news. Tony listened to the full report and thanked their lucky stars they were safely ensconced here. Or maybe that was the point of being taped—to know when the place was empty.

"We'll be right there." He punched the off key.

Once glance from Blythe and he could see in her eyes she knew something was wrong. She didn't like pretense and he damn sure wasn't going to pull any punches now.

"Someone broke into Cambridge Designs. The security guard was shot. He didn't make it."

She pulled in a sharp breath through her nose. "Let's go."

God, she was magnificent! Each second he spent with Blythe bonded him to her all the more. He couldn't wait to finish this investigation and get on with their lives. If they had lives after this. Obviously someone else wanted those diamonds, and they weren't above murder to get them.

CHAPTER 8

Blythe didn't say a word during the drive back to her shop. What could she say? All she could think about was how she'd bring Arnold a lemon scone and double mocha cappuccino from Starbucks every Friday morning. Now he was dead. She might doubt Tony's motives for getting involved with her, but she sure couldn't deny this was real. Even if Stephanie and Gavin were innocent, someone else obviously thought they had the diamonds. And that person was willing to kill.

Tony pulled into the far end of the parking lot. Policemen and reporters swarmed the area. Other tenants stood huddled outside in tight groups. Blythe recognized a few from having passed them in the hallway, but couldn't place person to business. As for names, well, a nod or a smile was all any of them could manage in their hurried lives. The security guards were probably the exception, and the only personal link they all had.

Hand cupped gently against the small of her back, Tony guided her

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to the first knot of people. The trio of men could have been a billboard for cultural diversity in Los Angeles—a tall black man with gray sprinkled through his short dark hair, an older Hispanic man whose silver hair reflected the midday sun and sent a trickle of sweat down the perimeter of his face, and a young Asian probably in his twenties.

They acknowledged Tony with a nod, then parted to allow them access to their group.

“What’s going on?” There were no preliminary introductions, but a quest for information.

The three glanced toward the building. The tall black man answered. “From what we’ve heard, someone broke in to the business below us. Someone said they heard some serious crashing around in there and told the security guard. He went to check, took the guy by surprise and was shot.”

The Asian thumbed his chest. “I heard it. Sounded like a loud pop.” He looked pale, shaken.

The Hispanic man jumped in. “A car backfiring. That’s what it sounded like. But I knew better. I mean, how could a car be inside? Then the alarm went off. So I called the police.”

Tony took in the bustle around the building. “So what are they doing now?”

“Floor by floor search, hoping to find the guy.”

“Do they know which business?” Blythe asked, playing the game Tony had set in motion.

Three sets of eyes turned her way.

“Cambridge Designs,” the black man finally replied.

Blythe gave the appropriate sharp intake of breath, although at this point it wasn’t hard to muster. She pressed her hand to the base of her throat. “That’s where I work.”

“Then I’d thank my lucky stars you were out,” he said.

“That’s a no-shitter.” Tony jerked his head toward an unmarked

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police car. "Is he the one in charge?"

"Looks like," he replied.

A man in a dark gray suit leaned against the car punching notes into his Palm Pilot. Every so often, someone said something and he'd nod.

"I'll let the detective know it was your place that was hit. Be right back, honey."

Blythe watched Tony walk away. So far his cover was still intact. Would he give it away now? The detective turned a gaze Tony's way as he approached. Blythe expected him to bark orders to Tony to leave, then Tony would flash his badge. Other than a brief handshake, it looked like there was no need for Tony to tip his hand. The two nodded and he hurried back to her side.

"He'll be over to talk to you in a few minutes."

"I don't understand." She shook her head slowly. "Why would anyone want to break into an interior design shop? There's nothing there."

The female in distress act pulled all three around her.

"Was there anyone else in the shop?" the black man asked.

She shook her head and tucked under the arm Tony wrapped around her shoulders.

"I'm going to cancel my appointments for the rest of the afternoon so I can be with you. My schedule is in the car. Will you be all right while I take care of this? You'll need to be available when the detective is ready."

Blythe gave him a tiny smile. Before she could answer, the Hispanic man did so for her.

"She can stay right here with us. Don't worry. We'll take good care of your woman."

Tony thanked the man and walked away. A warm feeling spread over Blythe. Tony's woman. She like the sound of that and wanted to believe it was true. She'd never know until this investigation was over.

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That need to know, to move on, to be able to let her guard down and accept what Tony claimed to offer did more to sway her to help him than anything else she'd seen and heard so far. If heartache was coming, she wanted to get it over with fast before she fell more in love with the guy.

"Can I get you a bottle of water?"

"Would you like to sit down?"

"Want to get out of this sun?"

The questions came simultaneously from all three men. Blythe tried not to laugh. They were just being nice. Introductions were thrown at her. She returned with her own name, but each man's escaped her seconds after he gave it. It was a true testament to how upset she was. If she was going to help Tony, she'd have to pay closer attention. A tidbit of information could hold the key he'd been looking for. Everyone was a suspect. Everything was a clue.

What had she told Trent? That she'd watched enough *Law and Order* to know? Time to put her money where her mouth was.

The detective looked her way. Recognition shot through Blythe like a bolt of electricity. It was the set of his jaw that did it more than anything else, a mannerism that screamed of Tony. This was no mere police detective. He wove through the crowd toward Tony's SUV. They even walked alike. If Blythe was going to help, now seemed a perfect time to start.

She smiled at her self-appointed protectors. "So, gentlemen, what business are you all in?"

* * *

To anyone watching, Detective Lance Driscoll was just wandering through the crowd. Tony knew better. Lance wasn't happy to see him there. His casual stroll was just his tempered way of muscling through people to get to his younger brother. Once clear, he stomped toward him.

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Tony unlocked the door and waited while he finished canceling the last of his appointments. Lance didn't wait for an invitation. He wrenched open the door and plopped into the passenger seat.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Though quietly asked, his tone demanded answers. It was a skill he'd learned from their mother. Now there was a woman who could interrogate.

Tony clipped the phone onto his belt. "I'm here with my girlfriend."

His brother snickered. "Liar."

"No, Lance. I'm dead serious."

He swiveled his head Tony's way. "And yet the place where she works just happens to have been the scene of a crime."

Tony shrugged. "Stranger coincidences have happened."

Lance narrowed his dark brown eyes. The resemblance to their mom was too close for comfort. There were even a few splashes of gray in his blond hair now. Tony forced his gaze to lock with his brother's.

"Tony...the place is all tore up. This is me you're talking to. I'm the last person who'd blow your cover and you know it. What were they looking for? Drugs?"

It was no use. Lance would keep digging until he got at the truth. Tony might as well use it to his benefit. "Conflict diamonds."

Lance's façade slipped. His eyes rounded. Just as quickly, the mask fell back into place. "I'll let you feed me dinner tonight and you can fill me in." He reached for the door handle.

"Blythe isn't a suspect."

He glanced in her direction. "She one of you?"

"No. She really does work for Cambridge Designs."

His gaze traveled appreciatively up and down Blythe's figure. "She's a little hottie, isn't she?"

"Back off. She's mine."

For the first time, Lance smiled. "Whatever you say."

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He was out of the vehicle before Tony could come up with a response or a threat. He watched his older brother's predatory stride back through the growing crowd. Wrenching open the door, he hurried to reach her before Lance did.

One of the men said something to her. Blythe turned with a smile. Tony quickly returned it.

"My schedule is all clear," he said as he neared.

She slipped her arm around his waist. "Thank you."

Lance was only seconds behind. "Ma'am?"

Blythe slipped free as she faced him. "Hello, detective. I presume you have some questions of me? I doubt I can tell you much."

Tony watched in awe as she wrenched control from Lance's hands. She never gave him the time to introduce himself, merely gave him a semi-detailed description of how she'd spent her afternoon then introduced him to the three men whose business shared the building with Cambridge Designs.

He dutifully took their statements, then turned back to her. Again, Blythe wrested control from him.

"When will I be able to get back into the shop?"

Lance tucked his Palm into his suit pocket. Humor sparkled in his eyes. Tony didn't like it one bit. What did he have to do to convince his brother hands off? Fuck her in the middle of the street?

"I'll check with forensics and be right back."

Blythe didn't so much as spare Lance a glance as he walked away. Tony breathed a little easier.

"Looks like we've got the all-clear to go back to our offices," the tall black man said. "You're welcome to wait in ours if you like."

She flashed that killer smile on him. "Thanks. I'll see what the detective has for me first."

One by one, tenants drifted inside. Television reporters buzzed with news. Tony pulled Blythe into the shade of palm trees bordering the

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street. A reporter rushed her. One glare from Tony sent the man scurrying off to another victim. He caught up with the young Asian man as he was going into the building.

Blythe scuffed the grass. "That's Erik Wong. He's the accountant for their office. Insurance. All kinds. Bill Gratham is the manager. He's the tall man. Carlos Munoz is one of the adjusters. Erik is single, but in a relationship. The other men are married. Carlos has five children and three grandchildren. Bill has two college-aged sons. Both wives work."

"Damn, you're good!"

She laughed, but didn't look up. "Just being sociable."

* * *

She'd done well. Blythe liked that she'd managed to impress a professional like Tony. Damned if she didn't feel like she'd won the lottery. Maybe she had—the Mr. Right lottery.

She was also dying to confirm the relationship between Tony and the to-die-for detective. But how could she without the risk of being overheard or videotaped? If these people were desperate enough to kill, what would prevent them from lip-reading?

Blythe covered a feigned cough with her hand. "Brother?"

"Uh-huh," he replied as he gazed off into the distance.

"Name?"

"Lance."

"Good looking."

That earned her a grunt. Blythe laughed. "Don't worry. You're good."

His gaze shifted her way. "Am I?"

She couldn't keep her hands off him, even in public. Blythe sidled up to him and draped her arms around his neck. "Oh, yeah. Very good."

His hands girdled her waist. While a slow smile built, he traced circles up her ribs with his thumbs. An erection thrummed between them.

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“A million years could pass and I’d never get enough of you.”

Blythe longed to melt into his arms. To haul him back to the vehicle, strip him naked and run her tongue all over his body. Let the nosy reporters get *that* on video.

A shout from across the street shattered the moment.

Eileen was dodging cars as she raced toward them. All Blythe could do was hold her breath and pray she wouldn’t be hit. Tears had carved rivers in her makeup. Mascara smudged in dark circles under her eyes.

“Friend?” Tony asked.

“One of my closest.”

“But obviously not one of the brightest.”

“Sad, but true.”

Judging from her appearance, Eileen had heard the news broadcast and assumed the worst.

A police officer caught up with her on the sidewalk. “Excuse me, ma’am, but have you lost your mind?”

Sobbing, she clutched her hands under her chin. “Oh, please. I have to get to my friend. You don’t understand. I thought she was dead.”

Tony’s brother came up behind them. “It’s okay. I’ll take this. Ma’am...” Cupping Eileen’s elbow, he led her the rest of the way.

Eileen broke free the last couple of feet and tossed her arms around Blythe’s neck. “I’ve never been so worried in all my life. If anything—”

Blythe hugged her with one arm while she rummaged around in her purse for a tissue with the other. “It’s all right. I’m just fine. Come on, you’re making a mess of yourself. And in front of good-looking men, too.”

Laughing through her tears, Eileen pulled away. She blotted at her ruined makeup with the proffered tissue. “Leave it to you to put things in perspective. Which one of these cuties is yours?” She glanced from man to man.

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Blythe raked a lascivious gaze down Tony. "This one."

Eileen nodded. "I approve. Yummy. Absolutely yummy." She broke down once more. "You could've been killed."

Blythe wrapped her arm around her shoulders. "But I wasn't. In fact, I wasn't even here. Tony and I were having lunch. Calm down. It's all right."

Eileen nodded through a shaky breath. "Sorry. It's just...I...Oh..." She waved the rest of her sentence away with her hand. Dabbing once more at the remnants of her tears, she laughed lightly. "Silly me."

"No." Blythe smoothed the tangles from Eileen's long black hair. "I think it's sweet."

A look passed between brothers that suggested otherwise. Men. What did they know?

"Well, detective, can I go in?"

He jerked his frowning attention away from her sniveling friend. "Yes, but don't touch. The team would like you to look things over to see if anything's missing."

"While you're doing that, I'll fix my face in the ladies room." Eileen hurried ahead, dodging traffic once more.

"That woman is a menace." Lance shook his head.

He had no idea. Eileen's guardian angels definitely worked some serious overtime. Blythe would like to see her try to sweet-talk her way out of a ticket from Lance Driscoll.

"Ma'am."

He motioned Blythe forward with his hand. In step with the two brothers, Blythe walked into the building. The sight of the body bag on the coroner's gurney jerked her to a stop. Neither man rushed her. She felt Tony's heat as he edged closer to lend her silent support.

"He was such a nice man," she said, more to herself than to either of them.

Tony curled his fingers over her shoulder. Blythe leaned into him. It

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felt good, right and gave her the strength to move on. She needed it when she peeked inside the office and saw the devastation.

The door had been busted open. Splinters of wood framed what used to be the lock. A card of fabric samples were on the floor beside it, most probably used to prop the door closed once they'd broken in.

"I told Stephanie she needed a dead bolt. But what the hell do I know?"

"I'd assume the guard had to break the door down to get in," Tony said. "Whoever broke in would have been quiet about it. A lock pick and privacy is all it took,"

And the lunch hour would have given him that. But he was still taking a risk. From the looks of the place, though, the man was in a definite hurry. Panicked came to mind. He wasn't worried about keeping his intrusion a secret. Desperation of that sort made a person dangerous.

Nothing was left on the shelves. Her desk drawers were upended. Files were scattered. The computer housing had been opened. If there was a place to hide something, the murderer looked for it. It was going to take days to fix the mess.

Stephanie's office was a duplicate disaster. Paintings were cut from their frames. Stuffing spilled from her leather executive desk chair and the matching sofa. The toilet tank lid was now cracked in two. Nothing was left in the medicine chest or the small linen closet. Even the glass shelves lay shattered on the black and white tiles.

"I suppose asking if you notice anything missing is asking the impossible right now," Lance said.

Blythe merely shook her head as she moved to the workroom. The first thing to hit her was the puddle of blood on the cement floor.

Blythe refused to give in to hysterics like Eileen would. She liked to think she was more stalwart than that. Still, the splatter left behind from the gunshot was almost more than she could bear. It covered

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everything, including the innards of the Carter's Naugehyde sofa that had been ripped to shreds.

The technicians picked over what evidence they could. They gave her no more than a glance before turning back to work. Bolts of ivory damask for the Sanchez order were unfurled, stained with a spray of blood drops. The two industrial sewing machines were smashed to the floor. Nothing was left on the work bench.

Blythe scanned the damage, quietly accessing the thousands of dollars gone in time and material, and all she could think about was that a man was dead. Someone heard the ruckus, he checked, and was shot. The alarm for the service bay door was tripped when the murderer ran out the back. Did he have an accomplice? Why break in the front and go out the back? Because of the gunshot? Whoever it was obviously didn't realize the back was alarmed.

"Anything?" Tony asked. Lance was steps behind him.

She shook her head. "I don't know if it's important, but the alarm only activates when someone tries to come in or out through the service entrance. The front door isn't alarmed because it's inside the building entrance and that's already covered. As for anything else, it's such a mess I can't tell what's missing. And I don't have a clue what they might've been looking for. As I said, we have no money to speak of here. If they were looking for something of value, the fabrics would have netted them a couple thousand dollars."

Maybe they'd found the damned diamonds and were long gone. Somehow she doubted it.

"I have to try to reach Stephanie. Then I need to call the Carters and tell them their couch has been destroyed."

Tony slipped his arm around her shoulders. "You can call from my place. We should probably get out of the way for now."

Lance fell in step beside them. "You have my card if you think of anything. I'll be in touch. We'll need the office for at least the rest of

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the week, so count on not having any access during that time.”

The door would have to be replaced. Stephanie’s insurance company would have to be called. She’d have to hire a cleaning service.

“May I take my planner?”

“Of course. I’ll clear it for you with the team,” Lance said.

“Good God, what happened here?” Ilsa Jensen’s shrill voice cut through Blythe’s thoughts.

Tony cringed. “Like fingernails on a chalkboard.”

Lance barred them from her view. “You two want to duck out the back?”

“If my purse was stolen, I swear to God I’ll sue!” Ilsa shrieked.

Her husband’s voice barely drifted their way as he tried to soothe her. Tempting as it was to sneak out, Blythe had to salvage what business she could.

“No. I’ll take care of it.” Shoulders back, she forced her feet to move.

Ilsa jerked a chubby hand her way. “She’ll tell you. That’s my purse. I left it here earlier.”

The young officer looked to his superior for help. So did Blythe.

“It *is* her purse. The Jensens left in rather a hurry earlier.”

A nod from Lance released the item to Ilsa’s waiting arms. She clutched it to her chest like a long-lost treasure. Her bottom lip quivered. Tears puddled in her icy blue eyes. “Thank you, Blythe. *Everything* is in here.”

Jamin steered her away. “Go wait in the car, dear. I’ll settle things here.”

A sigh heaved his shoulders. Blythe could see the weariness in his eyes. Dealing with Ilsa on a daily basis would drag anyone down.

“I’m sorry. Ilsa can be erratic at times.” He held out his palms with a nervous laugh. “Like with refusing the couch and wanting new fabric

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swatches. She's changed her mind again and decided she'd rather have the first couch. That is...if it's not damaged."

Blythe tried not to sigh. "No. It's not." It was safe and sound at her apartment. "I'll arrange for it to be delivered tomorrow."

She could hardly say no. The Jensens had paid for it, then refused. Stephanie hadn't refunded the money because they were going to go a different route. What else could Blythe do? Legally the couch was theirs.

Jamin grabbed her hand in both of his. "Thank you. I know it's an inconvenience, but it will make my life so much easier."

On top of the world, his long-legged gait took him back to his cry-baby wife. At least someone was happy. And it truly seemed like it was all about them. Not once did he mention the break-in or express concern. Typical of Stephanie's clientele. How had a dream job turned into a nightmare?

Blythe laughed at herself. It'd been a nightmare from the start with Stephanie's constant demands. All the knowledge in the world didn't make it worth it anymore. Why did it take something like this to make her see that?

"Ready?" Tony's voice was a soft caress against her ear.

She nodded. "I need to get my day planner first." Fed up and she still had to fulfill her obligations. It just wasn't in her to let other people down.

Blythe found her burgundy book under a pile of papers. She paused at the door for a final look around. "What a mess."

"I'll say. I'll contact the building owner to replace the door for you."

A week ago Blythe never would have thought about walking away from a disaster like this. She would have been too worried about leaving the place unsupervised. Now? Ah, hell...she *still* couldn't just walk away.

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She muttered a curse under her breath and motioned Tony to a secluded corner of the hallway with a jerk of her head. A puzzled frown wrinkled his forehead as he followed. Blythe glanced around, searching for eavesdroppers. Then she draped her hand over his cell phone/alarm.

"Is this on?" she whispered.

He nodded.

Since it wasn't doing anything, they were most probably safe. Still Blythe kept her voice low.

"We're supposed to behave as we normally would in order to avoid suspicion. Right?"

"Yes." He nodded slowly with his reply.

Blythe thought as much. As fed up as she was, it seemed she had little choice. Tony wasn't going to be happy with it. "Then I can't leave the scene. It would be...telling. A dead give away that something wasn't right. I know the police will be here off and on investigating and that the scene will eventually be secured. But they can't stay here twenty-four hours a day and... It will take forever and a day for the owner to send the repairman. Can you replace the door? *That's* what I would do under normal circumstances."

Realization chased away the little flare of fear and anger that flashed in his brown eyes. He caught her shoulder in a gentle hold and caressed circles against her bare skin with his thumb.

"Sure. Do you want me to get you a chair or something while you do what you need to do?"

"I'll be fine. Eileen will be swooping down on me any second again so I won't be alone. And I'll stay out of the way."

"Lance is just a shout away—"

She covered up the rest of his words with the pads of her fingers. "I'll be safe."

He kissed her fingers and walked away. The chill from the air conditioner replaced the warmth of his hand on her shoulder.

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In all the wild sex they'd had recently, nothing said as much as that gentle caress had. How could so simple a gesture have said so much? This man genuinely had feelings for her. That knowledge touched a chord deep in Blythe's heart. She watched him disappear around the corner.

It was only when she saw Eileen pop into view on her frenzied rush down the hall that Blythe pulled herself back to action. There was a lot to do, starting with a phone call to Stephanie.

CHAPTER 9

Tony drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. Nothing like cranking things up a notch, but it was an ugly turn to take. The place looked like a tornado had whipped through it. Someone was desperate—desperate enough to kill. But who? The Cambridges or someone else looking for those diamonds? And why now? What had happened recently that hadn't occurred the last six months?

The first thought that popped into his head was his relationship with Blythe. That was a major change and they'd hardly kept it a secret. If the Cambridges were monitoring their home and office, they'd have seen him and Blythe together. That could hardly appear threatening unless it foiled their plans to frame her. Tony discounted that idea. They'd merely claim he was Blythe's accomplice.

Had he done something to blow his cover? That would certainly be a threat. Hooking up with Blythe would also throw suspicion her way—they'd think she was in on it...and she was. Tony tossed that

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notion aside as well. He'd been very careful—parking blocks away, walking in a haphazard pattern to ensure he wasn't followed, entering the FBI offices through a back door. He'd never been so much as followed there. The only person outside the investigation who knew he was an agent was Blythe, and he told her that in her apartment. The place wasn't bugged—he'd checked. There was no possibility they'd been overheard.

But they were separated for several hours after that. Hours Blythe spent verifying his story. She could have been followed. He doubted she'd notice anyone behind her as she drove to the FBI offices. Anyone watching her might think *she* was the agent. She'd started at Cambridge Designs about a week before he'd gone in.

He rubbed a sudden ache from his forehead. That would be the shits—having Blythe targeted instead of him. In the past, if it were any other person, he would have cheered that the pressure was off of him. Now he cursed himself a thousand times over that he'd skylined her.

Tony stared at the building as crime scene investigators filtered in and out while reporters hovered on the sidelines speculating. They were definitely in the open now, if not before. Whoever did this had to be smarter than to think Blythe was an agent. An agent wouldn't be foolish enough to research conflict diamonds on the office internet. Maybe that's where she'd made her mistake...or he'd made his. He didn't get the information erased soon enough. But that was after her visit to the FBI office. Something else had to have triggered suspicion.

He smacked his palm against the steering wheel. Of course...Blythe had said it herself minutes before. Any action out of the ordinary would be seen as suspicious. Just because she meant in the present circumstances didn't mean early movement wasn't questioned, and she had uncharacteristically left the office earlier that morning to go to the Cambridges's. Her presence was caught on the security cameras at the house.

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Tony started up the SUV and pulled from the parking lot. He could get Trent to dump the phone records of the security company to see if any calls were made. Someone had to have been alerted. She was followed to the FBI office, after which her activity on the internet was monitored. Wasn't it shortly after that he realized they were being bugged?

At least he could feel relatively safe that the intruder's original intent wasn't to harm anyone, or he wouldn't have waited until he and Blythe left the office to ransack the place. But whoever it was, was armed and not afraid to use that weapon. The death of the security guard proved that. It was indeed unfortunate he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The man would still be alive if it weren't for the alarm.

Tony frowned as he maneuvered through traffic. A dozen more questions popped into his head and he didn't like the answers to any of them. He'd wanted a break in the case. Now it looked like things were much more tangled than they'd originally thought.

He briefly considered a detour away from his original route to Home Depot. It was too risky right now. He decided to wait until he was securely at home to call Trent. Maybe by then he'd have his theories all worked out and they'd be able to come up with more answers than questions. That would also mean he'd have to convince Blythe to stay at his place for now. All things considered, he doubted it would take much talking to get her to agree. A man was dead, a business nearly destroyed, and Blythe wasn't a stupid woman. Still, it might be wise to start sowing some seeds right now.

Tony pulled into the parking lot of a mini-mall and plucked his cell phone from his pocket. Blythe answered in the middle of the second ring.

"You haven't been gone for more than ten minutes. Surely you can't be missing me already."

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Tony chuckled and blessed caller ID. “I *am* pining for you.”

“I’ll bet.”

He could hear the smile in her voice.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“I forgot to mention my brother’s coming over for dinner tonight. We haven’t seen each other in a while and wanted to catch up. It will be a late night. I was wondering if you’d consider joining us. I’d love for him to meet you. I love it even more if you’d stay the night.”

“Are you kidding? I’d do just about anything to sleep in that sweet bed of yours again.”

“Anything, huh?”

“That’s what I said.” Her husky tone gave him an instant erection, but then anything that hinted of sex with her did that. “The endless possibilities boggle my mind.”

“I’m sure,” she said.

Tony feigned a groan and earned her soft laugh. He imagined himself by her side at that moment, her fingers drifting under his shirt and dancing along the waistband of his trousers, teasing him to distraction. He yanked himself back to reality.

“I’m going to need some tools to install this door. Why don’t we just head over there after I’m done at Home Depot? It’ll be much more comfortable for you than waiting around.”

“Now that’s an offer I definitely won’t refuse,” Blythe replied. “There’s not much else I can do here. I think I’ll run back to my place and get a few things while I wait for you to get back. I’ll make Eileen go with me. It’ll help her burn some energy.”

“Sounds like a plan. I won’t be long.”

“Neither will I.”

They ended the call simultaneously. She played the game well. With any luck, he’d be able to see if anyone followed her.

* * *

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“I *do not* need to burn energy.” Eileen sounded insulted by the very suggestion.

Blythe merely steered her toward the exit. “If you pace much more, your legs will wear down to nubs. But for the sake of humoring you, let’s just say it’s me then. And I do need to get some things if I’m staying at Tony’s.”

And she had to do something more than sit and wait. She’d called Stephanie and got her voice mail. Blythe didn’t know why she expected anything different. She left a message detailing what had happened. When Stephanie picked up her messages, she’d be none the wiser that Blythe was onto her little scheme.

The only other responsibility left was for her to call the Carters and tell them their couch had been destroyed—they were nice about it, but demanded a refund. Blythe assured them she’d handle it and then called the credit card company to reverse the charge.

That left the delivery arrangements for the Jensens. Blythe was half tempted to have that charge reversed as well; she loved that couch. But the good fairy part of her wouldn’t allow Blythe to play dirty. She arranged for the movers to meet her at her apartment the following morning.

“You can’t blame me for being worried.” Eileen’s stride matched Blythe’s as they walked toward the parking lot across the street. “If the situations were reversed—”

“I know. I couldn’t very well tell Tony I had to get out of there for a while. Going to my place seemed like a good excuse.”

“Why not tell him the whole truth?”

Blythe shrugged a shoulder. “He’d worry and come rushing back?”

And that was the whole truth. She was rattled and sure wasn’t going to lie about that. But the last thing Tony needed was to worry about her. He had a job to do and needed all his senses alert to finish it. She wouldn’t have him endangered because his attention was on her. He

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had to know she could function without him...even if she was beginning to doubt that herself.

"Things seem to be moving awfully quickly with you two." Eileen pulled open the passenger door the second Blythe clicked the lock.

Again she shrugged. "I suppose. Maybe it's because we've known each other all this time, leading up to getting involved physically."

"Perhaps." Eileen braced her elbow on the armrest and absently twirled her index finger around a lock of her long, dark hair. "That detective is kinda cute, don't you think?"

Blythe twisted the ignition. "I hadn't noticed, but you and him? Talk about oil and water. He seems buttoned down and by the book. You're anything but."

"I suppose you're right." She gave a sigh, all attention back to her friend. "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation—"

"I wasn't trying to hide." If anything, she'd wanted anyone within listening distance to hear every word she said.

"You're staying the night at Tony's?"

"Yeah, his brother's coming over for dinner. I'm just going to stay there."

"You really are scared, aren't you?"

"Not scared as much as rattled." If whoever did this wanted her dead, they would have busted in while Blythe was there. It was just the fact the place had been so viciously violated that disturbed her. A man was dead. They'd come prepared to defend themselves and hide their identity. For Blythe that meant one thing only—it couldn't possibly be Gavin and Stephanie. They wouldn't need to break in to their own shop. They wouldn't need to hide their identities. They had every right to be there.

Unless they were trying to hide that fact from someone else. Like the FBI, perhaps? But if it was Gavin and Stephanie, why tear the place up? They'd hidden the diamonds, so retrieving should have been a

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piece of cake. Was this a diversion to throw off suspicion?

Blythe eased to a stop at the traffic light. Nothing made sense. Maybe between them they could sort through all the inconsistencies tonight and find something plausible in there.

"Jeez, you're giving me a headache," Eileen said. "Quit thinking so hard."

"Sorry." She shot her friend a glance from the corner of her eye. "I wouldn't want to contaminate you with anything remotely resembling a thought that might go in your head."

Eileen gave her a playful nudge. "Shut up."

"Yeah...I love you, too."

She scooted around in her seat as much as the belt would allow. "So...tell me all about Tony. Don't leave a single detail out. I need to know everything that's happened since yesterday."

Eileen didn't have a clue what she was asking. If only Blythe could tell her. She could almost see her jaw drop with every word.

Blythe flashed her a smile she didn't feel. "Now, now, now... I can't be one to kiss and tell."

Eileen flopped back. "Oh, shit, it's love."

"Well...I don't know about that. How about very intense like and heavy lust?" A toot from behind alerted her to the green light. Blythe silently cursed her inattentiveness and drove on.

"No. If you've clammed up, it's love."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's much too soon to be talking love."

She might be thinking it, but she damn sure wasn't going to say it out loud. There could be any number of reasons for feeling the way she did. Killer sex would numb any woman's mind. Blythe nearly laughed out loud. She was only trying to fool herself. Her heart knew even if her head didn't want to admit. Still, knowing and speaking of it...well, it was just too soon. They deserved to bask in their relationship as it built. They sure as hell couldn't do that with all these other currents

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swirling about them. First they had to survive this test, then she could move on. Thinking of it in those terms scared Blythe more than she wanted to admit.

“So how did Tony manage to go from unworthy to the love of your life in one day?” Eileen asked.

Blythe gave a humorless snort. “You are hopeless, you know that? Let’s just say there’s more depth to the man than meets the eye.”

“Hmmm...must be if you’re moving in with him.”

“I am *not* moving in. I’m merely spending the night. For a best friend, I never realized how annoying you could be.”

“That’s what best friends do. Give me a break. There’s nothing going on in my life right now. I’ve hit a serious dry spell. So I’m forced to live vicariously. Indulge me.”

“Indulge yourself and go after that detective you think is so hot.”

“Yeah...well...maybe we’d just better change the subject.”

Blythe fought a triumphant smile as Eileen squirmed and stared out the window. She’d known that would shut her up. Interrogation wasn’t so pleasant when the tables were turned.

“You could’ve been killed today, Blythe.”

The words were so sad it was all she could do not to pull off and give Eileen a hug. “I guess it was lucky for me I was out to lunch.”

“But that’s the thing—you normally don’t go to lunch. Your daily schedule is so predictable a person could set their watch by you.”

And that predictability made it doubly hard to maintain a normal façade now. “Then I guess we have Tony to thank for leading me astray.”

“Thank?” Eileen laughed lightly. “I’m going to give him a big hug when I see him again.”

Thankfully, their conversation shifted to more mundane topics—movies they wanted to see, gossip about mutual friends, what they’d do if they won the lottery. Normal, commonplace subjects that let Blythe

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shove reality aside while they went to her place and she gathered up toiletries and a change of clothes. By the time they returned to her office building, Blythe's worries had drastically faded. They came swooping back the second she saw Tony was nowhere in sight nor was his vehicle in the parking lot. Fear raced her heart. She willed it to slow. He'd probably taken the time to brief his supervisor.

The logic didn't work on her panic. She had to talk to Lance. Maybe he could check or go look for him herself.

Idiot. Just call him.

She pulled Eileen to a stop. "I really appreciate you being here with me, but I don't want them coming down hard on you at work. I'll be fine now. Tony will be here soon enough and we're going right to his place."

"If you're sure..." They exchanged a hug. "Call me if you need anything."

Blythe nodded and then held her breath as Eileen cut across the street to her own car, dodging traffic all the way.

"It's a wonder you haven't been hit," she mumbled.

"A miracle is more like it," Lance said from behind.

She glanced over her shoulder. They were alone. "Tony's not back yet."

"I know. Not picking up his cell phone either... There he is." He jerked his head toward the parking lot.

Blythe didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until she expelled in a long sigh of relief.

"Yeah...I know," Lance echoed softly before he stepped back. "There's nothing more we need from you, Miss Smithers. I've let my investigators know your boyfriend will be replacing the door. They have to supervise the installation, but there'll be no problems."

Blythe flashed him the brightest smile she could muster. "He'll be glad to know that. I appreciate all you've done to help us."

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He smiled down at her. "My pleasure. If there are any further developments, I'll let you know. One of my people will give you a call when you're able to go back in, but if I were you, I would anticipate being gone the rest of the week."

"I'll leave another message for the owner."

So little said in so few words. Blythe was getting rather good with subterfuge. If only she could get used to the headache and stomach churning that went with it.

She waited for Tony at the door and then slid her arm around his waist when he stepped through it. "I was starting to get worried."

"Sorry." He brushed a kiss to the top of her head. "Took longer than I thought. Ready to go? I can always come back and put up the door."

She closed her eyes, absorbing the very essence of him. "Far, far away from all this."

"I hear you." He cupped her backside. "But the best I can do for now is my place."

"Works for me. I could nest in that bed of yours."

"That puts any number of images in my head."

"I'll bet." She slithered her hand under his shirt. "How would you like to come home to a naked woman in your bed?" His penis swelled between them. Smiling, she dotted kisses along his chin. "Spread-eagle, open, wet, ready for lovin'."

She glanced up. His eyes were glazed. They were still in the foyer alone.

"And there's your rule—I'm never to refuse you. If I did...wouldn't I have to be...punished?" She finished the words on a whisper.

Tony's breathing was ragged. Looking down, she saw the fire in his eyes. He grabbed her hair and pulled her head back. "You should be punished now for torturing me this way."

"I should be. How would you do it? Would you tie me to your bed and make me take one thrust after the other without letting me come?"

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Would you make me come over and over until every muscle in my body melted? Or would you haul me over your lap, peel down my panties, and spank me hard?"

"Jesus, Blythe!" He kissed her hard as he crushed her to him, shoving his tongue deep in her throat.

Voices down the hall drifted their way. Blythe couldn't let go. She had to have him—now! Had to feel something more than the fear that had been with her all afternoon. Lips locked, she pulled him toward the ladies room and prayed it was vacant. If not, someone was about to get an eyeful. She fumbled with the handle, then felt the door give way.

Tony swung her inside. "Get those panties off and bend over the sink." He hauled the trash receptacle in front of the door while she complied.

The slice of a zipper going down reached her ears beyond the thudding of her pulse. One hand gripped her hip; the other guided the head of his cock. He flicked it against her clitoris. Fingers curled around the sink, Blythe lifted her ass higher.

"What do you want, sweetheart?" he demanded to know. "Do you want my dick in you? Do you need it?"

"Oh-God-yes," she gasped out, then arched against his deep plunge. Hot fingers circled her clit. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think, all she could do was gyrate against him.

"That's it, baby," he whispered harshly. "Take it. Do it how you like it. Make us come together."

Blythe felt like a wild woman, letting her body take complete control. Being with him was heady enough, but the dirty talk coupled with the fear of being caught was an extra powerful aphrodisiac. She felt gloriously impaled on his erection. She was in control, yet so was he. Then he pinched her nipple...hard, twirling it as he did her clit. Her body tensed, jerking with the coming release. His cock hardened all the more. They stood there frozen in a coital embrace for what felt like an

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eternity and finally, blessedly, came.

They lay together—she melted over the sink, he draped over her—gasping for breath. It had to be a small miracle they hadn't been caught.

He pulled back her hair and kissed her neck. "Damn, woman, you are hot and full of surprises."

"You just bring out the devil in me," she said on a throaty chuckle. "And you have to admit, it's a great tension reliever."

"That's for sure and, heaven knows, we needed it."

As they righted themselves Blythe started to put her panties back on when another thought intrigued her. Smiling wickedly, she stuffed them deep into his pants pocket.

Tony's eyebrows inched together. "What are you doing?"

"I want you to think of me while you're installing the door. Think of me being at your apartment without any panties on waiting for you."

He grabbed a handful of butt cheek and yanked her to him. "You can guarantee I won't be long."

"I'm counting on it."

And did she have a surprise in store for him when he got home later. Her libido built back up just thinking about it as they drove to his apartment. It was all she could do not to drag him over the threshold and ravish him one more time when they got to his place. Instead, she settled for a toe-curling kiss.

"I shouldn't be more than an hour," he said, and another kiss saw him on his way.

Blythe leaned against the door. An hour should be just enough time to prepare. Hopefully, she could pull this off.

She hurried to the bathroom for a quick shower—the long soak in his tub could be shared later. Pulsating needles of water made her skin come alive. What would it feel like directed between her legs? No...she'd let herself build in anticipation of Tony's return.

She blow-dried her hair, curling it as well. It felt soft and silky

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against her bare shoulders. Body oil was next—smoothed with slow, methodical precision over every surface, crack, crevice, and curve she possessed. It hinted of vanilla. Good enough to eat? She hoped so. Now came her trickiest maneuver.

Blythe folded down the bedspread and covers, then opened her little bag of tricks—two vibrating dildos, four belts she'd salvaged from old bathrobes, and a pile of silk scarves. She laid everything out at the foot of the bed so Tony wouldn't miss them. After tying the belts to the four posters, Blythe positioned herself in the center of the bed. Tying her ankles was no problem. Her wrists would be harder. Loops with slipknots should solve that problem.

Using one of her scarves as a gag, Blythe tied it over her mouth. A second one served as a blindfold. Then she eased back and felt for the loops. Finding them easily, she slipped her hands inside and tugged. Blythe smiled. She was caught. Only Tony could release her—at what she hoped would be his leisure.

She laid there, heart pounding, body throbbing with anticipation. Where would he start? What would he do first? Would he twirl his tongue deep into her? Maybe he'd play with her toys. Maybe he'd take them and...

A knock at the door jerked her head up. *Shit*. She'd been so wrapped up in her plans she'd forgotten about Lance coming over. Now what? She couldn't extricate herself from her bonds. He'd just have to wait until Tony got home. Looks like their play time would have to be on hold, too.

There was another knock, then a third, and a fourth. Each one louder than the last. Blythe struggled to free her mouth to call out to him, but she'd tied the gag too tight.

She cocked her ear for another knock. Nothing. Maybe he'd thought she was in the shower or napping or just not here.

"Blythe?"

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Damn it! He was inside! And coming her way!

Mortified, she tensed waiting to be discovered. Hurried footsteps squished against the carpet. They paused.

“Good God, Blythe. What the hell happened?”

She heard what sounded like his pistol going back in his holster as he rushed toward her. The bed sagged with his weight. He yanked the blindfold off. The gag followed.

“What the hell!” Tony shouted.

Lance leaped back. “Chill out. I found her like this.”

“God, honey, what happened?” Tony was by her side a second later, fumbling with the ties.

If she had to live through this another minute... “I...it’s... Oh, just hurry up.” One hand free, she yanked the sheet over her.

CHAPTER 10

Tony couldn't stop laughing. He fell to the bed clutching his aching sides. Every time he tried to stop, a glance at Blythe's flaming cheeks set him off again.

"Would you stop it?" Blythe jerked a T-shirt over her head.

The second her arms were free, she'd raked her toys under the covers, then whipped the sheet around her while he untied her feet. Tony had never seen anyone move as quickly as she had. Actually, Lance had hauled ass pretty good himself.

"I'm sorry, honey, but you did it to yourself. Which begs the question... How *did* you manage to tie yourself up?"

She yanked on a pair of jeans. "It doesn't matter. And you can bet I'm never going to do that again."

"Too bad. I've never seen a more enticing welcome home." And that was definitely the truth—once he'd gotten over his initial shock, followed by fear someone had broken in. If Lance wasn't there, they'd

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be tangled in each other's arms right now.

"So...what all did you bring for us to play with?" He crawled over to where her stash still lay wadded up in the bedspread. Peeling back the edge, he picked out the dildo and flicked it on.

"Give me that." Blythe snatched it out of his hand and shoved it into the nearest drawer. "I have never been more embarrassed in my life."

"There's no one to blame but—"

"Just...shhh..." She sank to the edge of the bed and buried her head in her hands. "How in the world am I ever going to face your brother again?"

The look on Lance's face set Tony laughing again. "Poor Lance. I doubt he'll ever be the same again. He is so vanilla sex, this will traumatize him for life."

"I know it has me. I'm never going to want sex again."

He pulled back the curtain of her hair and nipped at her neck. "Then I guess I'll just have to tie you down after all and convince you otherwise."

A pink flush covered her from the neck up. Tony fished the second dildo from its niche. "Because I'd love to see what we could do with two of these."

Pink darkened to red. Smiling, he flicked it on and danced it over her breasts. Blythe pulled in a sharp breath through her nose.

"Or maybe this was where you wanted it?" He nudged the tip between her legs. "Or...some place else?" When he tried to tuck it deeper, she grabbed it away and turned it off.

"Maybe I was going to use it on you," she snapped.

"Intriguing. I've never done that, but with you, I'm game for anything." He dropped kisses to the corners of her mouth.

"Then please go explain to your brother. I'll even fix dinner if you just make this go away."

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“No need to bargain, sweetheart.” He slid his hand under her shirt and gently caressed the side of her breast. “I’d protect your honor and name to my death.”

She looked at him for the first time since he’d come home.

Tony would have given anything to be able to read her mind.

“I’ll square things with Lance,” he told her. “I brought steaks home for dinner. I’ll drag him outside while I grill them if you wouldn’t mind taking care of the side dishes.”

“Okay.” Almost as an afterthought, Blythe gave him a kiss.

Tony gave her thigh an affectionate pat, then left. It was going to take some fixing to get Blythe comfortable, not to mention Lance. His brother was as straight-laced as they came. He was probably trying to wrap his mind around what he’d walked in on. Or, for all he knew, Lance might have left. He was actually surprised to find his brother at the kitchen table sucking down a bottle of Bud Light.

“Uhm...about that in there.”

Lance cut him off with a slice of his hand. “I don’t want to know. Let’s never speak of this again.”

Tony skirted him and walked to the refrigerator for the steaks. “You know, Lance, some couples—”

“*Never* again. And pull me out another beer while you’re in there.”

He fought a smile. “Image too much?”

“More than you could possibly imagine. I just don’t know how the hell you got so damn lucky.”

Tony glanced around in time to see Lance chug the last of his beer. Maybe there was more to his oldest brother than he realized.

“Here.” He set a fresh bottle before him. “There’s plenty more where that came from.”

“So I saw. Just keep ‘em coming.”

Tony smirked. “Planning to spend the night, are you?”

“Or you’ll be driving me home. Just keep the noise down. I don’t

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need any more reminders of what I've not been getting lately."

Tony plopped the packages on the counter. "Now that's no one's fault but your own. There was a time you swore all you had to do was snap your fingers and they'd coming running."

Lance stared at the far spot on the wall. "Let's just say I've learned women are more trouble than they're worth."

Yeah, he'd heard divorce did that to some guys. "Come on outside with me while I grill these steaks."

Lance grabbed the neck of the bottle and followed him out the door to the small patio. After he fired up the gas grill, Tony twisted the cap off his bottle. Not too much tasted sweeter after a long day than a cold beer. Braced against the wrought iron railing, he watched the sky shift from golden sunset to inky night.

"Heard you took another stray home to Mom and Dad," his brother said. "Scrawny looking thing. But I've never seen a happier little dog. They're already doting on her. She can't decide who she wants to follow—Mom or Dad."

Tony chuckled. "Figured as much." For all his mother's fussing, Tony would play hell trying to get them to give up Lucy now.

"She's a beautiful woman."

At Lance's comment, Tony glanced through the sliding glass door. Blythe had just popped a few potatoes in the microwave to cook. She'd helped herself to a bottle of beer, too.

"Yes, she is." No sense denying it or getting jealous about it. Blythe was a looker. He'd recognized that from the second he laid eyes on her. Part of the pleasure of being with her was to have other men notice her with him. What man wouldn't be proud with a beautiful woman on his arm?

"You in love with her?"

Tony's gaze caressed her as he pondered his response. "She's the one." Simple as that.

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“She know that?”

He smiled. “Not yet. It’s too soon.”

Lance sighed. “I don’t know if it’s ever too soon. Lay your cards on the table. That way you both know where you stand from the start. No misunderstandings that way.”

“I’d rather get this case finished first. Then we can focus on what might be ahead for us.” He’d come this far, and he couldn’t afford to get much more distracted. Blythe was distraction enough. He just couldn’t stand not to have her any longer.

His brother propped his feet on the other white resin chair. “You’ve been doing this a lot longer than I did. If she’s the one, you might want to consider another line of work before this one eats you alive. Undercover work is especially bad. If an agent isn’t careful, it absorbs him.”

Tony tore his gaze from Blythe. Maybe it was the beer talking, but it had been ages since Lance had gotten philosophical on him. He wondered how far he could push it? He’d love to know the real reason Lance left the Drug Enforcement Agency.

“Is that what it did to you?”

“Yeah.” He nodded and took a sip. “I didn’t see it coming until I hurt someone I loved. Made me sick inside to realize I’d become what I hunted. By then it was too late.” He gave a humorless snort. “Hell, it was too late before that. I was just too wrapped up in my work I didn’t notice it at the time. If I hadn’t been, I could’ve saved her...and myself a lot of heartache.”

“You talking about Sheila?”

He snorted again. “No. But she suffered for it, too, I suppose.”

Tony tossed down a gulp, letting the cool liquid slide down his throat. “So what happened to the woman?”

“She’s living happily ever after with the man of her dreams, not the one of her nightmares.”

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A frowned tugged at his eyebrows. “Good God, Lance. What the hell did you do to her?”

His brother shifted a gaze his way, mouth open to reveal all. Then he clamped his lips shut, obviously having reconsidered. “Ah...doesn’t matter. All water under the bridge. Let’s just say I learned a lot about self-control since then. You gonna cook those steaks or not? I’m starving here.”

Self-control? Lance had that down to a science. Maybe he’d learned a little too much about it. “Coming right up.”

* * *

Blythe stared at the pot of broccoli boiling gently on the stove. Potatoes were done, the table was set, and there wasn’t much else to do. From her quick glance to the patio, it looked like the steaks were nearly ready. Somehow she had to put this embarrassment behind her. Somehow she had to look Lance in the eye.

Judging from what she could tell of the conversation between the brothers, they weren’t laughing it up out there. Whatever they were discussing looked pretty intense to her. So she doubted they were talking about her little stunt.

Good God! What had she been thinking?

Maybe they were talking about the case. Though that seemed unlikely out in the open where a conversation could be picked up with a highly sensitive microphone. Whatever it was, it was serious. Tony looked puzzled; Lance just looked...sad. No, definitely not a conversation about her. Thank goodness.

She heard the grill close and tensed. If either one of them said one word... The door slid open.

“Sorry,” Tony said as he stepped through, “I didn’t ask how you like your steak. Medium well okay?”

“Perfect.” She grabbed the pot, turned off the stove, and turned around to put it on the table with the rest of the food.

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Lance was bent over in the refrigerator. "You want another beer, Blythe?"

"Sure."

He pulled back with three in his hand, twisted off the caps, and set them next to their plates. "So, what's going on? You said conflict diamonds earlier?"

While they ate, Tony brought his brother up to speed on the investigation to date. It helped Blythe to hear it all again. From everything Tony said, it looked like the investigation had more or less hit a stand-still...until today.

"I'll admit it's an awfully huge coincidence," Lance said as he finished off the last bite on his plate.

Tony fished out three more beers for them while Blythe cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher.

"There was absolutely nothing in the office any thief could want," she said. "No money, nothing of value except the computer. Unless you take into consideration all the materials destroyed. That's several thousand dollars worth of damage."

"Any disgruntled customers you know of who would want to get even?" Lance asked.

"Not a one...until today." She twisted the dishwasher knob to "Start" and sat back down.

"So...what was unique about today that made the difference?"

Tony rested his forearms on the table as he leaned forward. "I've been asking myself that same question. The Cambridges are gone. There's nothing mysterious or unusual about that, except they apparently aren't where they said they'd be. There is no tradeshow in New York City. That leads me to believe they either skipped town with the diamonds or they've managed to piss someone off enough to be made to disappear. If it's the first thing, I can understand someone ransacking the place. If it's the second...." He shrugged.

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"They'd still ransack it." Blythe found herself nodding. "They'd want those diamonds."

"True enough." Lance squinted as if looking for the answers in mid-air.

Tony leaned back. "The Jensens arrived at noon for an appointment with Blythe. Judging from the looks on their faces, they weren't expecting me to be there."

"Are they clients of yours, too?" Lance took an absentminded sip of his beer.

"Yes...unfortunately," answered Tony. "I recently took them on after Stephanie finally recommended me to them. I'd been pushing her when I learned Ilsa's family runs a jewelry store. I'd hoped it would be the break I needed. So far, nothing. Jamin never stops conducting business. Always on the phone regarding his investments and deals. Big in real estate. Ilsa's..." He shuddered. "Extra friendly."

Blythe smiled. "Poor baby. The hazards of your profession."

"Tell me about it." He cast his gaze to the ceiling. "Words and accusations were exchanged when they realized Blythe and I are a couple. They left rather quickly."

"And then Tony realized we were being bugged."

Tony snapped forward once more. "The question is, by whom? The Jensens had an appointment. Did someone want to tape them for hidden clues in their conversation? Ilsa's father does own a jewelry store."

This was getting crazier and crazier. "That store has been in her family for generations."

"And times are tough," Lance pointed out.

"They've always been persons of interest to us," Tony told him. "But like with the Cambridges, it's been difficult to find anything on the Jensens. And yet—"

"Ilsa Jensen left her purse in the shop and you were bugged."

Tony tapped the table with his forefinger. "Exactly."

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Lance cocked his head. "You think you've been made?"

"I think someone got scared. Months of working with no leads...until today. Now I've got more suspects." Now *he* stared at that nonexistent spot in the air.

"The Jensens." It seemed the only logical conclusion to make.

Tony nodded slowly, still focusing on that nothing before him. "I thought I had something this afternoon, although it scared the hell out of me to think so. When Blythe left with Eileen to go to her apartment, I followed on the off-chance she was followed. And she was."

Blythe's heart skipped a fearful beat. "Who?"

"Who else? The Jensens. They followed you home, then back to the shop, then followed us here. When I left, they tailed me back to the shop. By the time I'd replaced the broken door and came out, there was no sight of them."

"But by then it was too late," Blythe said. "They knew where I lived, where you lived..." Poor Tony. Seeing her all trussed up like she was when he got home had to have freaked him out. "It might have been nice if you'd warned me I was followed."

"I know. Sorry." He followed the apology by clasping her fingers. "Trust me, it won't happen again."

She squeezed his hand back—*apology accepted*—then they released each other to continue working this puzzle. "They could still be out there watching the place. They'd have seen Lance arrive."

"Not a chance." Lance tossed down a drink. "I parked three blocks away and walked here. Took the back that faces away from the parking lot. All the trees around give good cover."

"We're careful like that on those rare occasions when our jobs intersect." Tony wrapped his hand around his beer bottle, wiping the moisture absentmindedly with his thumb. "So the Cambridges are gone, nowhere to be found. In hiding? Could be. Ran off with the diamonds? Also possible. The Jensens arrive—"

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“And they weren’t happy earlier when they learned Stephanie was gone.” She’d had to soothe their ruffled feathers earlier when they’d heard. Knowing what she did now, she should have plucked them instead. “Because they were expecting to get something extra special from her?” All things considered, it made sense.

Lance splayed his fingers on the table. “Stephanie’s not there. But you and Tony are. They obviously aren’t going to get what they originally came for. They create a scene over the two of you and leave in a huff.”

“Leaving behind her purse with a bug to see when the place is vacant.” Tony shifted a glance between them. “And this is where it gets tricky. Blythe and I leave. Someone, presumably the Jensens, returns to the shop. They can’t come in the back way without tripping the alarm, so they come in the front door.”

“By picking the lock.” Blythe frowned.

Tony nodded. “That’s what I’m betting on. The noise of prying open the door would have alerted someone to their presence. They had to be quiet.”

“Maybe they had a key,” Lance said.

She shook her head. “If they had a key, why not just wait until after hours?”

“Because they would have had to pass by the security guard,” Tony said.

Blythe’s frown deepened. “But they had to do that anyway to get back to the shop.”

“But in the daylight there’s no suspicion.”

“There is if the guard sees us leave and sees them come back.”

Tony cut her a glance from the corner of his eye. “His job is to guard, not be a receptionist. He probably didn’t even notice.”

He had her on that one. With all the comings and goings in the building, he couldn’t...he *wouldn’t* interfere. He wouldn’t know who

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was there for what reason. The building was open for business. People could come and go as they please.

Tony tapped his finger against the table. "All right... We're gone and the Jensens—at least one of them—comes back."

"Or they could've hid in the stairwell." Blythe reveled in the little smile Tony gave her with his nod.

"Very good, sweetheart. They could've hidden in the stairwell before or after the event. So, the lock is picked and in they go."

Lance held up a finger. "One of them. The other is still listening on the bugging device. If anything goes wrong, they'll know it."

"Then Ilsa would listen and Jamin would go in." That seemed the most local conclusion to Blythe. Ilsa didn't have the fortitude to tear through the shop the way the perpetrator had. She laughed at herself. Perpetrator...she was starting to sound like the men now.

Tony nodded. "Someone reported the noise and the guard went to check. He probably heard the noise and knocked. No answer and the noise would have stopped. He would have known something was wrong. Maybe he thought someone was hurt."

Lance shook his head. "Sad. He should've called it in. Instead, he busts the door down. Jensen is already alerted and ready. Guard comes in and sees him. Jensen has to protect his identity, so he shoots him and tears out through the service bay door."

"Activating the alarm. And leaving Ilsa's purse behind so they had no choice but to return for it or risk exposure," Blythe finished up.

They sat in silence for a few minutes nursing their beers. The Jensens certainly put on a good show, if they were guilty. Blythe didn't see how they could be innocent, especially if they'd been following her around afterward. And that made no sense. Why follow her? She didn't have the damned diamonds.

The couch!

"They think the diamonds are in my couch." The words rolled off

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her tongue so quickly, Blythe wasn't sure she'd said them at first. One glance at Tony, then Lance confirmed she had. Neither looked surprised. They just nodded in unison.

"That's why it was imperative they keep close tabs on you." Lance polished off the last of his beer. "They might think you retrieved the diamonds from the couch and want to know everywhere you go."

Blythe snorted. "Then they should've stayed here and not followed Tony back to the shop."

"For all we know, one of them did. But I didn't notice anyone when I drove up." Tony drained his bottle.

"Now what?" she asked. "Let them have the couch, then wait until they tear it apart and have the diamonds in hand before busting in on them?"

"First we need to make sure the diamonds are in there." Tony stretched his arms over his head.

"What do you do? X-ray it? Ultrasound?"

"Too big to x-ray," Lance replied. "And it would take too long to roust an ultrasound technician. The Jensens are expecting the couch in the morning. If they don't get it, they *will* be suspicious."

They were both looking at her now. Two minds, one thought? If x-ray and ultrasound were out, how did they expect to look inside it?

Blythe's eyes widened. "You want me to take it apart?"

A smile lifted one corner of Tony's mouth. "You can put it back together. I've seen you work, Sunshine. You're the best." He gave her a nudge with his leg.

She longed to wipe that cocky grin off his face. Sweet talk wasn't going to get him anywhere...well, possibly not. If they were careful in how they disassembled it... It wouldn't be the first time she'd done it, just the first time she'd done so under this kind of pressure.

"All my tools are at the shop. How can you expect—"

"You can retrieve what you need under my supervision," Lance

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butted in.

“Let’s go.” Tony smacked his hands against the table. When he made a move to stand, Blythe held him in place.

“I can’t begin to count the beers the three of us have had. None of us have any business behind the wheel of a car.”

That seemed to deflate their enthusiasm. But not for long. Tony’s grin was back.

“Call Eileen.”

Lance frowned. “The accident-waiting-to-happen woman?”

Finally...something Blythe could smirk about. “That would be the one. Drives like a bat out of hell, too. You definitely need to put your life in the hands of a higher power when you ride with her.”

He muttered a curse.

Blythe picked up the phone. “And you two better decide what story you’re going to tell her.” Not even the distraction of Lance’s presence would be enough to quell Eileen’s curiosity.

CHAPTER 11

Getting Eileen to pick them up was easy—she didn't know she was coming after *them*. Blythe had been vague when she called, simply asking Eileen to come get her. She let her friend fill in the reason why. Most probably Eileen would believe something had gone wrong between Blythe and Tony. It really wasn't the first time they'd bailed each other out of boyfriend entanglements over the years. Well...it *was* the first time Blythe had called for rescue. Every other time she'd been the one retrieving Eileen.

The subterfuge wouldn't last once Eileen arrived and saw the three of them standing outside the Burger King. Any explanation was going to have to come from Tony. This was his game and his decision how much he wanted to reveal. As much as she disliked lying to her best friend, Blythe would back him up all the way. Life or death situations did that to a person.

The brothers said little after she'd called. By unspoken command,

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they all left the apartment by the back entrance. In the shadows of the trees, Tony scoped out the area. A jerk of Tony's head alerted them to a dark sedan parked across the street. Although Blythe couldn't see inside, his intent was clear—someone watched. They hugged the shadows and back alleys for a block before they cut back to the main street and to the Burger King to wait for Eileen. There they opted for coffee, hoping to clear at least some of the fuzziness from the beer.

She'd just dared to take her first sip when Eileen whipped into the parking lot. Tony and Lance had long since sucked theirs down. How they could pour hot coffee down their throats was a mystery. But they'd done it...without flinching. Talk about macho.

Eileen scowled when she saw Blythe standing with a Driscoll on either side of her. God only knew what was going through her mind. Considering some of the predicaments Eileen had found herself in, she was probably thinking they had followed her and trouble was brewing. She selected a parking spot nearest the door so they could call out for help if necessary.

Eileen's gaze shifted nervously from Blythe to Tony to Lance and back to Blythe. Blythe tried to reassure her with a smile. It didn't work. With everything they had to accomplish tonight, the smile was too forced.

"She looks freaked out," Lance said. "I can't say I blame her."

"I'll be quick about reassuring her," Tony added, and pressed his hand against Blythe's lower back, urging her forward.

She gave up on the coffee, poured the contents in the dirt next to a plant, and then tossed the cup in the trash. A deep breath squared her shoulders and helped propel her forward.

Eileen clicked open the locks on her Dodge Neon and the men simultaneously reached for the door handles—Tony the back, Lance the front. Her eyes widened with alarm as Tony waited for Blythe to climb in then tossed his ever-present duffel bag in behind her.

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“Blythe?”

She pressed her hand to her friend’s shoulder. “It’s all right. Take us to my shop.”

After another glance around, Eileen’s alarm shifted into a frown. “Smells like a brewery in here.”

“Which would be why we need the ride.” Lance tapped the dash. “Let’s go.”

Her frown focused exclusively on him. “Why are you here?” She didn’t bother to wait for an answer. Eyes wide, she sucked in a gasp. “Did something else happen?” She whipped around to Blythe. “Did someone come after you? Are you hurt? Did they—”

“Relax.” Tony’s voice was calm, soothing. He followed it up with a touch to her shoulder. “He’s my brother. Blythe needs something from the shop. She can only retrieve it under Lance’s supervision. We’d been drinking and needed a ride. Having you meet us here was a lot easier than trying to guide you to my place.”

The answer seemed her ease her tension. Her shoulders relaxed as she turned back to the wheel. Glancing in the rearview mirror, Blythe watched her shift Lance a gaze from the corner of her eyes before carefully backing up and merging into the flow of traffic.

Blythe fought laughter big time as Eileen morphed into Miss Perfect Driver. She obeyed every traffic light and sign, signaled at lane changes and turns, even followed the posted speed limit...all because a police detective sat in the passenger seat. Blythe wondered if a threat to tell Lance of any violation would help in the future.

When they reached the building that housed Cambridge Designs, Tony instructed Eileen to park in an unlit area. She did so without question.

“You two go on in. It’ll look out of place if I go with you. Besides...Eileen and I need to talk.”

That had her frowning again. Blythe didn’t waste time with

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reassurances. They had a lot to do tonight. But she was relieved Tony had apparently decided to tell Eileen everything.

By the time she and Lance returned, Eileen was just sitting there, staring in shocked silence out the windshield. Her gaze locked with Blythe's in the rearview mirror. Once the doors were shut, she started the engine.

"How long have you known?" Eileen quietly asked.

"Since this morning," Blythe replied.

Chewing the inside of her mouth, she nodded and pulled away. Within minutes her soft laughter filled the car. Blythe didn't need an interpretation. It was pretty clear. Tony really was *the* one. She prayed Eileen would wait to rub in that little tidbit until they were alone.

* * *

"Where do we start?" Lance stood before the burgundy sofa, hands at his hips.

"I'm going to start with something to eat while all of you play spy." Eileen tossed her purse to the floor by the front door and headed for the kitchen to raid Blythe's refrigerator.

"Let's try the obvious hiding places first." Tony motioned his brother to the other end.

Blythe breathed a sigh of relief. They were going to tip it over. With any luck, they'd find the smuggled gems underneath. She definitely wasn't looking forward to searching any further. It had taken two weeks to cover the couch. Of course, that included sewing the material together in addition to handling all her other responsibilities.

She waited, hands clasped under her chin while they ran their hands over every surface underneath. From where she stood, it didn't look good. To get a better look, they'd have to remove the undercover. They looked up at her for direction.

"Cushions." Blythe pointed to the three cushions tossed to the side. Once unzipped, they were nothing more than foam with poly-fiberfill

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around the edges to smooth it out and fill in the gaps. They each took one for inspection...and came up empty.

No one said a word. Everyone knew what had to be done. They just waited for Blythe to take the lead. She picked up her staple puller from the kit she'd brought.

"I'll remove the undercover first. That should give us a good look at everything under there. We can also dig in a bit without too much damage."

She knelt down. If this wasn't successful, they would just have to carefully peel the material away so she could pull it back into place and re-secure it.

"Aren't you afraid you'll be accused of planting evidence?" Eileen was now curled up in the matching chair eating cold macaroni and cheese.

Lance pivoted his head her way. "We have two well-respected members of two different law enforcement agencies here, not to mention both of you as witnesses. We could all testify under oath about our actions."

"And just what is it you hope to accomplish?" She shoved a forkful in her mouth. "I mean...can't you just give them the couch, then issue a search warrant?"

Lance sank into the other chair while Tony sat on the coffee table, forearms resting on his thighs. "All we have is suspicion, no evidence. If we give them the couch, go in with a warrant, search the couch and find diamonds, *then* we could very easily be accused of planting evidence. Especially if we dig them out of the couch. The Jensens would say they had no idea."

"How is all this going to help?" She pointed her fork while she tried to talk about a mouthful of food.

"If the diamonds are in there, I'll place a tracking device in with them. If the diamonds are moved, we'll know it and be able to not only

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retrieve them, but also find those responsible for moving them.”

“And they’re not going to find a bug in with all those shiny diamonds?”

Blythe admired the men’s patience. Neither of them sighed or acted irritated. She turned back to her work and continued to remove staples from the bottom of the couch.

“These are rough, uncut diamonds,” Tony explained. “If you didn’t know what you were looking at, the average person could very well pass them off as gravel or bits of rock. Depending on the quality, of course.”

“Of course.” Blythe glanced over her shoulder in time to see Eileen tilt a nod his way. “But even the average person can spot an anomaly like a tracker.”

“That’s why I’m going to stick the tracker on the inside of the pouch along the seam. They’ll never see it.”

“I see...thank you.”

“No problem.” Tony knelt beside Blythe as she removed the last staple.

“Shame about the couch,” Eileen added as an afterthought. “I know how much you liked it.”

Blythe shrugged. “I should’ve known it was too good to be true. Isn’t that the way it always goes?”

“Not always.” Tony’s smile nearly blinded her with its intensity. It certainly heated her to the melting point. Her body flushed with warmth.

Lance feigned a cough. “Please, guys, don’t do this to me again.”

“Do what?” Eileen demanded to know.

“Trust me...you *don’t* want to know.”

“Were the two of you caught doing something naughty?” She did a poor job of hiding her amusement.

Blythe didn’t dare look around. She didn’t have to. She knew

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Eileen's eyes danced with laughter, her face a teasing mask of devilment. Instead, she glanced at Tony. He was looking at her too...and just as flushed as she had to be. Yet he smiled. She reveled in her ability to read his expression—he was sorry they hadn't had the chance to play. Her heartbeat doubled. No doubt he'd make sure they rectified that situation at a later date. The thought of him taking his time, exploring, playing, bringing her to...

"Oh, this *has* to be good." Eileen laughed.

Tony smiled. "We'll never tell."

"And you aren't prying the information out of me this time," Blythe added.

"Hmm...interesting. And I suppose your lips are sealed, too," she said to Lance.

"Tight." His tone backed him up.

"Maybe you'll show me instead."

Blythe jerked her head around, first to Eileen's seductive smirk then to the beet-red flush that covered Lance's face. She fought to keep from laughing. Subtlety was not in Eileen's nature. But she couldn't tell if Lance was horrified or intrigued. Obviously he was shocked—the silence told her that. Blythe felt for him. He'd definitely been through it tonight—finding her decked out for Tony, now having Eileen announce her interest in no uncertain terms. Eileen could be a lot to take at times, even for her, and they'd known each other for years. Still, she wondered if he would have called Eileen's bluff if they were alone. She didn't dare check his crotch for evidence. That seemed way too intrusive.

Eileen didn't have that problem. Her gaze slid down, and her smile grew. It looked like she'd found what she wanted. Now Blythe knew how Lance had felt when he'd found her trussed up for Tony—damned uncomfortable. The way the two of them looked at each other...it was like no one else was in the room but Lance and Eileen.

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“Could we just focus on the job for now?” Tony gently pulled the undercover away from the bottom. All that held it now were staples on the left side. It was pretty clear with one quick look nothing was hidden—all they saw were the springs.

Lance cleared his throat and leaned forward, forearms on knees, covering his predicament. “That takes care of all the easy to reach places, doesn’t it?”

Blythe sighed. She really wasn’t looking forward to tearing this thing apart. “I’m afraid so. Would they have really gone to this much trouble to hide them? Wouldn’t they opt for easy retrieval?”

Tony nodded. “With millions of dollars of diamonds at stake, I suppose I could argue either way. They’d want them protected, but they’d also want to get to them quickly. That would be no problem for the Cambridges since they’d know exactly where they were placed.”

“But it’s not the Cambridges retrieving them.” Blythe pulled out the hog ring pliers. The springs would have to come off.

“Maybe not.” Lance scuffed his hands together. “But the Jensens sure didn’t know where to look. Why else would they tear through the place?”

“Because they didn’t know where else to look.”

The three of them turned to Eileen. She shrugged and set her empty bowl on the table beside her.

“Quit looking at me like I sprouted a third eye,” she snapped. “Who knew you had the couch...for sure?”

“Stephanie,” Blythe answered.

“Who told you the Jensens rejected it?” She lifted her hand before Blythe could respond. “Stephanie. For all you know, the story about them wanting new fabric might have been a ruse to kill time until the coast was clear for them to take the diamonds. What else could she do? The couch was finished. Maybe the heat was on or they reneged on the deal. Her goal would’ve been to protect the diamonds. So she gave the

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couch to you.”

Lance flopped back. Fingers tapped against the arm rest. “You know...this makes no sense. A fortune in diamonds and she’s going to send the couch to Blythe’s? These aren’t stupid people. She might have given up the couch to throw the Jensens off.”

Blythe tossed the pliers into the tool box. She felt like hurling them across the room. “The Jensens didn’t know I had the couch until...they still don’t know I have the couch.” This whole discussion was giving her a killer headache...or maybe that was from the beer wearing off.

Using the upturned couch as a backrest, Tony propped himself against it. He stared into nothingness as his mind puzzled through this—a position mirrored by his brother.

Lance dusted his knuckles over his pale five-o’clock shadow. “We presume the guard was killed because he saw someone there who wasn’t supposed to be there.”

“The Jensens.” Eileen tucked her legs under her.

“Possibly.” Tony still stared into space. “But someone else isn’t supposed to be there either.”

“The Cambridges.” Blythe rubbed at the ache in her forehead. “It’s their shop, but they are supposed to be out of town. They wouldn’t want anyone to know they were there.”

Tony shook his head. “Why tear up your own place? You’d know where the diamonds are.”

“*Stephanie* knows where the diamonds are.” Lance let his arm flop down. Long fingers now traced the seam at the edge. “Maybe Gavin doesn’t. We could have a double-cross here.”

“Or a hostage situation,” Tony added. “Someone’s tired of playing games and took *Stephanie*.”

“No...*Stephanie* left me a note. It was a last minute decision, but she talked about the possibility last Friday. The only thing she neglected to do was cancel her appointment with you.” This discussion

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was getting them nowhere. Blythe reached for her pliers once more. They wouldn't be satisfied until they'd torn this thing apart. The sooner she did so, the sooner she could put it back together.

"Because canceling would alert him they were going." Lance's gaze shifted to his brother. "You've been made."

Panic raced to Blythe's heart. Wouldn't that mean his life was on the line? No, Stephanie and Gavin wouldn't kill. But a week ago she didn't have the remotest notion they were smugglers either. And a man was dead—presumably at the Jensens's hands, but who the hell knew anymore?

She reached for the first hog ring. Tony's hand on her wrist stopped her. He still stared into nothing.

"If I've been made and they took off because of that, they'd take the diamonds. Stephanie knew the couch was here. As far as we can tell, no one's been in this apartment and the couch has been left alone. I presume no one has a key?"

"No one." Not even her parents and sister.

"Then either the diamonds aren't here, or they were planning to frame Blythe."

She closed her eyes as she squeezed the bridge of her nose. *Back to that again.* She somehow managed to suppress a groan.

"But we're talking a fortune here." Tony gently rubbed her hand and continued speculating. "The goal is to get out with the diamonds. So far they've managed to slip away. They'd want to protect the diamonds as best they could. The diamonds were supposed to go to the Jensens in the couch. Something went wrong and the Jensens couldn't take the couch right away."

"Afraid someone was on to them, the couch goes to Blythe." That absentminded gaze was back on Lance's face. Blythe was beginning to think it was a genetic trait akin to all Driscolls. "They don't tell the Jensens because they can't risk it for now."

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“But the diamonds still have to be safe, so Stephanie removes them and puts them...where?” Tony frowned.

“The fish tank?”

The men broke their stares long enough to considered Eileen’s suggestion. Blythe hated to disappoint them.

“The Cambridges don’t have a fish tank.”

Tony clucked his tongue. “They don’t have cats either, but that doesn’t stop them—”

“I have a fish tank,” Eileen said.

Blythe scrunched her eyebrows together. “Stephanie’s been to your apartment?”

For the first time ever Blythe watched Eileen’s face flush with embarrassment. “No...Gavin has. He...I...we...”

“You slept with Gavin Cambridge.” It came out an accusation, not a question. The fact that it came from Lance doubled Eileen’s discomfort.

“It was... He...”

Blythe didn’t know whether to laugh her ass off or scold Eileen until she was blue for being so foolish.

Lance snorted.

“It was a mistake,” she snapped out. “Haven’t you ever done something you regretted?”

“Yep...more than a time or two.”

Tony shoved to his feet. “Well...let’s go look.” He swung open the door, giving them no choice but to follow.

Lance waited until Eileen stepped in front of him. “Hopefully, you’ve learned to be more selective of the men you choose to sleep with.”

She passed a scathing gaze down the length of him. “Obviously not.” She stormed by, hard strides taking her well ahead of them.

“If you think I’m going to chase after you, you’re wrong,” Lance

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called to her back.

Eileen shot him the finger and kept on going.

Blythe laced her fingers through Tony's as she stretched up to his ear. "Ten guesses where that relationship will go."

"Disaster," he said with a soft laugh. "He's too tight-laced and she's too loose."

"Might do her some good. I'd say Eileen's due for a little structure in her life." It was definitely time for her to be brought down a notch or two. Maybe she'd think twice in the future, be more cautious.

The drive to Eileen's apartment was made in silence. A small miracle since she broke every rule in the book. Blythe watched Lance's jaw tighten with every violation. If anything, he was noting each infraction for future use. Eileen was playing a dangerous game—in more ways than one. Maybe Lance wasn't as vanilla as Tony thought. She'd loved to be a fly on the wall when those doors busted open. On second thought, that probably wasn't a good wish. Talk about being scarred for life.

Eileen squealed into the parking lot of her apartment building and whipped her car into the nearest space—not hers. She shoved open the door as she cut the engine and was out a second later. Hampered by their seatbelts, Blythe and the men weren't as quick. However, the brothers wasted no time catching up to her. As she reached the elevator, each grabbed an arm and pulled her to a stop.

"This has to be done by the book." Tony loosened his hold on her. "If it's true, I won't have any evidence compromised. We go in first. No one touches a thing. Understood?"

When she gave a single nod, Lance released her and punched the elevator button. Strained silence descended once more. Blythe watched the light shift from floor to floor. At 6 the doors opened and they trooped down the hallway.

"Any security cameras?" Tony asked.

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“On every floor.” She pointed up to a small chrome hemisphere tucked in the cove molding every fifty feet. There were blind spots, but no one could exit the elevator and go anywhere without detection.

“Fire escape?” he asked.

“Same thing.”

“Did he know that?”

She stopped in front of her door, key poised to unlock it. “I don’t know. He was here enough it wouldn’t have mattered. No one would’ve been suspicious...even if he came during the day when I wasn’t home.”

“And I suppose he had his own key?”

That earned Lance another dirty look from her. Eileen let that be her response. One thrust seated the key. Light greeted them.

“Before you ask...yes, I left the light on.” She pushed the door open farther and motioned the men forward with a wave of her arm.

Blythe had to admit to a flash of pride as Tony quickly assessed the situation in the apartment. She swore he saw a thousand details all at once. His gaze quickly zeroed in on the large aquarium against the far wall. With one finger he requested continued quiet, while he turned on the detection device with the other. Nothing. They weren’t being bugged.

“Stay here while we check out the other rooms.”

Blythe leaned against the wall, arms tucked. Even from this distance she could see the puddle of water in front of the fish tank. Eileen must have as well. She turned her back to the room and stared at the bare wall. Blythe watched her blink back a rush of tears. One escaped to trickle down her cheek.

Blythe’s heart went out to her. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t know.”

Eileen snorted. “No, but I was sure easy to fool. And here I’d thought I was the lucky one because I got to have sex with the

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wonderful Gavin Cambridge. Idiot. I knew it wouldn't go anywhere. I was just in it for the fun."

"And the prestigious notch on your bedpost?"

Eileen flinched. Blythe regretted the slam.

"Yeah...that, too." She dusted her arms and turned a forced smile Blythe's way. "But never again."

It didn't take long for the men to do a complete check. No one else was in the place.

"Clear." Tony pointed to the door. "You can shut it now." He marched over to the aquarium. "It's pretty clear he got what he came after."

Blythe stepped up behind him. There wasn't a speck of gravel left. Gavin had taken it all.

"Should you dust for prints or something?" Eileen hadn't budged. It didn't look like she'd planned to any time soon. She had to feel betrayed, maybe even violated since her home was invaded in her absence.

"It wouldn't do any good." Tony slowly shook his head. "His prints would be all over the place since he'd been here before. Best we could hope for is to have a look at the surveillance tapes tomorrow. That would help determine he was here tonight when you weren't. I'll let my people know as soon as we get back to my place."

Eileen hugged her midriff. "Got an extra room? I...I can't stay here tonight."

"Sure. Pack your stuff."

There it was—that tug of love again. If this was how he was when he wasn't trying to win her over, Blythe would be completely helpless once he pulled out all the stops.

"What about you?" he asked his brother.

Lance stared after Eileen. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"And driving is?"

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His shoulders sagged. "I'll camp out on your couch. We just need to make sure I'm gone before sun-up." He flashed Tony a fake smile. "Can't go to work without making pretty first, now can I?"

"Heaven forbid." He rolled his gaze to the ceiling.

They could make a joke out of it all they wanted. Blythe wasn't fooled. Lance wasn't as unaffected by Eileen as he'd like to have her believe. But, much as she liked her friend, Lance could do better. She was a love 'em and leave 'em gal; Lance seemed like he'd be in it for the long haul. Blythe figured it was a relationship doomed to fail. She didn't want to see Lance hurt, didn't want to be caught in the middle trying to decide between Tony's brother and her best friend. And the way things were going with her and Tony...

Why don't you worry about one thing at a time? her conscience scolded. Now that was sound advice.

They were a subdued group during the drive back to Tony's apartment. Blythe didn't give a crap about what was running through Eileen's or Lance's minds, but she worried about Tony.

He stared out the window, mindlessly watching the passing city scenery as it unwound, no doubt mulling over all that had happened today and how it might fit together. He had to be frustrated with one road block after the other. He couldn't seem to get a break.

It was enough to make a saint swear, but from the pensive set to his face, she guessed he was blaming himself for the failure. She wished there was some insight she could provide to help him break the case wide open. If they'd hooked up months ago instead of dancing around each other, she might have even been able to do some covert work for him. Now, with his suspects gone, there wasn't much she could do except support his efforts.

Blythe wondered what other girlfriends and wives did in these situations. If a couple wasn't in tune with each other, it had to make for some tense moments. Did she and Tony have what it took?

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Now she stared out the window, just as thoughtful as he was. He'd need space, but he'd need to share. She'd have to be watchful so he could focus on his job and not worry something would happen to her. There might be things he wouldn't or couldn't tell her. She shouldn't press him, but he also couldn't shut her out. Yeah, she could do this if he was willing. The question was—was he willing?

Blythe reined her thoughts back for the second time that night. She was getting ahead of herself again when she should let the future unfold on its own. But Tony did need her support. That was definitely one good way to start on that road to the future.

She reached over to slip her hand over his. He caught her fingers and gave them a squeeze, then spent the remainder of the ride absentmindedly caressing his thumb over her knuckles.

CHAPTER 12

Tony stretched out on his bed to stare at the bare ceiling. An hour of turning over facts with Trent had left them both frustrated. Like Lance, Trent believed Tony's cover had been compromised. And while the facts might support that, Tony's instincts said otherwise. If he was wrong, that meant he'd lost his touch, his edge. If that had happened, he needed to get out of the business fast before he got himself or, worse yet, someone else killed.

He frowned up at the white expanse, a blank canvas to write his thoughts on. Something moved things into high gear last Friday. That's when Stephanie and Gavin decided to take off. But they hadn't been able to get the diamonds until tonight. Considering Gavin's relationship with Eileen, he could have wormed his way into her apartment, fucked her to exhaustion, then retrieved the diamonds and been on his way. Maybe he hadn't wanted Stephanie to know about the affair.

Tony shook his head. He wouldn't have had to tell her. All she'd

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need to know was that he had to get the diamonds. Eileen knew from Blythe that they were out of town. He might not want to risk discovery.

Tony rubbed his eyes. That theory didn't wash either. Gavin wasn't sitting around hoping for the chance Eileen would leave the place at night. Were they looking at a double-cross here? Something happened to make them move the diamonds in the first place. Something happened to make them run. Maybe they'd smelled trouble from him the second he strolled into their lives, massage table under his arm. He'd been so sure, so careful. His only slip-up was Blythe...and that hadn't happened until after the Cambridges were on the run.

He burrowed his fists into his eyes. *Think!* Had he ever left his duffel bag unattended? Was he doubly careful about not being followed when he made his reports? If they traced his license plate, it would have been tied to fake information—the only thing correct was the name. If they found his apartment and questioned the manager, they'd be told nothing more than the fact he did contractor work on the side. He hadn't seen or spoken to his family since he'd gone undercover...until this week...until Blythe. Was the trip a ruse to flush him out, catch him off guard?

"You'll go blind if you keep doing that."

He dropped his hands as Blythe shut the door behind her. "Here all this time I thought masturbation did that."

"Somehow I don't think that stopped you." She stretched out beside him. "Beating your head against a brick wall?"

"Something like that." Tony tucked her close. They should have done this months ago—hooked up. She felt like home in his arms. All that time lost...never again.

She traced lazy circles over his chest. His nipples thrust their tips against his shirt. "Is there anything I can do to help you?" she asked.

"I can't think of anything to help myself right now, much less asking someone else." He gave an empty laugh. They were just going

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through the motions now—checking the security tapes at Eileen’s apartment tomorrow, sending out feelers to see if the Cambridges were still in town. Amateur crap, all of it.

“If there were, would you?” she asked.

“Absolutely.” He didn’t hesitate. Blythe was observant and had a head on her shoulders. He’d be foolish not to use that to his advantage...up to a point. “I wouldn’t risk your life, though.”

“That’s a given. I just want you to know I’m there for you.” She absentmindedly flicked her index finger over his nipple. Tiny jolts of pleasure zipped down to his crotch.

“I sure regret not jumping your bones six months ago.” Tony slid his hand up her shirt.

“Such a romantic.” She poked her fingers into his ribs.

“Ow!” Laughing, he tried to grab her hand before she could sneak another blow. “Sex aside...I meant because I could’ve cracked this case by now if I’d had you on my team.”

“Aw.” Her expression melted into that puppy-dog-look. “That *is* the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Tony shrugged. “Yeah...most guys say it with flowers, fancy dinners, and expensive gifts. Me?” He waved his hand. “Not my style.” He thumbed his chest. “I just say, ‘Come on, baby, help me kick the bad guy’s ass.’”

Blythe’s laughter bounced around the room. How could a guy not smile when he was around her?

“Come on, Mr. Softy.” She rolled to her feet trying to take him with her. “It’s been one hell of a night and I could use a hot soak.”

Tony jumped up. It sounded like the perfect end to one hell of a day. “No one does a hot soak in the tub better than you.” He swung her under his arm.

Blythe reached up to kiss him. “You’re full of compliments tonight. I suppose you’d like bubbles.”

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"I love bubbles!" He tried to mimic one of his nieces and must have succeeded because it earned him more laughter. "Can we use dish soap? I don't have any bubble stuff."

She feigned a gasp of shock. "Thank goodness I do."

"You bring it with all the other toys?" He peered over her shoulder to where she'd stashed the treats.

Blythe steered him from the room. "Don't you worry about those toys. It'll be a cold day in hell before you see them again."

"I could turn on the air conditioning." He whipped an arm around her waist, tugging her close. "Or maybe drag out a couple of trays of ice cubes and really make things...interesting."

She studied his lips through half-closed eyelids, then traced her finger along them. "Your romantic vein is greatly enhanced by your imagination."

"I'm not the one who tied herself to the bed. How *did* you do that?"

Blythe smiled. "My secret. And, by the way, who was it all strung up for me when I came back from lunch?"

His grin matched hers. "Just means we're perfect for each other, Sunshine." He nipped soft kisses along her lips, then across her jaw until he reached the tender flesh along the curve of her neck. Blythe let out a muffled squeal of delight when he bit.

"Shhh," he whispered. "You'll wake the kids."

She slipped free. "Last one in the bathtub is—"

"The one in charge." He dashed ahead of her.

"Now *that's* intriguing."

Tony twisted on the faucets full force. While she squirted a generous portion of bubble bath into the steamy water, he stripped down to nothing. She still managed to keep pace. Her toe was poised for the tub as she gave her hair a twist and secured it with a barrette. Tony used the distraction to his advantage, lifting her clear of the target and taking her place.

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“I win,” he declared, sinking into the mountains of bubbles.

“You cheat.” She slid in behind him. “And there will be punishment later.”

He’d been working on a hard-on since she first came into the bedroom. Now one raged as he conjured up all the methods of “torture” and “punishment” Blythe might employ.

She draped her legs on either side of him. Long fingers danced up his spine to his shoulders. “Honey, you are really tense. I suppose you have a right to be. It’s been a day.”

“Has been for you, too.” He closed his eyes on a sigh as she kneaded his muscles.

“Well...it was a lot to cram into one day. If I had time to think about it, my head would explode.”

She lathered up his back, scrubbing slowly and gently continuing to a deep muscle massage. She might not be a professional, but she sure knew how to do it just right. Tense muscles caved under her deft fingers. Everything about him relaxed...everything. Blythe moved her attention to his spine, working small circles over each vertebra. A couple popped, releasing pressure Tony hadn’t realized existed. Next time he took a tumble, he definitely wanted Blythe to set him to rights again.

“You should do this for a living.” He closed his eyes on another contented sigh.

“I doubt I’d be comfortable massaging people I don’t know.”

He sighed as she traced her thumbs against his lumbar. There was one piece of his spine that always seemed to stick. Could she...

“Ah, yes, baby.” He felt the pop deep inside. “We should be doing this in bed. I could fall asleep just like this.”

“Really?”

“Really...I feel like a noodle.”

“Do you? Let’s just see.”

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Her fingers skidded over his hips right to his crotch. One hand cupped his testicles; the other took his flaccid penis. It didn't stay that way for long.

"Now lean back and let's see if I can really relax you."

The whisper against his ear sent ripples of pleasure over his skin. He laid back in her arms and let her work him. Each stroke hardened him all the more. And her fingers gently kneading his balls! Tony swore he'd go mad if he didn't come soon. His body demanded a faster pace. He thrust up.

"Uh-uh-uh." She squeezed his cock. "I'm the one in charge...remember?"

Tony sucked a breath through his teeth. "You're killing me here."

"I did warn you to expect punishment, didn't I?"

She stroked again, harder, faster. Tony longed to whip around and slam his body into hers. Something about being at her mercy kept him still and wonderfully turned on. He floated in her arms, her willing prisoner. Thoughts of her tied spread-eagle on his bed lashed against his mind. What he could do with those toys! He imagined her whimpering with need—rather like he was doing now. He'd take one of the vibrators and gently work it up her tight ass. Then he'd slip his cock deep into her molten heat. One touch of his thumb would make her...

"God, honey, I'm going to come!" Fire washed over his testicles and penis as it raced for relief. Blythe looped her thumb and forefinger at the base of his dick and squeezed hard, shutting him off.

"Arghhh!" Tony jerked in her embrace, coming yet not coming. Talk about torture! He wanted to call her a traitor. He wanted to haul her off to the bedroom and give her a fucking she'd never forget. He wanted her to do it again.

"What are you thinking?"

That sex-heavy voice of hers caressed his ear. Long strokes worked his cock again. His balls felt like steel in her fingers. "Are you thinking

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about how much you want to be inside me?”

He couldn't think much less speak. His mouth worked, but no words came out.

“Are you thinking about how hot, how wet, how tight I am for you?”

Tony felt another burning rush and tried to hold back, knowing she'd steal complete relief from him once more. Gasps for breath gave him away.

“Or maybe you're thinking about how much you'd like to punish me for punishing you?” she whispered. “Maybe you'd like to have me over your knee, paddling my ass with that wooden hairbrush while your fingers tweak at my clit?”

Tony arched against her, hips thrust high. Blythe squeezed the orgasm into submission. He sagged back into her arms. “You should be spanked. You play dirty. If we didn't have company, I *would* turn you over—”

“Shhh...” She stroked him once more, quieting his protests.

All the muscles she'd worked so hard to relax were twice as tight. His dick and balls felt like they were ready to split open. He was the man. He was stronger. All he had to do was take charge. Torture though this was, frustrated as *he* was, Tony stayed.

“Yes, I have been more than a little naughty tonight,” she purred seductively while she worked him up once more. “Morning will be here soon enough and we'll be all alone. I'll take my spanking then like a good girl.”

The image of her bare ass over his lap assaulted him.

“What will you use? I want to prepare myself.”

Did she know she was driving him insane? She had to. He was nothing more than a blithering idiot, thrusting into a grip that suddenly wasn't tight enough.

“Your hand? Or a hairbrush? Maybe your belt or a wooden spoon?”

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Or...all? I have been very—”

“Ahhhh!” He fought the release in fear of her stealing it anyway. Her grip loosened. He reached for his cock, then pulled back.

“You want to come, don’t you? You want to touch yourself,” she whispered.

Hell, he could come right now just listening to her.

“Then come, sweetheart.”

She stroked him hard, fast. His hips jerked with her. Warmth flushed him from the waist down, then raced up his back and down to his cock. Teeth clenched, cum jetted from him over and over and over again, like a fountain gone haywire. With the last spurt, he collapsed, panting for breath.

“Now you’re a noodle.”

He glanced over his shoulder to see a self-satisfied smirk on her face. “You realize—”

Her kiss stole the words away. “Surprise me,” she said after the kiss.

“I’d love to give you the screwing of your life right now, but you’ve taken everything I’ve got for now.”

“I know.” She dotted kisses down his neck, over his shoulder. “But you would never leave me...unsatisfied.”

“You’re right about that.” He rolled over, thrusting two fingers deep into her heat.

Blythe reared back, unwittingly offering her breast. He suckled deep, cheering at her stifled moan. His tongue whipped across her nipple. She clutched at his head, holding him close while her vaginal walls contracted around his fingers. He pushed up hard against her G-spot, massaging until she thrashed her head from side to side.

“Oh, God, Tony...please touch it.”

“Touch what, baby?” he asked around a mouthful of tit. “This?” He brushed his thumb over her mini-erection.

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A gasp strangled in her throat.

“Do you want me to torture you the same way you did me?” He traced the valleys around her clitoris while she mindlessly shook her head.

“Maybe you’d like one of your toys to play with?” He twirled over her peak.

“Maybe you’d like one here?” He thrust deeper into her vagina. Blythe arched against him.

“Or maybe...here.” He slipped his middle finger from her warmth and gently slid it into her anus.

“Oh, G—” Orgasm quaked through her. She spasmed with the release, then collapsed as he had—panting for breath. “Now *I’m* a noodle.”

“Last one to bed is—”

She placed her fingers against his lips. “Is the last one to go to sleep.”

Tony laughed and pulled her with him as he stood. “Sounds like a deal to me.”

They blotted the water off each other with the prohibitively expensive but had-to-have plush towels—who didn’t deserve pampering—then wrapped up and wandered off to bed where they cuddled up for a well-deserved sleep.

* * *

A phone call blasted through Tony’s dreams. Cursing under his breath, he fumbled for the receiver. It seemed they’d just gone to sleep. He glanced at the bedside clock as he muttered a sleepy hello. Six o’clock. Six hours of sleep and he was still dead tired.

“The Jensens were found dead this morning in their home by their maid,” Trent said.

That flashed his eyes wide open. Adrenaline shot through his system. Tony snapped back the bedcovers and swung his legs over the

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side.

"I'm at their place now," Trent went on. "Looks like a fucking blood bath in there. Police are on the scene."

"I'm on my way." He hung up and started to dress.

Blythe shoved upright. "What's wrong?"

"I've got to go in. We might have had a break in the case. Lance will be going with me—if he's still here." Judging from the dawn lighting the windows, he doubted that. Lance wanted to leave before sun-up to avoid compromising Tony's situation. He'd probably just gotten home and would have been called right back out. "I want you and Eileen to stay here, and stay inside until you hear from me."

He tugged a shirt over his head, stabbed his feet into his shoes, and quickly ran a comb through his hair. After a bathroom stop, he'd be ready to go.

"But the delivery men are coming for the couch this morning," Blythe called out. "I promised the Jensens they'd have it today. The last thing I need is them on my ass."

Tony flushed the toilet, rinsed his hands, and grabbed his toothbrush. There was really no easy way to tell her. "The Jensens are dead. Killed last night in their home."

Spit. Rinse. Done. He flicked off the light and stepped out. She sat there in dumbstruck silence.

Tony grabbed his badge and weapon from his duffel bag. If Trent wanted him on-site, that meant the undercover portion of his assignment was officially over. Whoever killed the Jensens might be watching. If they knew him as Tony the massage guy, they'd now see how screwed they'd been. It could help rattle them. A rattled perp was a sloppy perp. They had to be pretty desperate as it was to kill twice...three times in one day. He worried Blythe might be next. Her association with Stephanie could make her a target. He was counting on her common sense to keep her put. Hopefully she had enough for

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Eileen, too.

“I’ll try to keep in touch, but it could be a while.”

Her brown eyes clicked up to his. “Do what you have to do. I’ll be here when you get back.”

“Now that’s my woman.” He gave her a quick kiss. “Love you. Don’t worry.” After snagging his FBI wind-breaker from the closet, he took off.

The living room was vacant. Lance had already left. Tony bet he’d be seeing him soon.

He took the time to zip through the Starbucks drive-thru for coffee for both of them. He resisted the urge to grab a bagel. If the place was bloody enough to shake up Trent, Tony didn’t want anything solid in his stomach. But he and Lance needed the coffee.

The brothers pulled to a stop outside the Jensen home at the same time. Tony had to laugh. As they left their respective vehicles, they each had coffee for the other one.

“Well, Mom did raise us to be considerate.” He passed his cup to a patrolman as Lance did.

“And she taught us how to dress fast,” Lance added.

Both pluses. Noticing Lance’s morning beard, Tony scuffed his own. *Well, you can’t have everything.*

Matching strides, they flashed their badges and walked toward the house. The Jensen house wasn’t tucked away like most of the places in this area. No gate separated it from the public. No mini-forest of trees guarded it from prying eyes. Everything was open and approachable, as if they flaunted their success for the neighbors to see. The sprawling expanse of neatly trimmed green grass was like a welcome mat. Judging from the splotches of oil on the wide driveway, their house saw a lot of traffic.

Trent lifted a wave they returned.

“Girls still asleep when you left?” Lance asked.

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“Blythe wasn’t. Eileen was. I briefed her and asked her to stay inside until I get back. She didn’t hesitate. And, by the way, she’ll skin you alive if she hears you call her a girl.”

Lance smiled. “I’ll take my chances.” The humor faded. “I hear it’s bad in there. Blood everywhere.”

“Sounds like they were hacked to pieces.”

“Gutted like fish,” Trent replied as they came within earshot.

He looked pale. One detective braced himself against the side of the house, his back to everyone. Another agent crouched at the bushes near the side. Tony doubted either of them was looking for evidence.

Trent wiped his fingers over his lips. “Their...uhm...insides are all over the place. Chopped into pieces.”

Tony scrunched up his face. It made no sense. Was this related at all to the smuggling or a horribly random event? They had to go with what they knew up to this point, which was only going to be the information gleaned from the smuggling operation, since the forensics team would be all day shifting through the mess here. He was glad he wasn’t first on the scene. At least he could avoid having to see the carnage.

“I want to execute a search warrant on Cambridge Designs and the Cambridge home,” Tony said. “As well as the dressing room of any studio Gavin might presently be involved with.”

“I’ll have the judge sign it when he signs the warrant for the surveillance tapes of that apartment.” Trent scratched the side of his face as he scanned the gathering crowd.

“Add another one for Eileen Cronkite’s apartment.” Lance tossed down the remainder of his coffee. “No telling what else Cambridge might’ve hidden there.”

Trent nodded. “Done. Anything else?”

“Nope,” they answered in unison.

He sighed. “Then let’s get started. It’s going to be a long day.”

That was an understatement. Tony just hoped they found evidence

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to finally nail the lid shut on this case.

* * *

Blythe didn't budge as another old movie started on TV. They'd passed the day and part of the night in this mindless activity. Eileen hadn't said a word since Lance had called to advise her they had a warrant to search her apartment. He gave her the option of being there when they did so. Eileen refused. She trusted them to do their job. Blythe didn't know what Eileen would do if they discovered Gavin had hidden more things there. She was ashamed enough as it was. Maybe it would make her more careful in the future.

Blythe appreciated the quiet. It gave her time to think. God knew she had a lot to think about. Despair, worry, and joy warred in her heart and mind. The Jensens were dead, murdered. The Cambridges were missing, presumably the killers. A fortune in smuggled diamonds had disappeared. A best friend had wedged herself in the big middle of it by having an affair with one of the culprits.

And, above it all, those two little words that made her heart sing—*Love you.*

They were said so matter-of-factly he might have uttered them a thousand times before. Surely he meant them. Tony wasn't the type to play games or use someone's emotions against them. If he said them, he meant them. By the time she'd recovered her shock, he was out the door. Where did they go from here? Weren't declarations of love supposed to take the relationship somewhere? Nothing was normal about this relationship. It was intense yet more comfortable than any she'd ever had. It felt...right. Tony felt...right. She knew that in her heart. So did they just throw out the "L" word and keep going like they were? Weren't they supposed to plan for...something?

Blythe hugged the sofa pillow to her chest. Crazy as it sounded, it seemed the perfect thing to do was just accept this amazing gift the Universe had given them and enjoy it. No analyzing. No agonizing.

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Just acceptance. *So much better than picking it apart.*

She heard the front door open. Flinging the pillow to one side, she jumped to her feet. “They’re back.”

Blythe was at the door before Tony could shut it. Beat as he looked, he smiled at her. She wrapped him in a welcoming hug. She was all too aware of the pistol strapped to his shoulder.

“You look like you need a cold beer, a hot shower, dinner, and a good night’s sleep. And I’m not necessarily sure in what order. You, too,” she added to Lance.

He gave her a half-hearted smile.

Tony kissed her and patted her butt. “I think we’ll take the beer first.”

“Good, then I’ll throw together some spaghetti.”

Eileen hovered in the doorway. When the men sat, she pulled out a chair and joined them. Blythe passed around the bottles, then started in on dinner. It felt good to be doing something constructive after having sat all day in worry.

“What did you find out?” She tossed a pound of frozen ground beef into the fry pan. While it thawed over the low heat she could mix up sauce. “Or can’t you tell us?”

“The Jensens were eviscerated,” Lance said.

Eyes wide, Blythe whipped around.

Eileen frowned. “Eviscerated? What’s that mean?”

“Cut open,” Blythe said in a rush of breath.

Tony nodded. “Their stomachs and intestines were chopped into pieces.”

Blythe glanced at the can of tomato sauce clutched in her hand. Suddenly, spaghetti didn’t sound all the appealing. She’d make taco rice instead. That shouldn’t spawn any reminders of the day for any of them.

“Why...why would anyone do something so heinous?” She shoved

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the can back into the pantry and pulled out a bag of rice.

Lance rubbed at his eyes. Both men looked exhausted. “We’re still trying to figure that one out. We couldn’t find any fingerprints at the place, but there were a couple of shoe prints. Looks like a combat boot of some kind.” He glanced up at Eileen. “And if I were you, I’d be looking for a safer place to live. Those security cameras your landlord has all over the place aren’t real. They’re for show to help bring down his insurance costs.”

Eileen clutched her fists to her chest. “Did you find anything else in my apartment?”

“Nothing.” He twisted the cap off his beer and took a sip.

Eileen’s sigh of relief was clearly audible.

“We tried to not make too big of a mess,” he said.

“I appreciate that.”

Seeing Eileen humbled was a first. Blythe hoped this new version of her friend stayed a while. It was much better than obnoxious and over-bearing.

“Am I safe to go back?”

“I can drive you there to get some more clothes, but I’d prefer to keep you here until this is resolved.”

Eileen didn’t argue. She stared at the bottle of beer before her, then shoved it away. Blythe snagged it and returned it to the refrigerator. She didn’t feel much like drinking either.

“What about the other searches?” She found a brick of cheddar cheese. Eileen could shred it while she cut up lettuce and tomato for the taco rice.

“Nothing at the shop.” Tony’s chair scraped back. Smiling, he took the cheese from her hands. “I need something fun to do.” He gave her a wink as he sat back down.

How could she not love a guy like that? “And at the house?”

“Something really weird.”

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“Let me guess...she has no cats.”

“Now there’s a surprise.” He rolled his eyes, laughing when Blythe punched him. “Baby stuff. A whole room was set up for a baby in the room that was locked.”

Very weird. “But they didn’t have a baby and weren’t expecting one.”

“We found the same thing at the Jensens,” Lance added. “One bedroom all set up for a baby and recently used, too.”

“We found records to indicate both couples had interviewed nannies. One worked for the Jensens, but I never saw her or a baby when I was there.” Cheese fell neatly into the bowl in front of him. She watched it slowly fill with each pass over the grater while she puzzled this through. No wonder the men looked beat—they been banging against more brick walls.

She heard her cell phone chime. A jerk of her head and Eileen snagged the strap of her purse and swung it her way. Blythe plucked it from the pouch on the side. The caller ID flashed Stephanie’s number.

“It’s Stephanie!”

Chairs flew as the men jumped to their feet.

“Keep her off guard,” Tony said. “Try to get her to let you call her back on a land-line so we can get a trace.”

Blythe nodded even though her hands were shaking. She couldn’t give Stephanie a clue they were on to her. She punched the key, pulled in a breath, and put the phone to her ear. Tony spun away to make the arrangements on his end.

“You picked a hell of a time to call me, Stephanie,” she said on a world-weary sigh.

“I need your help.” She sounded like she’d been crying.

“I’m on a date. Can’t this wait?”

“It’s a matter of life or death.”

“Sorry...you’re breaking up. I’m at the movies and the reception

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sucks. Let me find a pay phone. Okay?”

“Hurry.”

“Do you have a better number for me to call in case your reception is bad?”

Stephanie hesitated, then rattled off another number. Blythe scrambled for pad and paper, writing as fast as she could. She let out a whoosh of air as the call was disconnected. “It worked. But I don’t know if I can keep her on the line long. She’s panicked and crying.”

“Then let’s do it.” Tony led them to his bedroom where the only regular land-line existed, all the others in the house were cordless.

“Won’t caller ID tell her who you are?” Eileen asked as she trailed behind.

“He’s got it blocked,” Lance replied.

Smart man, Blythe said to herself as she sat on the bed. She needed to think about doing that.

On Tony’s nod, she picked up the phone. Her insides quivered, but her hand was steady. Stephanie answered before the first ring completed.

“What’s going on, Stephanie?”

“We’re in trouble. Big trouble, Blythe. I don’t have anyone left to trust. We need your help. Meet us—”

“I’m not doing anything until I know why. Stephanie, the shop is a shambles. A man was *killed*. I don’t know what you’ve got yourself into—”

“Please, Blythe. It truly is a matter of life and death. The Jensens—” She broke off on a hard sob. “The Jensens are dead. We will be, too, if you don’t help. I have nowhere else to turn.”

“How about the police?”

“No! Someone could be watching. There are more lives at stake than ours. Do you really want that on your head?”

She glanced Tony’s way. Stephanie knew all the right buttons to

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push. If Blythe didn't know the true nature of things, she might be fooled.

He nodded. They had the location.

"All right, Stephanie. Tell me where you are." She scribbled down the address. "I'll be there as soon as I can, but I doubt very seriously I'll be able to dump my date. He's very intuitive. He'll sense something's wrong. He'll have to come with me."

"Just hurry."

And that was that.

Blythe hung up. "She said more lives are in danger than hers and Gavin's. They're being watched and she's afraid others will be killed if she calls the police. Your men need to keep a distance."

Tony squatted down, resting his fingers on her knee. "You did really well, sweetheart. We'll go in together. I'll call Trent and set things up. Sounds like she's going to try to get you to do her dirty work."

"It wouldn't be the first time." Just the first time she'd asked Blythe to do something illegal. The enormity of what she was about to do hit her. Blythe pressed her hands to her cheeks. "I hope I don't screw up."

Tony rubbed her knees. "You have good instincts, you pay attention, and you think quickly on your feet. I have every faith and confidence in you."

Blythe dropped her hands into his. "Do you?"

He squeezed her fingers. "You bet. If I didn't, I wouldn't allow you to go through with this. And, yes, I said *allow*. I'd forfeit the case in a heartbeat if I thought there was danger to you neither of us could handle. Capturing all the smugglers in the world isn't worth losing you."

He brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them. "Let me call Trent so we can get going."

As he made a move to stand, Blythe grabbed his face between her

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hands and kissed him quick. “I love you, too.”

Without hesitation, he wrapped her in his arms. He didn’t say anything, he didn’t have to. She felt his warmth, his soul surround hers. He was the one—the love of her life she’d been waiting for. The rest of their lives together waited for them...as long as she didn’t screw up and get them both killed.

CHAPTER 13

The tape holding the wire in place tugged at Blythe's skin with just the slightest movement. She tried her best to ignore it. Sitting still wasn't an option. She had to act normally or someone might suspect she was wired. She tried to take her cues from Tony, whose actions didn't betray him in the least.

We'll see how he feels when it's yanked off. Blythe wasn't looking forward to that either. Fortunately, she didn't have chest hair to deal with. Lucky for Tony, he didn't have much to deal with either.

Blythe looked forward to the end of this. She didn't know what good the wire was going to do. Her heart pounded so loudly the agents cooped up in the surveillance van near the rendezvous point wouldn't be able to hear anything over it.

She studied Tony's profile in the passing headlights of I-15 traffic. He hadn't said anything since they left his place, but then neither had she. She'd bet he was running scenarios through his head. Blythe was

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also in some respects. It didn't help that she didn't have a clue what to really expect. Still, she was grateful Tony didn't run through a litany of possible problems and what to do if any one of them cropped up. She was nervous enough as it was, without having all that flung at her. She didn't expect this to go one hundred percent smoothly, but with any luck, they'd get this done without too much stumbling on her part.

And to think an hour ago she was just starting to prepare dinner, looking forward to cuddling off to sleep next to Tony. Poor guy. He was exhausted when he'd gotten home. Somehow he'd found reserve energy to function on. Blythe supposed that was just part of the job. She wondered what he'd be doing after this. The wire taped around her mid-section kept her from asking.

She saw their destination just ahead—a Motel 6 just off the freeway in Temecula. It was a nice enough place to stay, but certainly well below Stephanie's five-star resort specifications. Quite a come-down.

As Tony pulled in, she saw a couple of cargo vans parked in different areas. One of them was the surveillance vehicle. She didn't ask which one and Tony didn't volunteer the information. He eased into a space across from Stephanie and Gavin's room. Blythe glanced up at the second floor room—someone was peeking through the curtain.

"Let's do this." Tony dusted his fingers over her shoulder. When she looked his way, he planted a simple kiss on her lips. "For luck."

All she could do was nod. Hopefully, she'd get her wits about her quickly. As she and Tony approached the room, the door cracked open.

"Get in. Quick." Standing behind the door, Gavin opened it just enough to let them squeeze in. A second later he shut it, secured it with the chain lock, and the bolt.

Even Blythe was smart enough to realize that wouldn't keep a determined person out. All they'd have to do was bust the plate glass window and they'd be in. Of course, that racket would draw attention.

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But it did appear these were desperate people willing to do whatever it took to get what they wanted.

Whiskers darkened Gavin's face. The room reeked of cigarette smoke. Obviously one of them had restarted that habit.

She glanced around and saw Stephanie crawling onto the bed from her hiding place on the floor beside it. Put-together Stephanie looked like she'd been on a three-day bender. Puffy eyes from lack of sleep and tears, no makeup, uncombed hair. And still she had the nerve to look down her nose at Tony.

"Him? He's your date? I thought you had higher standards than that."

"Now that's not very polite to say from someone in desperate need of what looks like a questionable favor," Tony shot back.

"Honey...please." Gavin sat beside her, taking her hand into his. Stephanie clutched it as if her life depended on it. Tears filled her eyes. She pulled Gavin's hand to her cheek and let them fall.

"What the hell's going on?" Blythe demanded.

"I hardly know where to start," Gavin replied.

"The beginning would be nice." Tony crossed his arms over his chest.

Stephanie sniffled. Dropping her grip on Gavin's hand, she swiped her tears away with shaking fingers. "That will take all night."

"We've got nothing else to do...now." Blythe let that innuendo sink in as she stared them both down.

Gavin waved his hand to the other bed, inviting them to sit.

With our backs to the window? I don't think so.

Obviously, neither did Tony. He pulled out the chair from the built-in desk and positioned it just in front of the bathroom for Blythe. When she sat, he stood next to her.

"Let's start with the obvious question? Did you kill the Jensens?" Blythe asked.

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They shook their heads. "Absolutely not," Gavin added.

"But we are somewhat responsible." Stephanie clutched her hands. "If we'd given them what they wanted, this might not have happened."

"And what did they want?" Tony's voice was clear, each word precisely spoken. Blythe made a mental note to do that as well—the wire had to be able to pick up everything.

"We...we got into a bad situation." Gavin reached for a pack of cigarettes on the nightstand.

"If you light that, I'm out of here." She had the upper-hand, so why not use it?

Gavin pulled his hand back with a sigh. "We wanted to have a baby, but discovered we're unable to do so. My sperm and Stephanie's eggs were harvested and we found a surrogate to carry the baby for us—Ilsa Jensen. She agreed to fifty thousand dollars, but wanted anonymity. We took care of everything in Switzerland. Once it took, the Jensens decided fifty thousand wasn't enough."

Stephanie pulled in a shaky breath. "She said the morning sickness alone should get her more. We offered them more money. After all, that was *our* baby she was carrying. They wanted something else."

"They wanted us to smuggle several million dollars worth of diamonds into the United States." Gavin stared at the floor. "If we didn't..."

"They would abort the pregnancy," Blythe finished for him.

The couple nodded.

"We were panicked. This was *our* baby." Stephanie smacked her fist into the rumpled bedspread.

"We agreed on the condition the diamonds wouldn't be turned over until the baby was born. They agreed. And so we waited. The baby was born at home two months ago with a midwife in attendance. We were there when she arrived."

Tears filled Stephanie's eyes once more. "She was so beautiful, so

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perfect. A mix of me and Gavin.”

Gavin reached for the cigarettes again, then pulled back. “We were ready to make the trade right then. They said no, that it was too dangerous. I told them we’d hidden them in a couch and they could take them out when it was safe. They still said no.

“That’s when we realized they were going to renege, although they insisted they weren’t. Stephanie removed the stones from the couch. We were afraid they’d take the diamonds *and* the baby. We needed a place to hide them where no one would think to look. That meant bringing someone into our confidence.”

“We thought about you at first,” Stephanie said to Blythe. “But were afraid you were too goody-goody to help us.”

“And yet here I am—the one person you called,” she sarcastically replied.

Stephanie glanced at Tony. “Then we thought of you, but didn’t know if we could trust you. You are just a massage therapist.”

“Heaven forbid.” He was pretty sarcastic, too. Blythe fought a smile.

Gavin placed his hand on his wife’s knee, a silent reminder that the people she insulted were their only hope now. “So we turned to my stunt double for help. We’ve known him for years. He didn’t hesitate. He took the diamonds and hid them for us.”

The stuntman hid them? Either Gavin was lying to cover up his affair with Eileen, or Eileen had been having an affair with the wrong man.

Blythe had met Butch Jackovovich once. The resemblance between him and Gavin was remarkable. If a person didn’t know better, one *might* think he was Gavin. It’d be like Eileen to make a mistake like that.

“When you called Stephanie about the break-in, we knew we were in over our heads. We asked Butch to retrieve the diamonds for us. We

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were going to make the exchange that night.”

“But someone got there before you,” Tony said.

“Yeah.” Gavin pinched the bridge of his nose. “And now that person has the baby and her nanny.”

Tony shrugged. “So, if you’ve got the diamonds, just make the switch.”

“The police are looking for us in connection with the Jensens’s murders. We are apparently ‘persons of interest’ to them.” He made quote marks in the air.

“And that’s where we come in. You want us to make the trade.”

“Yes.” Stephanie’s shoulders sagged.

“And what makes you think we won’t double-cross you?” Blythe asked. “Oh...wait...it’s because I’m too goody-goody and Tony is too stupid.” She jerked her thumb his way.

Stephanie’s face flushed. “I’m sorry. We’ve just been under so much—”

“Save it.” Tony lifted his hand. “Obviously, this person is aware you need someone else to make the delivery and they’re content with that because they want those diamonds.”

Gavin nodded.

Tony shifted his gaze between them. “I have a friend who’s a coyote. He uses a specially built RV to smuggle immigrants across the border. There are hidden compartments throughout the place. I think he’d be willing to loan it to us...for a price. We could get you to the rendezvous point and you could make the switch yourself.”

For the first time, hope lit their faces.

“No cost is too great,” Gavin said on a rush of breath.

“That’s what got you into this mess in the first place.” Tony snorted as he shook his head. “I’ll make the call.”

* * *

It had taken less than an hour to have the self-contained RV

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delivered. The guys on the other end of the wire must have started moving the second the words left Tony's mouth. It was huge, with all sorts of nooks and crannies tucked throughout, several of which were steel-reinforced safe places in the event of gunfire.

The Cambridges were tucked away in kitchen bench seats so well-camouflaged no one could find them even if they looked. They bought Tony's story that his coyote friend had a soft spot and would let them borrow the RV for only ten grand. In their hiding places, they felt safe should any police happen to pull them over. *Little did they know*, she thought with a snicker. At least it gave her and Tony a chance to talk and plan without the Cambridges overhearing.

Once they were hidden and Tony and Blythe were in front driving away from the motel, he briefed her further. Guns were stashed under the driver and passenger seats, under the dash, behind the door panel—one hard yank would pop it open—behind the toilet, in the kitchen drawer underneath—just stick your hand in and up. Essentially, everywhere you went, a loaded weapon was within easy reach. Blythe was to stay close to the RV during the transaction. If something went wrong, she was to duck into one of the safe places. Besides the kitchen bench seats, there were two closets, the bathroom, and the area under the foam mattress in the bedroom. Things could go sour in a heartbeat, even with federal agents tucked around the perimeter of the meeting place.

It bothered Blythe to think of a baby caught in the middle of all this. *Poor little one*. Stephanie and Gavin must have been frantic for her welfare all this time. Even though they made the mess themselves, Blythe understood and even felt a little sorry for them.

“Do you suppose a hostage situation could develop?” she asked.

“Always possible. The baby and nanny are with this guy. One of the men will try to grab them first.”

“At least he didn't kill them when he killed the Jensens.”

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“And hopefully he hasn’t killed them now.”

Dread settled into Blythe’s bones. He hadn’t killed them because he intended to get rid of all the witnesses at one time. “Are we walking into an ambush, Tony?”

“Yes, without a doubt. Just stay close to the RV. When it goes down, hide. It’ll buy you some time until the team can move in. They’ll be quick.”

But quick enough to keep Tony alive? “You just keep your head down and your ass covered, Tony. I’m not done with you yet. The way I figure it, you still have about fifty years of good use left in you and I intend to take every minute of it.”

He laughed lightly. “I’ll do my best.”

They didn’t have a long drive—fifteen minutes at the most. Tony found the designated side road off State Route 79 easily enough. The wooded clearing was five miles farther. With every mile, Blythe’s heart beat a little faster.

He turned down the dirt road. She could make out the empty area just ahead in the light of the half moon. Trees and low brush ringed the area—the perfect hiding place for the other agents.

“Did they see us?” she asked.

Tony glanced into the rearview mirror. “Yes, looks like a Lincoln Towncar is right behind us.”

He circled the clearing until the RV was pointed to the road going out. The Lincoln parked twenty feet away. Tony left the engine running and hurried back to the benches.

“We’re here. Let’s move it.” He rapped twice on each bench.

Stephanie and Gavin lifted the lids and crawled out.

Tony opened his palm to the other man. “Give me the pouch. You be ready to get the nanny and baby in here. Stephanie, you stay near the entrance to the RV with Blythe.”

No one argued. They followed like dutiful ducklings out the door.

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As they stepped into the night, the passenger door to the Lincoln swung open. Blythe would have laughed her ass off if the situation weren't so dire. He was dressed in typical men-in-black fashion—black suit, black tie, black hat. The only thing missing was the sunglasses. He was an average man of average build, nothing remarkable at all. She sure as hell wouldn't be able to pick him out of a line-up.

He greeted them with a single sentence. "You got the pouch?"

Tony held it up. "Right here. Where's the nanny and baby?"

The back door opened. A young blonde woman with wide, frightened eyes stepped out. A baby slept in her arms.

"We make the trade at the same time," Tony said.

The man nodded. With a flick of his finger, the woman started forward. Tony met her halfway, motioned her on with a jerk of his head, then tossed the pouch to the man who quickly handed it off to someone inside.

Stephanie raced forward to get her baby, ignoring Tony's earlier instructions. Now, with the exception of Blythe, they were all exposed. And Blythe couldn't pull them back without arousing suspicion. Tony and the man stared at each other, neither moving. Stephanie, Gavin, and the nanny hovered over the baby, oblivious to everything else.

Seconds later, the pouch sailed from the back seat. "Where the fuck are my diamonds?" a voice demanded from inside. "This is glass."

Tony grabbed for the pistol tucked in a holster at his back, but he couldn't beat a man with a shoulder holster.

"Inside now!" Tony shouted over his shoulder.

The trio just stood there looking befuddled while Tony faced down the barrel of what looked like the biggest gun Blythe had ever seen. And *still* no one moved.

"Get your asses over here *now*," she hissed out.

Stephanie blinked, shifting her gaze between the baby and unfolding disaster.

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Tony lifted his arms. “Hey, man, I swear to you, I had no idea. I’m just the delivery guy. Let’s talk this through.”

Dark shapes dashed toward them from the edges of the clearing.

“If you’re a delivery man, you’re dispensable,” the voice said.

They weren’t going to get here soon enough! A distraction—something, anything to give Tony time to get his weapon. Preferably something that wouldn’t get her killed. There seemed only one choice.

Pulling in a deep breath, Blythe screamed and stomped her feet. “Ew, ew, ew! Spiders!”

The man smirked at her. Tony had his chance. She saw his arm whip around as he crouched to one knee.

“FBI! Drop your weapon! Now!”

The man zeroed in on him, firing wildly. Tony fired back, nailing his shoulder. His pistol flew from his fingers, bouncing off the hood of the Lincoln. Stephanie, Gavin, and the nanny ran into each other trying to reach the safety of the RV as the other agents swarmed over the area.

“Now you move.” Blythe barred their entry. “Idiots. It’s over.”

She pushed away from the door and let them by. Seeing Tony involved with the rest of the men, she sat on the steps to wait for him. She didn’t have to wait long. Within minutes he and Trent stomped her way. Blythe stood as they neared.

Tony looped his arm around her waist and gave her a kiss. “You scared the shit out of me, but...great distraction.” He followed up with a smile, then gave her butt a quick squeeze. “This is going to take a while.”

“I’m patient. Shaking like a leaf now that it’s over, but patient,” she added with a smile.

Tony gave her another kiss and hopped up into the RV with Trent. “Where the hell are the real diamonds?”

Blythe slipped in behind the men. She’d like to know the answer to that one herself. She couldn’t believe Gavin had the nerve to sit there

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and look stupid.

"I...I don't know. Butch—"

"Cut the crap." Tony smacked his fist against the wall. The nanny jumped and the baby started to cry. "We know you hid them in Eileen Cronkite's apartment."

Gavin's face screwed up. "Who's that?"

Tony looked ready to strangle him. "The woman you were having an affair with."

Stephanie and Gavin exchanged a look Blythe couldn't interpret. Linking hands, Gavin glanced at the table top while Stephanie sighed.

"That's not possible, Tony. Gavin's impotent."

Oh, please...you've got to be kidding, Blythe thought to herself.

"I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of prostate cancer two years ago. There was only one way to hope to cure it—removal and chemo."

"We'd always wanted children so we had his sperm frozen. Everything was handled quietly. Money does earn you some degree of privacy if you are willing to spend it. Then we discovered I was unable to carry a child to term. I had one miscarriage after the other. That's when the Jensens made their offer."

"If this Eileen person was having an affair, it wasn't with me," Gavin said. "Now, Butch is a different story."

Stephanie gave a weak smile. "He never could refuse a lady. But he would never cheat us. Never."

"Yeah...right." Tony reached for his cell phone and punched in a number. "Miss Goody-Goody and I, the untrustworthy masseur, don't think your opinions of people are that reliable... Yeah, this is Driscoll. We need a Willard Jackovovich aka Butch rounded up. Check airports and such. He'll have a cache of uncut diamonds on him."

No doubt about it. Tony Driscoll was a keeper.

CHAPTER 14

It was a little after sunrise when Tony and Blythe finally got back to his apartment. His bed screamed their names. Nothing seemed sweeter than crawling under the covers for some well deserved sleep.

He tucked Blythe under his arm as they trudged up the three flights of stairs. "I'm beat. You look like you are, too."

"Pretty much."

She could have slept in the RV while they finished up, but hung in there—getting them coffee one time, sandwiches another. He couldn't believe how brave she'd been, how smart. If it weren't for Blythe, he could have been lying in a hospital right now or, worse yet, a morgue. Maybe it was time to move on to other pursuits. There was that house he wanted to renovate. He'd always loved contracting. With Blythe's eye for decorating... Well, they'd make a hell of team, that's all there was to it.

"After we've got our sleep caught up, there's a place I'd like to

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show you. It's a great old house, but needs a lot of work. Has a lot of potential."

Blythe hugged him around the waist. "I'd love that. Sounds like fun. Does it have a big backyard for Lucy to run in? Or should we just leave her with your mom?"

"Mom and dogs." Tony laughed. "Now that's a tough one." It might take an act of Congress to pull those two apart now that they'd bonded. Although his parents did seem pretty firm about not wanting any more pets. "I say we make the offer and leave the decision up to them. There's nothing to say Lucy can't come visit."

"Absolutely... I'm going to give my landlord notice tomorrow and start moving in here."

"Good."

The sooner, the better as far as he was concerned. Funny, they were talking about all this for the first time, automatically accepting the other would agree. And they did! Tony smiled. Who cared? It worked for them. And it was much less stressful then tearing things apart with conversation and analysis.

The smell of coffee reached them as he opened the door. Sitting at the kitchen table, Lance and Eileen shot to their feet.

"What happened?" Lance demanded to know.

"Did you get them? Was anyone hurt?" Eileen spit out.

Tony waved them back to their seats. "Calm down."

"You want coffee?" Eileen grabbed the pot.

"No." Blythe pulled out a chair to sit. "We want sleep."

"But we know we won't get any until you've heard all." Tony slid into the chair beside Blythe. "Gavin's stunt double, Butch Jackovich, was the person Eileen was having the affair with, not Gavin."

Eileen pulled back, denial on her lips. Something must have made her think twice. She clamped her mouth shut in a tight line as he filled in the details.

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“And did you find him?” Lance asked.

“Yes, he was in the international terminal at LAX preparing to board a flight to Argentina. He’d stuffed the diamonds into a condom and swallowed them. We’re still waiting to...uhm...recover them.”

“Which explains why the Jensens were carved up,” Lance said.

Tony nodded. “Yes, Victor Burson was counting on his tried and true method of smuggling. The Jensens were, too. I guess they were trying to buy some time, hoping to escape. The nanny said they told Burson’s man he had to wait for the diamonds to work through. He wasn’t willing to do so.”

Lance smiled. “Victor Burson, huh?”

“Finally.” They’d been after him for years.

“Poor nanny is probably a wreck by now.” Eileen traced her thumb around the rim of her mug. “Is the baby all right?”

“Fine. Safe at home.” Much to the joy of their three cats who’d come out running the second Stephanie and Gavin crossed the threshold. Tony didn’t know who was more shocked—him or Blythe.

“What will happen to them now?” Eileen asked.

“That remains to be seen. Yeah, they broke the law, but there were extenuating circumstances. That doesn’t make what they did right, but maybe it’ll make any sentence handed down easier. Jackovich is definitely going down. His motive was greed. Claimed the Cambridges owed him for all the wear and tear stunt work had put on his body.”

“You’d think he’d have been scared shitless after the Jensens were murdered,” his brother said.

“Scared, yes. But still stupid. Guess he figured Burson would never think to look his direction. And, actually, he didn’t. If we hadn’t caught him, he’d be living the high-life in Argentina.”

“Greed will do that to people.” Blythe pushed away from the table. “I’m sorry. I’m dead tired. I need to get some sleep.”

“Right behind you.” Tony gave Lance and Eileen a quick nod. “See

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you two later.”

Blythe was down to her underwear by the time he reached the bedroom. She flashed him a smile. “I never did thank you for sticking up for Eileen. You could’ve easily made her a suspect.”

Tony pulled off his shirt and tossed it to the corner. “She’s a ditz, not a thief. Right now there’s only one thing that woman wants, and it’s not diamonds.”

“Poor Lance.” Blythe laughed lightly, stripped panties and bra off, then crawled under the covers.

“He’ll survive. Might be good for him to experience the wild side.” He shoved off his jeans and boxers, taking his shoes and socks with them.

Blythe snuggled against the cove of his body after he slid in beside her. She was already half asleep.

“You know I still want to try out those toys,” he whispered against her ears.

A smile curved her lips. She draped her arm over his back and patted his butt. “Let me catch a few hours’ sleep and then you can do whatever you want to me.”

“Whatever, huh?”

“Your every fantasy.”

“I can fantasize a lot of things, Sunshine.”

“I’m counting on it.”

CAITLYN WILLOWS

Caitlyn Willows is the pseudonym for award-winning author Catherine Snodgrass, who wanted to flex her writing muscles in the erotica genre. Readers will find the same quality from “Caitlyn” that they have come to expect from “Catherine,” but the stories will be more over-the-top and more steamy. Sometimes the novels are written singularly, and sometimes they are a collaborative effort with award-winning author Paris Dixon. Always they will be action-filled...in more ways than one.

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* * *

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