



Surprise

© Arianna Hart

Samara Murphy went to Jamaica for a little adventure—she comes back home to a big SURPRISE.

Samara Murphy goes to Jamaica to relax in the sun and escape the New England winter. She doesn't expect to meet far-too-sexy Connor O'Riley. And she definitely doesn't expect to have her first fling.

Once home again, Samara plans on going back to her old life, but soon figures out that isn't possible. Her house is broken into, a car almost runs her down, and someone is leaving sick messages on her front doorstep. Can she trust Connor to get her out of this mess alive—and with her heart intact?

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Arianna Hart

Dedication

To all of my family, without their support I would never have had the courage to try. Especially to my sister Debbie, who not only read the book, but also put up with my nagging and neurosis. I couldn't have done it without you. To my daughters who gave me the inspiration to write this, especially to Shannon whom I was pregnant with when I started writing it. And as always, for my husband Paul, the rose was for you.

Also, special thanks to the makers of children's videos everywhere. Trust me, without your hours of entertainment, this book never would have been written.

Prologue

Connor watched the blonde get on the bus headed to the airport. He chuckled to himself as she gave him a saucy wink from the safety of the air-conditioned bus. He couldn't help but remember her long, long legs wrapping around his waist last night. Connor didn't think he'd forget this one so easily, but forget her he would. In his line of work, long-term attachments were impossible. He shook his head over what could never be and headed into the coolness of the bar.

"Hey, mon. Isn't it too early even for you? Did that little blonde get to more than your Johnson?" The bartender busted Connor's ass while he cleaned the counter.

"You know, Alex, there are plenty of other resorts in Jamaica that I can go to without the aggravation of a smart ass bartender. I'll take an ice tea, minus the booze and the criticism."

"No criticism here, I liked the lady, too. Will you see her again?"

"You know that's not possible. Besides, I doubt she'll be coming back any time soon."

"You're right. Who needs a wise cracking, tall, leggy blonde with a sense of humor around anyway?"

"Do you want to keep your teeth?"

"Okay. I'll stop, but you know, you have to settle down someday. You can't keep dodging bullets at your age."

"Enough."

Alex just gave his deep booming laugh and continued to set up the bar.

“So, what’s the word around town? Hear anything interesting lately?” Connor nonchalantly spun his glass of tea. The reason Connor came to this resort in the first place was because of Alex’s connections. He had informants in more places than the CIA, FBI and DEA put together.

“Word on the street be saying some weird stuff going out of Cuba. Some folk say a shipment landed in Miami yesterday and might be on the street by the end of the week.”

“That sure is a lot of words.”

“Yeah, and that’s enough for now.”

“If you hear any more words, pass them my way.”

“Don’t I always?”

“That you do. I’ll see you again.”

“Going so soon?”

“Not much left for me here. I think I’ll go to Miami and see if things are better there.”

“Be careful, mon, be careful.”

“Aren’t I always?” He didn’t wait for a response and was out the door before Alex could do more than frown.

One month later, bleeding from a gunshot wound in the thigh, hiding in the garbage surrounding a warehouse, Connor thought staying in Jamaica would have been a much better idea.

Chapter One

“Samara Murphy Editing. Can I help you?” Samara took the information from the caller, glad to have some work to keep her busy. She had just sent off her last job in the morning mail and wanted the challenge of something new. She had enjoyed her vacation at the Jamaican resort, but was glad to return to her schedule.

Shaking off the daydream with a brief sigh for what could never be, she finished her business and straightened out her desk. Grabbing her purse, Samara dug for her keys as she headed to the door. Her appointment at the hairdresser was one of the few indulgences she allowed herself. The week she had spent in Jamaica had streaked her dark blonde hair in a very satisfying way, and she wanted to touch it up with a little chemical sunshine.

Half an hour later, foil covered her head as she sat in the salon under the dryer. Her stomach churned and she felt vaguely nauseous.

“Something wrong?” the hairdresser asked.

“No, my stomach is just a little upset. I didn’t have any breakfast this morning and the smell is getting to me.”

“I believe it. You know, I don’t even smell it anymore.” The hairdresser went on and on while she rinsed out Samara’s hair, trimmed the shoulder length mass and styled the whole thing with more hair spray than Samara had ever used in her whole life. The spray made Samara’s already queasy stomach feel even worse, and she vowed to get something to eat as soon as she washed out her “new do”.

After downing a dry bagel, she felt much better and decided not to skip her afternoon karate class. Although, she probably should have because she couldn't focus to save her life.

"Earth to Sam? Hello Sam?"

"Sorry, I was in la la land. What was that again?"

David Malchow, Samara's karate instructor, repeated the next move in the form she was learning. He had to do it two more times before Samara caught on.

"Maybe we should stop for today—your mind is miles away."

"Sorry, I really am out of it. I'm tired, too. I should probably just go home and go to sleep."

"Maybe you're coming down with something. Did you drink the water when you were in Jamaica?"

"No, no water. Just wine, lots and lots of wine."

"You've been home six weeks, that would be one hell of a hangover."

"It's probably just the flu. Sometimes I hate living in New England in the winter. It's like living in a cold petri dish."

"Isn't that why you went to Jamaica in the first place? To get away from New England winters?"

"Yeah, and I should have stayed there, too." Samara refused to dwell on the memory of cobalt blue eyes staring down at her from a chiseled face, a hard body straining over her, under her, surrounding her. It wasn't just the weather that made her miss Jamaica.

"Go home and get some sleep. If you're not back to class by Thursday I'll send Macayla after you."

"Gee, Dave, you're all heart. She may be my best friend, but as my doctor she is a pain in the ass."

"Well, if you keep slacking off, she's gonna kick your ass. She's my second best pupil and she's very competitive."

“Don’t I know it? If she wasn’t so busy delivering babies she’d be here all the time and I’d become second best.”

Samara left the karate studio feeling like dog food. She was light headed, tired and still queasy. *Great, she wanted to finish her newest job early and now she was going to have to take time off to be sick.* She groused all the way home.

Owning her own business was great most of the time, but no one paid her for sick days. She liked being able to set her own schedule, and now it was all thrown off because she caught some nasty bug.

Samara sat on her bed, still grumbling to herself as she removed her shoes. A wave of dizziness overtook her as she turned her head.

“God, I *hate* being sick.”

She lay down for a second to ease the spinning in her head. “Just for a few minutes.”

She fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow, karate gi still on.



Samara woke up two hours later feeling much better. After changing out of her now wrinkled gi, she made herself an omelet for supper and started reading her newest assignment. She was only a third of the way through the grammatical nightmare when the phone rang.

“Saved by the bell. Hello?”

“Hey Sam-Sam. What’s wrong with you? Dave said you couldn’t keep a thought in your head today and that you were looking a little green around the gills.” Macayla came straight to the point.

“Tattletale. He told me he’d give me until Thursday before he’d sic you on me.”

“Well, I was curious why you weren’t in our cardio class and he snitched.”

“I think it’s just a bug, I felt better after my nap. Now I’m just disgusted by the bad writing in the manuscript I’m correcting.”

“Maybe you should go back to teaching, then you could teach people how to be better writers.”

“Why? I’m making much more money off bad writing than I ever did teaching. Besides, I like working for myself.”

“Yeah, but how are you ever going to meet Mr. Right working out of your house?”

“Like I’d meet Mr. Anybody teaching? And you’re one to talk. How are you going to meet anyone delivering babies? Last time I checked only women had babies.”

“Shut up, we weren’t talking about me. Anyway, if you don’t feel better by the end of the week, stop by the office and I’ll check you out.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Bite me.”

Samara laughed as she hung up. Macayla Sullivan was her best friend in the world, but no two women were ever more different. Macayla was five feet, three inches tall, with snapping green eyes and flaming red hair. She was a brilliant, gifted doctor and so full of energy that Samara didn’t know how her little body contained it all. She was the only other female black belt at Samara’s studio, and most of the men were afraid to take her on. Samara tended to take things at a much slower pace than her friend and was more than happy to just go with the flow instead of challenging everything head-on like Macayla.

Although she appreciated Macayla’s concern, Samara brushed her illness off as a touch of the flu and went about her routine as usual. If she sometimes found herself daydreaming about long-fingered hands bringing her over the edge again and again, well, she figured that would pass in time and pushed it to the back of her mind.

Some things just weren't meant to be. She might not be a rocket scientist, but Samara was smart enough to know what she and Connor had was a fling. A damn satisfying fling, but just a vacation romance all the same.

Sure, she still thought about him, who wouldn't? Connor was the hottest guy she'd ever seen. Besides just being good looking, he was also funny, charming, and great for her ego.

Wonderful traits for a week in paradise, but not exactly enough to carry over into a relationship in the real world. Unfortunately.

Vacation affairs weren't her style, but being with Connor was something she'd never regret.

Chapter Two

“Knock knock?”

“Sam, come on in. I’ll be finished with this paperwork in just a minute.” Macayla looked up from the pile of folders on her desk.

Samara wandered around the cluttered office, looking at pictures of the two of them, Macayla’s brother, and the many children she had delivered since she joined the practice. Macayla stuffed her papers into a folder and placed them in the “out” box.

“So, what are you here for? I have time for a quick lunch before I do rounds at the hospital, want to get some Chinese?”

The thought of Chinese food made Samara feel queasy again, the same thing she had been fighting for weeks. When she shook her head no, Macayla turned to her mini-fridge in the office.

“No huh, how about some chicken? I think I have some left from yesterday.”

When Macayla pulled out the greasy looking chicken wings, Samara’s rebellious stomach finally gave up the fight and sent her retching into the garbage can. Macayla got a wet washcloth from the exam room next door and some mints from her purse while Samara emptied her stomach.

“That’s what I wanted to see you about. I can’t shake this bug. I don’t feel sick all the time, but I’m constantly tired. I feel light headed in the morning, and I get queasy at the weirdest times. I’ve never had a bug that lasted this long.”

“How long has it been going on?” Macayla asked, all business now.

"I don't know, maybe two or three weeks. Right around the time I missed cardio class and you called to check up on me."

"Well, I have some time before rounds, change into a gown, pee in a cup, and I'll be in after I finish my lunch." Macayla laughed when Sam made another run for the garbage can.

Fifteen minutes later neither one of them were laughing.

"What do you mean pregnant? There must be some sort of mistake. Give me another test." Samara was in a panic. How could the one and only time she had ever had a fling result in pregnancy?

She, who had never slept around, who always used protection, who used protection this time as well, could not be pregnant. It was some cruel trick played on her by fate. Many of her friends slept around on a regular basis, some only using chancy protection, and they never got pregnant. How could someone as careful as she was get pregnant?

"I can give you another test, but these are pretty accurate. While we're waiting for the results from this test, why don't you fill me in on where the sperm came from to make this little line come up positive."

Macayla took another sample from the cup and dropped some of it on the test.

"Now give. I know you haven't been seeing anyone around here, you would have told me, you better have told me. Why aren't you on the pill? I've given you plenty of samples, it's not like you don't have them available."

"I haven't been taking them, there's been no need. There's no one I've been seeing even remotely intimately."

"Well, you've been intimate with *someone*, you don't get pregnant by yourself."

"We don't know that I'm pregnant for sure. Besides, I was getting to that. When I was in Jamaica I met a guy..."

“You had a fling? I don’t believe it. A vacation fling for Samara. I’d be proud of you, except why didn’t you use protection? I know you’re not that stupid.”

“I did use protection. Every time.”

“Every time? This is getting better and better. Out with the whole story.”

“I’m trying, stop interrupting. His name was Connor O’Riley, and I met him at the resort. He was charming, very, very good looking, in a dangerous sort of way, and so much fun I couldn’t help myself. We hung out on the beach, danced, drank, and one night I decided why not give in to my hormones. I’m thirty years old, and I’ve never had a one-night stand. I was very attracted to him, I had condoms, and I figured what would be the harm? I would never see him again, he has no way of getting in touch with me, or I him. Why not be irresponsible for once in my life? I guess I now know why. Are you sure those tests are accurate? They look like something you’d get at the grocery store.”

“Not as accurate as a blood test, but pretty accurate.”

“Is this one ready?”

“See for yourself.”

Samara crossed the room on shaking knees. The pink line was startlingly obvious in the white box.

“Now what?”

“When was your last period, then we’ll go from there.”

Samara answered Macayla’s questions in a daze. She was pregnant. One night of incredible sex, and she was now carrying a new life inside her. She had no idea what she was going to tell her parents. They would support her once they got over the shock of their daughter having an illegitimate child. She had no way of contacting Connor, but he should be told he was going to be a father in less than seven months time. Samara

didn't think he would be too thrilled with impending fatherhood. He didn't strike her as the family man type.

"Are you going to tell the father?"

"I'll try, but I doubt I'll be able to find him. I've been home from Jamaica for over two months, and I haven't heard a word from him. I wasn't attracted to him because I thought he would make a good father. It was his difference from every other guy I've ever dated that interested me, not his domestic qualities."

"How could you have missed two periods and not noticed?"

"Well, I got one, sort of, a couple of weeks after I got home from Jamaica. I've been so busy I hadn't noticed that I didn't get another one yet."

"You probably spotted a little when the zygote implanted in your uterus. Was it a light period?"

"Yes. I guess it wasn't really a period huh?"

"Nope, now I'll get you a prescription for some prenatal vitamins, and I have some pamphlets for you to read. See my secretary on your way out. She'll set up a real appointment for next week. In the mean time, if you feel tired, get some sleep. Eat small meals of whatever will stay down, and drink plenty of water. I'll call you later on tonight."

"Thanks, Cayla, I'm glad you were here. I may need you again when I tell my folks."

"Ewww."

Chapter Three

Dear God, how was she going to tell her parents about this? Maybe she should wait until after she had a nap? No, she'd put it off long enough. If she didn't do it now she'd just agonize over it until she made the call. Might as well get it over with now. Ugh.

Heaving a deep sigh she hit the speed dial and waited for someone to answer.

"Hi, Mom, it's me. Are you sitting down? I have something to tell you."

After twenty minutes of drama, Samara managed to keep her mother from flying up to Connecticut, reassure her that she was okay, and nix the suggestion of a quickie wedding.

Her mother may not like the idea of her first grandchild being born out of wedlock, but she was very excited about having a grandchild. Samara left her with the job of telling her father the news when he got home from his round of golf. She'd had enough traumas for one day.

With that unpleasantness out of the way, she sat down to a dinner of salad and grilled cheese. Once again, she'd forgotten to take anything out of the freezer for dinner. Better take out something for the next day while she thought of it. It was time to eat a little healthier now that she was eating for two.

As she munched on her grilled cheese, she read the newspaper. An advertisement for the travel agency that she'd used for her trip to Jamaica stared at her from the travel section. Wonder if anyone was still

in the office? They must have the number to the resort where she'd met Connor.

Should she call?

Her gaze strayed to one of the pamphlets on proper nutrition Macayla had given her. There was a picture of a man serving a hugely pregnant woman a plate of food. He had a smile on his face, and her hands rested on her bulging stomach.

Samara's hand drifted down to her still flat tummy. What would it be like to feel her child move inside her? To have Connor there to feel it, too? Would he even want to be there?

What if she called him and he blew her off? Would it be better to not even tell him and avoid the possible rejection?

What if he wanted to be part of the baby's life, though? Was it fair to exclude him because she was afraid of confrontation?

Screwing up her courage, Samara called the travel agency and got the number of the resort. She sat and looked at it for a long time. Now what? Should she call and leave a message at the front desk? Connor had said he visited the resort regularly, but how often was that? What was she going to do if he was there? Say "Hi, remember me? The easy blonde you slept with in Jamaica? Oh, by the way, I'm pregnant. Have a nice life."

Fear clutched her heart in an icy fist. She couldn't think. She needed to get out of the house, to find a way to sort all of this out.

Grabbing her keys she bolted for the door. Without planning to, she found herself in front of the karate studio. Dave was doing paperwork in the office when she walked in.

"Hey Dave, mind if I come in?"

"Hey, stranger. How are you feeling, I haven't seen you in two weeks. Did you finally get over that flu?"

"Yes and no. I never had the flu, I'm pregnant."

"Well...um...well."

“That’s what I thought too. Do you mind if I use the studio for a little while? I need to work out and do some thinking.”

“Sure go ahead. If you don’t mind my asking, what did the father have to say?”

“I haven’t told him yet. That’s what I need to think about.”

“What is there to think about?”

“It wasn’t like we were in a relationship, it was a fling. I don’t know if I should even tell him. Why should he have his life ruined because the condom broke?”

“Who are you to make that choice for him? Look, it’s your life, but if it was me, I’d want to know.”

“That’s kind of what I thought. It’s just a little easier to know what the right thing is than to actually do it. But I appreciate you giving me the guy’s point of view. Thanks.”

“No charge. Hey listen, I’m almost done here. Why don’t I lock up behind me and leave you alone for a little while.”

“That would be great.”

“No problem, just don’t over do it or Macayla will have both our heads.”

As soon as Dave left Samara alone in the dim studio she loosened up and let her body take over. She started off doing her katas and pinions then did some loose kicks on the punching bag, and finished up with her tai chi form. When she was done and her body felt like a wet noodle, her mind was calmer and more in control.

She still couldn’t believe she was pregnant. She hadn’t gone to Jamaica to meet anyone. She had just wanted to get away from the cold, dreary New England winter. She picked the resort particularly to avoid the mating rituals that went on in many Caribbean resorts. She hadn’t expected to meet anyone, especially not someone like Connor. The attraction between the two of them had been immediate.

She remembered their meeting so clearly she could have been in the resort bar instead of the dim karate studio. Samara had been flirting with the bartender when Connor walked into the bar.

“Oh no, be careful, this mon be trouble.”

“Now what kind of introduction is that?” the tall, gorgeous man had asked her. He gave her an assessing glance down the length of tan leg revealed by Samara’s sundress.

“Pretty accurate I think,” Samara answered with an assessing glance of her own. Connor was as fine a specimen of man as she had ever seen, never mind spoken too. He had jet-black hair and cobalt blue eyes that reminded her of a blue glass figurine her mother had. His body looked as hard as stone, with bunches and ripples of muscle in all the right places. Chiseled cheek bones led to a narrow nose, and a stubborn chin. He had to be over six feet because he was at least a head taller than her five feet nine inches. All in all, the best looking man Samara had ever clapped eyes on, and he was talking to her. Would wonders never cease?

“She’s pretty quick, I’ll give her that. How about a beer and whatever the smart little lady is having.”

“Ooh, little lady is it? Make mine a double.”

“A double White Zinfandel on ice coming up.” Alex laughed as he poured Connor a draft and gave Samara another drink.

“So, is this the first time you’ve been to the island?”

“Oh, that’s original. Is that the twenty-first century version of ‘Come here often?’”

“Feisty, aren’t you?”

“Persistent, aren’t you?”

“Connor O’Riley, how do you do?”

“Samara Murphy, nice to meet you.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.”

They spent the rest of Samara's vacation together, playing on the beach, having dinner and dancing. Samara had never been the object of such a serious pursuit before and found it very flattering. On her last night at the resort she decided to give in to the rousing emotions Connor sent surging through her blood stream.

Closing her eyes, Samara sat down in the studio as she remembered their one night together. Her body trembled as it recalled the way his hands had caressed her breasts and sucked on her nipples until shudders tore through her body. She visualized his chiseled face over hers in the candlelight, his intense gaze burning into her as he made love to her.

He'd been a demanding yet considerate lover, making sure she was as wild for him as he for her. She had been exhausted the next day but had never felt so fulfilled.

She had hoped she could pack away the experience to bring out during those dark and lonely moments in her life. It seemed those moments had been coming with more and more frequency of late. Now she had other things to worry about.

They hadn't exchanged phone numbers or addresses. Connor explained that he moved around a lot and had no permanent address. Samara didn't know if he was telling the truth or just trying to keep things in perspective. She decided he didn't want any strings attached so she didn't bother to give him her address either. She left him the next day with a wink and a smile instead of a kiss. She felt a little pang as the bus pulled out but was too tired from being up all night to do more than wish she could have spent the morning with him as well.

She had considered extending her stay at the resort, but decided to stick with her original departure date. She had enjoyed Connor's attention immensely, but she knew if she stayed with him any longer she wouldn't be able to leave without losing a chunk of her heart. Not one to

believe in love at first sight, she was more than ready to admit she had a serious case of attraction at first sight. In spades.

All of this daydreaming wasn't solving her problems for her. She had to admit Dave was right. If the shoe were on the other foot she would want to know. Now all she had to do was find him.

Samara let herself out of the studio and headed home. She ran through a million different ways to tell him about her condition. None of them seemed good enough. When she was showered and settled in her comfy pajamas, she eyed the phone number she had copied down earlier. She looked at the clock; it was only nine p.m. The bar would just be getting started.

It was probably a better idea to call the bar instead of the front desk. Alex was a good guy, and if anyone knew where Connor was, it would be the friendly bartender. It was now or never. She quickly dialed the number before she lost her nerve.

"Rasta Mon, this is Alex. How can I help you?"

"Um, hi, I don't know if you remember me, my name is Samara Murphy, and I was a guest of the resort a few months ago."

"Oh, how could I forget someone who put ice in their wine? Of course I remember you. How can I help you?"

"Uh, well, I was wondering if you could pass a message on to Mr. O'Riley the next time you see him."

"Miss Samara, I hate to burst your bubble, but O'Riley isn't exactly the type to keep in touch, if you know what I mean."

"Don't worry, Alex, I'm not trying to resume our relationship. I just have some information for him, um, important information."

"I'll try me best. I don't know when he'll be back. He goes five maybe six months between visits. I don't have any way of getting in touch with him any sooner. Sorry."

“That’s all right, it’ll keep. Thanks for your help.” Samara left her cell phone number with the bartender. She didn’t know how long it would take Connor to come back, and she didn’t want her home phone number bandied about a resort bar.

Samara went to bed that night thinking about all the changes taking place in her life and in her body. She didn’t look pregnant yet, if she hadn’t been sick she would have never suspected a thing. She would have just gone on her merry way, never knowing that she had a life growing inside of her. Amazing what havoc one night could reap.

Luckily her body wouldn’t let her mind keep her awake too long.

Chapter Four

Samara had more work than she could handle as dissertation season was in full swing. Usually Samara enjoyed reading the theories written by aspiring academics, but when she had three papers waiting to be corrected, she felt more harried than interested.

She didn't like to take on too many projects at once, but she wanted to build up a nest egg for when she was out of work with the baby. She also wanted to redo her guest room into a nursery. Now that she had accepted its reality she actually looked forward to preparing for the baby.

At her last doctor's appointment, she heard the heartbeat, and in a week she would have her first of two ultrasounds Macayla insisted she needed, just to be safe. She had bought some books about what to expect and was reading the pamphlets Macayla gave her as well.

Another month and she was going to need maternity clothes. She could no longer fit into her jeans, but luckily had plenty of sweat pants, and skirts with drawstrings. Looking at herself in the mirror she decided she didn't look pregnant to anybody else, but at four months, she had a definite lump in her belly. Whenever she was alone she talked to her lump and rubbed it in gentle circles. She played classical music to the baby, even though she wasn't a fan, and she tried as hard as she could to put Connor out of her mind.

It had been two months since she called the resort. Part of her wanted to call again to see if Alex had given him the number and he just didn't call, the other part didn't want to look like some desperate female.

She kept telling herself that there was nothing she could do about the father so she was just going to have to take care of herself and the baby alone.

It was depressing, but a fact of life, and there were plenty of other women in the same situation. Macayla had given her the number of a support group for single moms, but Samara hadn't called it yet.

Samara was inserting a disk for the next paper she had to edit when her computer went insane. She quickly disconnected her DSL connection and unplugged the computer before whatever virus was on the disk could spread.

"Damn. Couldn't this have happened to the last paper I had to correct?" Samara could use her laptop computer, but it wasn't nearly as fast, and she was nervous about trying the next disk in case it had the same virus as the first one. Better wait until she could get some help before risking it. She went to her address book and dialed her friend Jack Stillman, computer expert.

"What?"

"Hi Jack, it's Samara, am I bothering you?"

"No of course not babe, what's up?" Jack thought of himself as quite the catch. He was very intelligent, made a great deal of money and was still in his thirties. Samara knew he figured it was only a matter of time before she gave in and went out with him. After all, she had already turned thirty and wasn't getting any younger. She secretly thought she'd have to be much older before she was desperate enough to see Jack as anything more than a friend.

"I need your help. Someone gave me an infected disk and I don't know what it's done to my computer. My virus scan didn't pick it up so I'm afraid it's a nasty one."

"No problem. I'll be right over. Your anti-virus software probably isn't up to date."

"You could be right. I wish they would check their computers for viruses before they send me their disks. After all, if I can't edit them, they can't get them on time."

"They're probably looking for an excuse to not turn them in. I'll be over in a few."

"Thanks."

The doorbell rang less than twenty minutes later. Jack was wearing clothes that looked like they had been taken from the bottom of a clothes hamper. His hair was sticking up on end, and he had enough cologne on to bring back her nausea in full force.

"Thanks for getting here so quickly. I have two more papers to correct, and I don't want to corrupt my laptop as well."

"Leave it to me, babe, I'll have it fixed in no time."

"Great, I'll be in the kitchen." Samara fled from the overpowering fumes of cologne wafting off the computer wizard.

An hour later the virus had been found and destroyed, the disk cleaned, and her computer restored. The other two disks checked out clean so Samara could proceed without any further problems.

"What would I do without you? You're so good to come right over when I need you. How much do I owe you?"

"Don't worry about it. I don't charge friends. You can just go out to dinner with me instead."

"Oh I couldn't do that Jack. Besides, I'm going to charge the customer who gave me the bad disk, and I'm sure you don't want to go out to dinner with him." Samara tried to keep the panic from her voice. She had gone out to dinner with Jack before and almost didn't survive it. "Oh, while I have you here—"

"Yes?" he asked, hope shining in his eyes.

"Do you know anything about hacking?"

"They don't call me Jack 'the Hack' for nothing."

“Well I wouldn’t want you to do anything illegal, it’s just that I’m looking for someone I’ve lost touch with, and all I have is a name, no address, no phone, not even a state where they might be.”

“No problem, I’ll just look in the IRS files. They must pay taxes, as long as it isn’t a common name, I should be able to track it down. If it is a common name, I can narrow it down by age.”

“Really, you can do that without a social security number?”

“Just watch me. Why don’t you come over to my place tonight and I’ll look it up.”

“Oh, I have karate class tonight,” More panic. “Do you have time to do it now? I have a DSL line here so you don’t have to worry about download time.” Samara crossed her fingers. She really liked Jack, but only as a friend. She had patiently explained this to him several times, and had even tried to stop seeing him completely, but he promised her he was comfortable being just friends. She didn’t want to take advantage of his friendship, which was why she insisted on paying him for his computer services, but she didn’t want to date him either.

“If you’re not comfortable hacking into the IRS, I completely understand. In fact why don’t we just forget it, it was a bad idea anyway.” Samara lost her nerve.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I can get in and out of any system with no problem. Give me ten minutes on my laptop and then give me the name. I’ll find it for you.”

Jack went out to his car to get his own laptop. He mentioned something about firewalls and backdoors, but it was all Greek to her. Samara had the feeling he had done this before, but wisely kept her mouth shut. She had time to make a pot of coffee for him and watch him drink half of it before he gave a shout of success.

“I’m in. All right, give me the name.”

“Connor O’Riley.” Jack flinched at the name but didn’t ask any questions. Samara waited breathlessly while Jack’s computer whirred. Soon it chirped and Samara caught her breath in anticipation.

“I’m sorry Samara, there is no such person.”

“Are you sure? How accurate is this?” Samara winced at the memories that question invoked.

“It’s pretty accurate, I checked the entire record. I’m sorry. Who is he?”

“Just someone I met on my vacation. I had some news for him, nothing important.”

“Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.” He wouldn’t look her in the eye as he packed up his computer. “I’ll send you a bill so you can charge the kid who gave you the bad disk. Maybe you can join me and some of the guys for happy hour Friday.”

“Maybe. Thanks.”

Samara barely got Jack out of the house before she burst into tears. She knew that she was overly emotional now, but she couldn’t help but feel betrayed that Connor didn’t even tell her his real name. She had secretly hoped that Alex just hadn’t passed on the message. Now she hoped he never would.

Jack thought he heard a sob through the doorway, and felt a twinge of guilt. He hadn’t told Samara the entire truth. The name turned up “restricted”, but it was there. He didn’t know why this guy would have restricted clearance, but Jack had seen stranger things happen in the past. Someone was covering this guy up, and that was never good. He assuaged his guilty conscience by telling himself that if this guy fell under the restricted category he was probably bad news, and Samara was better off not getting in touch with him.

Chapter Five

Connor got off the plane in Jamaica weak as a day old kitten. It had taken almost two months to recover from his gunshot wound. He had been put on indefinite medical leave from his job, which pissed him off, but he had no choice. He'd probably better start thinking of a new profession since his cover was blown. If he had to take it easy, he might as well do it in Jamaica.

He had lasted less than a week in the hospital, then left against medical advice to recuperate at his hotel room. The food and the room service were a lot better than the hospital, and he didn't have nurses poking at him every hour. But even that got too confining after a while. There was only so long you could look at the same four walls without going crazy.

Once he was able to move without falling on his face he hopped the first plane to Jamaica. The fact that he spent most of his waking moments, and many of his sleeping ones thinking about laughing brown eyes and shining blonde hair had nothing to do with his choice of destinations.

"Hey, mon. You're still alive."

"Just barely, Alex, just barely. Pour me a tall boy of Red Stripe, I need it."

"You look a little pale, too little sun."

"It's hard to get sun in a hospital room. You were right, I am getting too old to dodge bullets. Here's to you." Connor toasted him with his

beer. After the first grateful swallow, he looked around the bar, unconsciously searching for a leggy blonde.

“So picked out your next pretty?”

“No, no one catching my eye. Have any prospects I should know about?”

“Not compared to your last visit.”

“Yeah, well, she’d be hard to compete with.” Connor didn’t want to think about how often he had been reminded of Samara. He’d thought about looking her up, but figured she was better off not knowing too much about him.

“Speaking of Miss Samara...”

“Oh, were we?”

“Well we are now. She called here about a month ago, looking for you. I told her you weren’t the type to keep in touch. She said she knew that, but she had some information to pass on. She gave me her phone number, if you want it.”

Connor resisted the urge to grab the bartender and demand the phone number. He thought about it for a few minutes before he gave in to the desire.

“Why don’t you give it to me, I might as well hear what she has to say.”

“I’m sure I have it around here somewhere, just give me a minute to find it.” Alex didn’t bother to hide his grin. “She’s probably given up on you after all this time. You don’t really need the number anyway.”

“Give it to me before I take the bar apart to get it.”

“It’s coming, mon, relax.” Alex finally surrendered the number. Connor finished his beer and was out the door in less than five minutes.

Connor dialed the number written on the bar receipt using his digital phone. He didn’t know if it was a ploy or not, but he was interested in

what she had to say. This was the first woman he'd met who'd stayed in his mind for more than a week after he'd left her.

He wished he had had more than one night with her. But, oh what a night it was. If he'd had more time with her, he probably wouldn't be so obsessed with her still.

Yeah, right.

The phone went to voice mail, but Connor didn't leave a message—he'd be damned if he'd act like a lovesick fool. He didn't make it a habit to chase after women. Although, if anyone was worth making an exception for, it was Samara.

He shook his head ruefully. One month off the streets and he was turning soft. He needed to recover fast before he became a complete sap. A good night's sleep and a good meal were part of the doctor's orders, and he was going to follow them to the letter. Samara would wait another day, even if it killed him.



Two days later Connor lay in the sun, trying to get some color on his sickly white legs, when his cell phone rang. He glanced at the display and saw that it was Jared Romero. Jared was an old military buddy who became a computer wizard. He now did contract work for legitimate, as well as some shady customers.

"Romero, long time no see. How'd you get this number? It's supposed to be secure."

"Hello to you, too. I have my sources."

"Well I'm glad you do. You're too damn hard to find so I have to wait for you to contact me. Took you long enough."

"Ha ha, aren't you a comedian. This isn't a social call."

"I didn't figure you for the reunion sort."

“Got that right. Just thought you should know, I’ve been doing some contract work for the government and there seems to be an awful lot of interest in your file recently.”

“How so?”

“Lots of deletions and additions. I took the liberty of making a copy of the original when I noticed some stuff going on.”

“Thanks.”

“There is a lot of interest in you from the computer world. In fact, the IRS was hacked into a few days ago and you were the only report tapped.”

“Did they trace it?”

“Yup.”

“Well? Stop playing games. Who’s checking my yearly income?”

“The IP address comes back to a ‘Samara Murphy’ from West Hartford Connecticut. Sound familiar?”

“Maybe.”

“Now who’s playing games?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

“Ah, I get ya. Whoever she is, she isn’t the one screwing with your government file, but someone is. Watch your back.”

“Will do, thanks for the warning.”

“No problem. Oh, when I saw it was a chick, I took the liberty of hiding the hack. Figured knowing you she probably had a good reason to be looking for you and didn’t need to go to jail for it.” Jared laughed.

“You’re all heart.” Connor snorted.

“Not bloody likely.”

So, Samara was checking up on him. That bore some thinking about. He was even more curious as to who was screwing with his file. Someone didn’t want him around—he had a bullet hole in his leg to prove that. There was a reason why a routine drug bust went so terribly bad.

As soon as Connor had his full strength back, he was going to find out what that reason was. In the meantime, he had some questions for nosy Miss Samara, and he was looking forward to getting the answers.

Chapter Six

Samara couldn't believe she had let Macayla talk her into going out. She had too much work to do to waste her time drinking ginger ale in a bar.

"Come on Sam, you can't hide inside your house like some hermit. So you're pregnant, big deal it's not like you are the first woman in the world to get pregnant without the benefit of a husband. Trust me, I'm in a position to know how many single pregnant women are out there."

"I'm not hiding. I just have a lot of work to do. I won't always have the time to get it done so I want to finish it as soon as possible. Besides, I have nothing to wear to go out in. In case you haven't noticed, I have this increased waistline to deal with now." Samara pointed to her slightly rounded tummy and non-existent waist.

"So you wear that black, stretchy, knit skirt and a sweater over it."

"It's too short to wear now."

"Nonsense, the shorter the better. Everyone will be too busy looking at your legs to notice that slight bump under your sweater. Wear the red, V-neck sweater. You have increased cleavage to go with that tummy, might as well show it off," Macayla said cheerfully.

"Gee, you're feeling helpful aren't you, what's up?"

"Nothing? Why do you think something is up?"

"Because you never dress me unless we're going to meet someone you know. Usually a man."

“Someone has to do something about you meeting a man. You’re obviously not doing anything about it yourself.”

“What happened to ‘nothing wrong with being a single mom’?”

“There isn’t anything wrong with being a single mom, just like there isn’t anything wrong with going out and meeting new people. No one said you have to date them, just get out of the house for God’s sake.”

“Fine, if it will get you to stop nagging me I’ll go.”

“That’s my girl. Put on some make-up too, you look all washed out.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Bite me.”

“You always have to get the last word in don’t you?” Samara called from the bathroom, laughing.

Macayla’s “Yup” made her laugh even harder.



Connor had the taxi drop him off a few blocks from the address he held in his hand. The spring air was a little nippy, at least compared to the balmy air he had left this morning. It had taken him less than a day to decide to follow up on what was so important to Samara that she hacked into the IRS to find him.

It had taken him considerably less time to find her than it had taken her to find him. A few phone calls and he had her phone number, address, college transcript, as well as her parents’ names and address.

A car that matched her registration was in the driveway. He knocked on the door of the little blue cape. There were bulbs popping up in the flowerbeds, gutters in need of cleaning, and a spring flag hanging off a wooden pole fastened to a shutter.

There was also nobody home.

“Hell, it’s Friday night, she’s probably out drinking some wine with ice. Probably out with some nerdy academic with glasses and a tan sport coat.”

He should find himself a hotel and call her in the morning. The last thing he wanted was to see her giving some jerk a goodnight kiss. Even though they didn’t have a relationship, the thought of her kissing some other guy made his gut clench with annoyance.

Connor waited until 9:30 before his patience ran out. He’d just walked around the side of the house to look for a way in when he saw headlights turn into driveway. He ducked back into the shadow of the breezeway and watched her step out of the car.

“Thanks for the ride home, Chad. No really, you don’t have to walk me to the door, really.” Samara had an edge of panic in her voice. The guy, Chad presumably, got out of the car anyway. “Thanks for being such a gentleman, I’d love to invite you in, but the place is a mess. Maybe some other time.” Samara dug around in her purse frantically.

Connor had a feeling this jerk was going to try something if she didn’t get inside the house soon.

She took too long.

“Don’t worry Samantha, I’ve seen dirty houses before, I won’t even notice in the dark.” He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her in for a kiss.

Connor could practically see the jerk’s teeth mash against Samara’s lips.

A fierce surge of anger flooded him. It was all he could do to hold back and not charge over there and break them up. His plans to just fade into the woodwork took an abrupt turn. He’d wait inside for Samara so they could have a little talk. And if the asshole trying to taste her tonsils made it through the doorway, well wouldn’t he be in for a shock?

How did she get herself into situations like this? Her head ached, her feet hurt, and now Chad mauled her in an attempt at seduction. This had to stop before he stuck his tongue any further into her mouth.

Samara slipped her arm between them and twisted while turning her head aside. She thought she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye, but decided it must have just been a shadow.

“Chad, I think you should leave now.”

“Hey we’re just getting started.”

“No, we’re not. You might have been, but I’m going to bed. Alone. Good night.”

“You and Macayla are both the same. Frigid ice queens.”

“There’s no need to resort to name calling just because you didn’t get lucky.”

“Screw you,” he shot over his shoulder as he stalked back to his car.

“Not even at my most desperate moment,” Samara mumbled as she finally managed the dead bolt and got through the door. She re-locked the front door and leaned her head against it.

“Never again am I going to listen to Macayla. ‘What harm can a little dance do? Why don’t you let Chad take you home, he’s an internist.’ Never again.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” came a voice from behind her.

Samara let out a yell, sunk down and swept the leg of the fool who dared sneak up behind her. She switched on the hall light and grabbed the baseball bat she kept in the umbrella stand by the door.

The bat dropped with a clank from nerveless fingers when she got a good look at who was sprawled in her foyer.

“But you don’t exist,” was the last thing Samara said as the hall got dark again and she sank to her knees in her first-ever faint.

Chapter Seven

Connor managed to catch most of Samara's weight before she smacked her head on the floor next to him. He wasn't feeling too charitable with her after witnessing her good-bye and then being dumped on his butt. He probably should have gotten her a glass of water and a wet washcloth. Instead he gently slapped her face.

"Come out of it, Sam, what kind of fighter faints after she takes somebody down?"

"Huh? What? What are you doing in my house? How did you find me? Why haven't you called? How can you be here, you don't exist."

"Don't tell me that, you just dropped me on my non-existent butt."

"What? Oh well, you shouldn't have surprised me. How did you get into the house?"

"I'll keep that in mind. I found your spare key on the breezeway and used it. You should find a better hiding place than under the mat. Everyone knows to look there. And besides, I did call you. Don't you ever answer your cell phone?"

"I left it in my car and the battery died. I keep forgetting to recharge it." She took a deep breath and appeared to pull herself together. "Listen, I need to change. I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere. I need to talk to you. Just make yourself at home for a few minutes, okay?"

"Sure. How about getting off my lap." A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. He hadn't realized how much he had missed her wiseass comments. Watching the knit skirt tighten across her behind made him

think about other things he missed too. He had a great view of her long legs as she fled up the stairs.

Connor waited until he heard the door slam upstairs before he stood gingerly. His leg didn't hurt half as much as he thought it would after landing on the hard wood floor. What did she mean "you don't exist"? He'd have to remember to ask her about that later.

Meanwhile, he wanted to get a good look at the place Samara called home. He walked around the living room and peeked into the office adjoining it. He looked at her sophisticated computer set up and figured she probably needed it for her business.

He wandered into the kitchen, noticing the herb pots on the windowsill as well as the clutter that made a house a home. He looked at her calendar on the counter and noticed doctor appointments in red. She was taking some sort of medication as well.

Connor knew he was snooping, but he didn't care. She started it so he figured he was justified. He picked up her calendar off the counter to see if she had any other dates since they had been apart, and noticed more doctors' appointments, as well as an ultrasound.

Was something wrong with her? Is that why she wanted to talk to him? He tried to figure out why she would need an ultrasound, a kidney stone maybe? Did they use ultrasounds for kidney stones? Hell, he didn't know. He tried to think of any ailments that used an ultrasound for diagnoses. As he paced, a handful of pamphlets fell to the floor. He picked them up and felt his jaw drop as he read the titles: "Working while Pregnant", "Is Breastfeeding for You?", "Proper Nutrition for You and Your Baby."

"When I said make yourself at home, I meant sit down on the couch and turn on the TV, not snoop through my private life."

"What does this mean?" Connor asked, holding up the pamphlets.

"I'm pregnant."

“And?”

“And? And what? I tell you you’re going to be a father and all you can say is ‘And?’”

“How do I know I’m the father? You were getting pretty hot and heavy with jock boy out there. Who else have you locked those long legs of yours around?” Connor asked, shock and fury warring in his head.

Samara flinched as if she had been slapped.

“Just because I had sex with you must mean I spread my legs for any man, is that what you think? You know, I thought you had played me for a fool, but that was better than accusing me of being a whore. If that’s what you think, there’s the door, don’t let it hit you on the way out. I had planned on raising this baby by myself anyway. I don’t need you, so if you want to think this baby is somebody else’s that’s just peachy.”

Samara ran out of the kitchen and up the stairs without giving him a chance to answer her tirade. Connor heard her heartwrenching sobs coming from what must be her room. A slice of guilt slipped through the shock and anger churning in his gut.

He considered going up and explaining himself but thought better of it. He needed a chance to think about this new twist in his life, and she probably needed a chance to calm down.

He’d buy some flowers and stop by in the morning. Right now he needed a drink, a hotel room and an outlet for the anxiety he was feeling. He had to get out of the house—those sobs were killing him.

Connor ran for the door and scooped up his duffle bag along the way. He should probably call a taxi but didn’t bother to dig out his cell phone. A nice long walk to the nearest hotel would help him wrap his head around the bombshell Samara had dropped on him.

Good God, a father—he was not expecting that at all.

What the hell did he know about being a father? His father hadn’t been anything to brag about, but he was probably a better one than

Connor could ever be. What kind of father went for weeks at a time working undercover with the dregs of humanity? Hell, Connor didn't even know if he had a job to go back to after the disaster that got him shot up.

One thing was for sure, whether he wanted it or not, Samara was having a baby and he wasn't ready to let her out of his life just yet.

Chapter Eight

The sound of the phone ringing woke Samara up. She hit her alarm clock a few times before she realized it was the phone. She'd fallen asleep sprawled sideways on the bed still in her clothes.

"lo?"

"What the hell happened with you and Chad? He came back looking pissed as hell and shot me a look that would have split me in two if I was the type."

"He tried to make a move on me. I wasn't receptive. He didn't take no very well. Said I was like you, a frigid bitch."

"I was afraid of that. I thought he was just a caveman with me because I'm so much smaller than he is. Some guys are like that. Oh well, he's nothing to cry about, so why are you crying?"

"How do you know I'm crying?"

"Duh. Because I've listened to you cry more than any other person besides your mother. What gives?"

"Connor was here tonight."

"Connor-the-dad Connor?"

"One in the same. He looked pretty good for someone who doesn't exist."

"How good?"

"Not that good. He asked if the baby was his."

“Bastard. Did you tell him that he was only the second man you had ever slept with? And really, the first one was such a dud, he didn’t really count.”

Samara mumbled something incoherent.

“You didn’t, did you? You just let him think that you were this wild and carefree woman who slept around on vacation on a regular basis,” Macayla accused.

“It shouldn't matter how many people I've slept with. Maybe he thinks I have no morals because I slept with him within a week. How was I supposed to tell him that I have never done that before? Why would he believe me after the way I acted in Jamaica?”

“There was nothing wrong with the way you acted in Jamaica. You have nothing to feel guilty about. You didn't sleep with him on the first date.”

“I know, it’s just that...”

“What is the problem with men? If you don’t go to bed with them then they think you’re frigid and if you do go to bed with them, then you must sleep around.” Macayla was on a roll now. “This is why I treat women. Men are just too complicated.”

“Yeah well, I’m thinking I’ll just stay a hermit. I was doing pretty well all on my own.”

“Ouch.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m just feeling sorry for myself. Listen, I’m going to get into my pajamas and go back to bed. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Not tomorrow, I’m on call tomorrow. I’ll call you Sunday or Monday depending on how busy I am.”

“K, good night.”

Samara washed her face, cleaning off the tear-streaked make-up. She took off the stretch pants she had put on when she had changed for

Connor. The elastic squeezed her uncomfortably. She put on her favorite football jersey and brushed her teeth.

As she shut off the light in the bathroom she heard something bump downstairs. What now? It was probably Connor coming back to argue with her some more.

She put on her robe and went down to check out the noise. “What? Can’t you understand ‘Get Out?’” Samara shouted, turning on the light. She didn’t know who was more startled, her or the man in the ski mask coming out of her office. They both froze, staring at each other for a minute until he took a step towards her.

She was too far away from the phone or the baseball bat, but she still had her training. Luckily it kicked in while her mind adjusted to the fact that the man in her living room was not Connor. As the intruder picked up speed, Samara got on the balls of her feet and held her hands up at a guard.

He ran at her with arms outstretched, Samara ducked under his arms, slammed a knee into his stomach and an elbow into his spine. He let out a yelp and continued for the door. Samara watched him run even as she dialed 911. She looked to see what direction he was headed, and if he had a car, but his black clothes blended in with the shadows.



Connor jogged into Hartford on his sore leg. He was limping by the time he reached a hotel. That suited him fine. He figured he deserved the pain for what he’d said to Samara. He’d rent a car when he got his clothes out of the locker at the airport tomorrow. Right now he just wanted a drink, and the hotel boasted a sports bar not twenty yards away.

Connor nursed a beer at the bar. The sweat had dried to his back and he felt in desperate need of a shower. Since he didn't want to put his dirty clothes back on a clean body he suffered with the itch. He probably didn't smell like roses, but he wasn't exactly in the mood for company anyway. Maybe the smell would keep people from sitting too close to him.

"Riley, no, O'Riley isn't it?" A middle age man in a badly fitting sport coat and slacks came over to him with his hand outstretched.

"Yeah, it's O'Riley."

"Hey, I thought that was you. You probably don't remember me, Howard, Detective John Howard, West Hartford police."

"Oh, sorry, yes I remember you, Howard. You weren't a detective when I was here a few years ago." Connor shook his hand.

"No, that bust put me on the list for a promotion. So, what are you doing in this neck of the woods, if I can ask?"

"I'm not here on business. I'm visiting someone." Connor noticed the look of relief on the detective's face. The guy had probably only recently gotten his promotion and was still insecure about it. Probably worried there was something in the works that he didn't know about.

"Well in that case, let me buy you a drink. Pete here makes a good stiff gin and tonic."

"Thanks, but I'm doing all right with my beer. I don't want to keep you if you're having a drink after work."

"No, I'm having coffee. One of the dispatchers is having a baby, so we're all helping her celebrate soberly. Why don't you join us? There are a few of the guys that worked on that case here tonight."

"Thanks again, but I'll pass. I'm not feeling very sociable."

"Suit yourself, if you change your mind we're over in the corner."

Detective Howard had partially turned when the radio on his belt started squawking. Connor tuned in out of habit, and then when he heard the address, he tuned in for real.

“Howard, you feel like taking a ride?” Connor asked, slapping some bills on the bar.

“I’m not on duty.”

“Then how about giving me a ride, that’s my...” Connor didn’t know what Samara was, but he wanted to know why the police were going to her house. If that creep Chad came back for another go around, he’d have more to worry about than just the police.

“Never mind, just drop me off there.”

“Sure thing.” Curiosity burned in Detective Howard’s eyes.

Samara was talking to the police when Connor got to the house. Lights were on in every room, and other police officers dusted for fingerprints.

Detective Howard hailed another officer in the room and introduced Connor as a colleague. Connor shook hands absently and walked to Samara. She looked like a little girl in her flannel robe and squeaky-clean face. She had her hair pulled back into a ponytail and was holding a glass of milk.

“What are you doing here?” She didn’t exactly look thrilled to see him.

“I was in the neighborhood, what happened?”

“It was nothing. Really.”

“Ms. Murphy, I doubt we’ll be able to catch this guy without a better description. He could be hiding at the police station and we’d never find him. Just consider yourself lucky that he didn’t steal anything and you weren’t hurt. We would really rather have you call us before you confront a burglar than after. The safest thing to do is call us from your room.”

“Yes officer, I’m sorry, I won’t do it again, I promise.” Loud enough for Connor to hear she mumbled, “Next time I’ll cower in a corner for fifteen minutes before I call so I can be sure he’ll have time to steal everything of value.”

Connor shot her a look but didn't say anything while she answered the questions the police asked. They said they'd keep in touch and let her know if anything turned up.

After what seemed like hours they finally left. Samara wrapped the robe tighter around her waist.

"What are you doing back here? I think you made your position quite clear earlier this evening."

"Look, I'm sorry." Connor ran his hand through his hair. "You took me by surprise. I didn't react very well, I apologize."

She stared him down for a minute before her shoulders lost some of their tension. "I didn't exactly present it very well either. I'm sorry I jumped down your throat. You are the father. There's been no one else, for a very long time."

"I know. I knew that even as I said the words. I was annoyed before you even walked in the door. I had been waiting for you to come home for at least half an hour and when I saw you kissing that jerk, well, I didn't like it."

"That makes two of us."

"I'm sorry I acted like an ass. I can't say it won't happen again, but I'll do my best to think before I open my mouth."

"Forgiven. I'll try not to drop you on your ass again without good cause."

Connor chuckled to himself and slid a little closer to her. "What happened here tonight? I couldn't get much information out of the cops I spoke to."

"Someone tried to break in. How did you know the cops were here?"

"I worked with the West Hartford P.D. on a case a few years ago. I was with one of them when your call went out over the scanner. I begged a ride from one of the guys when I heard your address. I thought maybe jock-face came back for another try."

“You’re a cop?”

“No, I’m with the Drug Enforcement Agency, or at least I was.”

“Was?”

“I got hurt, otherwise I would have looked you up sooner.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“You didn’t strike me as the law enforcement type.”

“Yeah, well you didn’t strike me as the violent type. Those were some pretty slick moves you laid on me. Did I hear right that you took care of your intruder as well?”

“Not really, I let him get away. I wasn’t in the mood for a prolonged wrestling match.”

“Good thing. I wouldn’t want either one of you to get hurt.”

“Oh, um, thanks.”

“Listen, I’m going to camp out on your couch tonight. That guy is probably long gone by now, but I don’t want to take any chances. Why don’t you go to bed and we’ll have a long talk in the morning.”

“You don’t have to stay, really. I’m fine. He didn’t steal anything, and I wasn’t hurt at all.”

“Then take pity on me, I don’t feel like walking all the way back to the hotel.”

“Oh, I could give you a ride...”

“Sam, go to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“At least let me get you some blankets and a pillow.”

Samara scurried around getting the bedding for Connor. She was nervous and didn’t know why. For heaven’s sake, she had already slept with him; she had nothing to be nervous about.

But she was. After getting Connor settled, Samara brushed her teeth and tucked herself in to bed yet again. Once in bed she lay there staring

at the ceiling. Every time she closed her eyes she could see the ski mask coming at her, only in her mind it got bigger and bigger. She sat up in bed and almost turned on the light, but stopped herself before she clicked the switch.

Damn, she forgot Connor was downstairs. She didn't want him to think she couldn't handle this; she was a grown woman after all.

That's all I need, Connor thinking I want to hop back in bed with him. The damsel in distress is one of the oldest tricks in the book.

Maybe if she waited a few more minutes he would be asleep and she could get another glass of milk. Thinking about milk made her bladder remember the glass she'd had earlier that night, and she couldn't hold it any longer. As quietly as she could, she tiptoed to the bathroom and closed the door.

When she was finished, she washed her hands and crept downstairs. She peeked through the banister to see if Connor was asleep. He lay motionless on the couch so she felt safe easing to the kitchen.

"Couldn't sleep huh?" Connor asked from the shadows of the living room.

Samara let out another yelp and spun around so fast her robe flared out behind her.

"Are you trying to stop my heart? If I don't drop dead from the events of this night, nothing will kill me. And no, for your information, I just wanted a glass of milk."

"Here, sit down on the couch and I'll get it for you."

"Don't be ridiculous, go back to sleep. I'm already up, I can get it."

"Humor me. I feel the burning need to make up for being such an ass earlier today. Let me grovel a bit, okay?"

"Fine," she said in a faint voice. Connor wore nothing but his jeans, which left his torso gloriously bare. Samara couldn't stop staring at his chest. She had forgotten what he looked like without clothes. Though

how one could forget “god-like” was beyond her. He was a little thinner than she remembered, but no less sexy.

His shoulders were so broad, she could see the muscles bunch and ripple as he pushed himself off the couch. His chest was well defined, as were the muscles in his stomach. The covering of dark hair across his chest tapered off to a thin trail going down to those beautiful abs. Samara remembered quite vividly where that trail lead. She was still standing in the center of the room when he returned with the milk.

“Would you like it warmed up?”

“Ugh, no. I don’t like milk that much anyway, but I’m trying to do the right thing.”

“I suppose that White Zinfandel probably isn’t good for the baby.”

Samara’s shoulders tensed at the mention of the baby. Was he still mad? Did he want to talk about it now? What was he thinking?

“Come on, sit down. I won’t bite.”

Samara blushed at the memory of him doing exactly that. She ducked her head and sat at the end of the couch.

Connor was attuned to every nuance of Samara’s behavior. He’d been afraid that she might be suffering from delayed shock, but she didn’t appear to be upset. Instead, she seemed...uncomfortable. It couldn’t be because she only wore a thin robe, could it? Obviously, yes. She was clearly nervous about their state of undress. She kept fiddling with the belt to her robe and clutched the garment to her chest like a talisman.

Connor wanted to pull her into his arms and touch her everywhere he could reach, but her body language confused him.

Finally, he couldn’t take her discomfort any longer. “Okay, what’s wrong?”

“Wrong? Nothing’s wrong.” She carefully placed her untouched milk on the end table.

“You’re pregnant, I made you that way. Why are you nervous about me sleeping on your couch?”

“Because everything is different now.” Her hands fluttered along the lapels of her robe.

“I’ll admit I wasn’t expecting to become a father, but I’m not necessarily against the idea. Give me some time to come around.”

“It’s not that, exactly.” Samara begged him with her eyes to understand. “When I was in Jamaica, no one knew the real me. I could behave in a way I never would have here. I have never, in all my thirty years, ever slept with someone I’ve only known for a week. I’ve never slept with someone I’ve only known for a month. I’m not even the type to jump from one relationship to another. I go months in between relationships, not days. I felt safe doing what I did with you because I thought no one would ever know, no one would be hurt, and I could try a walk on the wild side with no harm, no foul.”

“So that’s all I was to you, a ‘walk on the wild side’? A fling?”

“What was I to you? As I recall the attitude was reciprocal.”

“All right, I guess you’re right. Neither one of us had much more than that week on our mind, but it was...special,” he ended lamely.

“I agree. It’s just, I wasn’t expecting to see you again, and now I don’t know how to act. I’m not the same person you met in Jamaica. I don’t go dancing, I rarely drink, I even more rarely go out at all. My friend Macayla calls me a hermit.”

“I’m not the same person I was in Jamaica either.”

“Just exactly who are you? I mean your real name?”

“Connor William O’Riley.”

“Don’t lie to me. I know for a fact that Connor O’Riley doesn’t exist. I had a friend search for you when I found out I was pregnant. He even checked the IRS, and you don’t show up on their records.”

"I swear to you, I am Connor O'Riley. I've gone by other names for work, but that is the name my mother gave me. There's some weird shit going on with my files right now, but I wouldn't lie to you. Why would I give you a fake name and then show up at your house?"

"I was wondering that very same thing this evening. It's just I don't know you, the real you."

"We both have some adjusting to do. Even more than if we were just getting reacquainted. Now we have the baby to think about. Do you think we should get married?" Connor didn't think about what made that pop out of his mouth, but, once it was out, it didn't seem like such a terrible idea.

"No."

"No?"

"No. I know you mean well, Connor, and I may be doing the stupidest thing in my life, but I am not going to get married just because I'm pregnant. I don't know you well enough to tie myself to you for the rest of our lives."

"All you need to know is this." Connor gave in to the urge to pull her into his arms. He grabbed the back of her head gently and drew her face toward his. Their lips met and he captured her gasp of surprise.

Connor had been thinking about this since Alex told him of her message. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or annoyed by her refusal of marriage, all he knew was she affected him like no other woman he'd ever met.

Samara gasped at the first touch of Connor's lips. He took advantage of her surprise and dipped his tongue inside for a taste of her honeyed mouth. Her fingers inched their way across his chest and a trail of fire burned in their wake.

Connor spread the lapels of Samara's robe and gently cupped her breast through the cotton of her pajamas. He noticed the difference in

their shape and weight almost immediately. He wanted to explore them with his hands, his mouth, his eyes. He couldn't get enough of her. Slowly, he slipped his hands under the jersey and skimmed his fingers up her ribcage.

Samara moaned as his hands moved over her bare skin. She rubbed her hands down his muscular thighs, kneading them with her fingers. Connor was so preoccupied with reacquainting himself with her satin skin he flinched in painful surprise when she gripped the bruise on his leg.

"What is it? Is something wrong? Did I hurt you when I swept your leg earlier?"

"It's nothing, just a bullet wound. This is more important." Connor mumbled, his lips pressed against her neck. He ran kisses from her collarbone to her earlobe. Samara shivered, but wasn't distracted enough and put a halt to Connor's wandering hands.

"Connor, stop. What do you mean 'a bullet wound'?"

Connor sat back and ran a frustrated hand through his hair. He hadn't misremembered the reaction his body had to her. His blood boiled in his veins, and she wanted to talk about his thigh? He barely even remembered he had a leg—he was concentrating on something a little to the right of his thigh.

"After you left Jamaica, I got a tip that there was a major shipment of drugs being smuggled into Miami. I left for Miami and blended in with my contacts down there. When I felt around, I realized that my department was doing nothing about the shipment. I mean, everyone knew about this deal, there was so much cocaine being spread around. Even the lowest junkie knew what was going on, there was no way my department head could miss this. I dug a little deeper and found out when the deal was going to take place. I asked my boss if I could be part of the bust, he agreed."

Connor didn't go into how he had gotten his department head to agree, but she didn't need to know everything. "I went to the exchange site, and had my back-up waiting. Only when I got on the scene, there were more gang members than I had expected, and my back-up got delayed. I took a bullet in the thigh while diving behind a dumpster. I was lucky, it didn't hit my femoral artery or I would have died. As it was I lost a lot of blood and was in the hospital for longer than I care to remember."

"Oh, is that all? You make it sound like a bad case of the flu."

"It wasn't as bad as it could have been," Her concern, couched in her typical sarcastic remarks, made him smile. He leaned back into the corner of the couch and pulled her close, her back pressed to his chest.

"Tell me about the baby. I don't even know when you're due. Do you know what we're having?"

Connor spread her robe open and laid his hands gently on her growing stomach. She wasn't very big. He hadn't even noticed she was pregnant when he had first seen her. If he hadn't seen her naked in Jamaica, he might not notice the difference now. He did notice her legs looked just as long and smooth as he remembered, Pushing that lustful thought aside, he concentrated on feeling the roundness of his baby inside of her.

"Spike is due October twelfth, and no, I didn't want to find out what I'm having. I had an ultrasound, but I didn't want them to look. The ultrasound was too early to see anything anyway, but I made sure they didn't even guess. I want it to be a surprise."

"It sure surprised me. Will you have another ultrasound? I'd like to be there if I'm still around."

"I'll have another ultrasound in a few weeks. The first one is just to establish the due date and make sure the baby has a heartbeat. The second one is the good one, and I'd love to have you there for it."

Connor continued to hold her, enjoying the feel of her weight against him. She was a little stiff at first, but then seemed to relax. He let out the pent up breath he'd been holding. He wanted to feel her stomach and the changes that were happening to her body, but he didn't want to push her too hard after everything she'd been through today. The differences in her physical appearance were small, but so significant. He wanted to explore every pore of her body and feel what his baby was doing to her.

His baby. Man.

"It surprised me, too, you know. I thought I had a bad case of the flu."

"Because of morning sickness?"

"That and I was tired and kept forgetting things."

"Do you still get sick?"

"Not really. Only once in a while, if I eat too much or not enough. It was pretty bad in the beginning. I only recently started gaining weight."

"Is that okay, I mean for the baby?"

"Yeah, Macayla says it's normal. I'll catch up over the next few months and be big as a house before too long."

"The same Macayla who you'll never listen too again?"

"One in the same. She's my best friend, and my doctor. She's been with me through the whole thing. I was going to have her as my Lamaze partner, but I didn't know how she was going to do that and deliver the baby at the same time."

He thought she might ask him to be her partner, but she didn't say anything else. Connor didn't know if that was a good thing or not. Maybe it was still too early for her to make decisions like that? Right now the important thing was to get her to rest and take care of herself.

Connor continued to rub Samara's stomach until he felt her fall asleep. It was hard to believe that he'd never seen her sleep before. Here

he was, holding her for the first time in something other than passion, and she was carrying his child.

It amazed him that one night could start a whole new life. He knew guys who tried for months to get their wives pregnant, and here was Connor one night with a beautiful woman, using protection even, and he was going to be a father.

He watched her sleeping face, marveling at the creamy skin, the long eyelashes lying against her high cheekbones. Her delicate, pink lips were pouty in sleep. She curled trustingly up against him, and he felt his groin flare back into life.

Her robe slid away with his gentle prodding, and he took a longer look at her exposed legs. She was wearing tiny little black panties under her dumpy football jersey.

Slowly, he pulled her jersey up so he could see all of her tummy. He rubbed the taut skin around and around. Almost of their own volition his hands pushed the shirt higher, until her breasts were exposed to his hungry gaze. He promised himself he would just look. She had one hell of a day and needed her sleep. He didn't want to wake her up, he just wanted to explore the changes in her body more closely.

He wouldn't touch her breasts, just look. Maybe just one touch, to see if they were as full and heavy as they looked. Her nipples had darkened and grown, making his mouth water to taste them. He had remembered her breasts as fitting nicely in his hand, just enough to knead, a healthy handful.

Now when he held them in his hands, they overflowed his palms. She arched her back in her sleep and thrust her breasts more firmly into his hands. Connor took that as an invitation and stroked them to his heart's content.

It was killing him not to pull her beneath him. He had dreamed about her those many weeks he was recovering. Every detail of their night together was etched in his mind in intimate detail.

The reality was so much more than what his memory had given credit to.

Watching in rapt fascination, he continued to stroke her, up her ribcage, under her breasts and across her nipples. He slid his hand down her hip and across her thigh, and she moaned in her sleep.

His heart raced as his hand drifted over the black excuse of panties and across her other thigh. His hands trembled and sweat beaded on his brow. He knew he was torturing himself, but he couldn't stop.

Moving in slow increments, he inched his fingers under the waistband of her panties. She was so hot and moist he groaned out loud. He slid one finger inside her swollen sheath and had to grit his teeth to keep back another groan as her inner muscles gripped his finger like a fist. He used his thumb to rub the tiny nub of her pleasure and thanked God when she came almost immediately. The muscle spasm of her orgasm triggered one of his own, and he was doubly glad she was sleeping.

Connor's breathing rasped in his ears as his lungs pumped oxygen to his lust-crazed body. What the hell was wrong with him? Never in his life had he lost control like this and been unable to keep his hands off a woman while she slept. He may have started something a time or two, but he made sure the woman was awake and willing before it got to this point.

What was it about this woman that got to him so badly?

Christ, he wasn't sure he was ready to find out. Connor eased her jersey back down, closed her robe and tied it tightly for his own sanity. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Nine

Samara woke with a crick in her neck, and realized it was from sleeping on the couch. The memories of last night flashed back to her in a rush, including the kiss she and Connor shared.

Especially the kiss she and Connor shared.

She blushed hotly when she thought about the dream she had, with Connor in the starring role. One of her pregnancy books warned her about vivid dreams—boy, it hadn't lied.

She didn't remember falling asleep. God, she hoped Connor hadn't been in mid-sentence when she dropped off on him. Being pregnant made her bone tired. Once, she fell asleep at her desk in the middle of a paper. Not unusual in and of itself, but this paper had been really interesting. But she would have to be almost dead to ignore Connor.

Samara got up, used the bathroom and headed into the kitchen. She listened, but didn't hear Connor moving about the house. Maybe he moved into her bed since she took over the couch? Putting on a pot of coffee, she tried to think of something more interesting than cereal to make for breakfast. She had some onions and peppers chopped already in the freezer, and she had plenty of eggs and cheese. Hmm, maybe a veggie omelet?

She'd have to see what Connor was in the mood for. When they were at the resort he had eaten plenty of whatever was available, but so had Samara. Now back in her normal routine, she rarely ate a big breakfast.

She was debating whether or not she should start scrambling eggs when Connor came in the front door.

“Oh. Hi. Where’ve you been?” Samara asked, feeling awkward in her robe in the broad light of day.

“I wanted to check out the area around the house, to try and find where your visitor broke in. See if I could find any footprints.”

“Oh, the police did that last night, they didn’t really find anything useful. He jimmed open the office window to get in.”

“Yeah, I saw that. Do you think you could give me a ride to the airport? I left my bag in a locker there. I wasn’t sure how long I’d be staying, and I didn’t want to haul it around if I didn’t have to.”

“Sure. No problem, I’ll run you out there today to pick it up. I’m only about fifteen minutes away if we don’t hit traffic.”

“Great. Are you making breakfast?”

“I was thinking about it. Would you like an omelet or scrambled eggs and toast? Sorry, I don’t have any bacon to go with it. Coffee should be done soon, and there’s juice in the fridge.”

“An omelet sounds great if it’s not too much trouble. Do I have time to take a quick shower?”

“Yup and if you need one, there’s a spare toothbrush in the medicine cabinet as well.”

“You’re a goddess.”

“I know. Now hurry up, I’m starving.”

Connor patted her behind before he hightailed it out of the kitchen.

When Samara heard the shower shut off, she went to the bottom of the stairs and shouted up to Connor, “I have some boxer shorts in the bottom, right hand drawer of the dresser in my room. See if any of them fit you.”

“Thanks,” he shouted back down.

Wonder how he was going to like wearing her Scotty dog boxer shorts?

“Umm, smells good, I’m not used home cooking.” Connor slid up behind Samara and rubbed his nose in her hair.

“I didn’t know I had eggs in my hair.” Samara’s breath hitched in her chest. His presence so close behind her made her blood rush through her system and her knees weak.

“I borrowed your razor, too. I put a fresh blade on after I finished. This beard of mine is deadly on razor blades.”

“Gee, when you make yourself at home you take no prisoners huh? My clothes, my toothbrush, my razor, my pajamas, even my bed.”

“Hey, don’t make me out to be a complete villain. I didn’t take your bed.”

“Oh, where did you sleep after I took over the couch? I took the guest bed down last week so I could re-do the room.”

“I slept on the couch with you. You make a nice handful.” He gave her the sexiest grin she’d ever seen.

Something about that grin made her heart pound and her hands shake. Men like Connor should be locked in a glass case with a sign that said, “Break glass in case of emergency.” He was far too sexy to be let loose on the female population.

Samara gave him his omelet with trembling fingers. It felt so weird to have him at her kitchen table, eating a breakfast she’d made for him. They fought over the sports section companionably, like they’d been sharing meals together for years instead of for one brief week. Samara loved seeing his eyes light up when he laughed, and tried not to think about how *right* this felt.

“Let me take a shower and I’ll take you to the airport. Did you need to do anything else while we’re out?”

"I don't think so. I may need to do some shopping if I stay in Connecticut any length of time, but I should be fine for a while. If you don't mind, you could drop me off at the hotel in Hartford on the way back from the airport."

"Don't be ridiculous. You can stay here. Why stay in a hotel when I have the house to myself?"

"Sam, I live in hotels. I don't mind, besides, I don't want to put you out."

"Don't be an idiot. You'll have to stay on the couch for a while until I change my office into the guest bedroom, but there is no reason to waste money on a hotel when there is plenty of room here."

"Sam, I don't know if that is such a good idea..."

"Why?"

"Because I want you so badly I can barely keep my hands off you now, after one day. I don't know if I could be in your company day in and day out and not attack you." Connor stared at her with such hot eyes Samara felt weak at the knees again.

"Oh. I see. Don't you think we can work around that? I mean, we're both adults, not rutting teen-agers who don't know any better." At least normally. "Besides, we agreed we'd try to get better acquainted. It'll be hard to do that with you staying in a hotel. I'm sure we can work out that, uh, little detail."

"You call this a 'little detail'?" Connor pointed to his erection. With her mouth gone dry, she fled the kitchen for the safety of her room.

Maybe living in close quarters wasn't the best idea after all.



Samara drove her little Toyota to the airport and waited while Connor got his luggage out of a locker. He came out with his duffle bag and

climbed back into the tiny roller skate she called a car. “Is that all you brought with you?”

“I travel lightly. When I’m working, I wear pretty scummy clothes. I don’t have a huge wardrobe.”

Connor clutched the armrest in a white-knuckled grip as Samara weaved in and out of traffic on the way to his hotel. Christ, the woman drove like a maniac.

His knees shook as he hopped out of the car in the hotel driveway.

“I’ll be right back. I just need to check out.”

“I’ll find a parking place and wait for you.”

“I should only be a few minutes.” It pissed him off to have to pay for a hotel room when he didn’t sleep in it, but he was the idiot who checked in last night.”

His eyes followed her through the lobby window as he waited for the clerk to process his credit card.

“Mr. O’Riley, I’m afraid there’s a problem with this card. It’s being denied.”

“Denied? That doesn’t seem right. I never have a balance on that card.” Connor tugged his debit card out of his wallet and passed it over.

What the hell was up with that? Something weird was going on. He’d have to have Romero look into it. This could have something to do with the assholes who were messing with his permanent record

He signed for the room and saved the receipt. As he strode through the parking lot to Samara’s car, the nagging feeling of something wrong wouldn’t leave him.

“Something wrong?”

“No, not really, just my credit card was denied, so I had to use my debit card. I have money in the account to cover it, but my card shouldn’t have been denied. It’s very odd.”

“Could the card have expired and you didn’t get your new one because you were in the hospital? That’s happened to me before.”

“Maybe. I’ll get in touch with someone on Monday.” Connor would get in touch with Jared long before Monday.

“Good thing you’re staying with me after all.”

“Yeah, good thing. Damn, I was going to rent a car, but I suppose that’s out of the question now. I’m not emptying my bank account when I don’t know if I have a job to go back to.”

“You can borrow my car. I work at home so I don’t use it that much. Just for shopping and going to the doctor. I don’t see why I couldn’t schedule my errands around your schedule.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“Hey, don’t pick on my baby. She may not be a Corvette, but she gets me from here to there with a minimum of fuss.”

“If you say so.”

“Just for that, I’m going to make you come with me to the mall instead of dropping you off at home.”

“The mall?” Connor hated the mall with a passion. All those soccer moms with strollers, pushing screaming kids from store to store while teenagers with attitudes ran around the place. Just thought of it gave him hives.

“Yup.” An evil little grin lit up her face.

“What do you need there?”

“Maternity clothes.” She laughed mischievously when Connor let out a groan of dismay.



“I’m outta here,” Connor said with near panic as Samara headed into the Motherhood store.

“Coward.”

“Absolutely. I need to pick up a few things. I’ll meet you back here later.”

Samara couldn’t help but admire his world-class buns as he fled towards the nearest sporting goods store. Being this close to him made her hormones sing.

Hell, he made them sing, dance and turn back flips. That man turned her on like nobody’s business.

She heaved a lustful sigh as she headed into the maternity store. She desperately needed clothes that didn’t squeeze her like Great-Aunt Sally’s girdle.

After half an hour of searching, she found a few pairs of pants and several shirts that weren’t too unflattering. She even managed to find a maternity bathing suit, Although she couldn’t imagine fitting into it, even when she tried it on with the fake tummy the salesperson gave her.

She had picked out a few nursing bras and was looking at the maternity underwear when Connor met her back at the store. He had a few bags from the sporting goods store, and what looked like a suit bag from a popular men’s wear store.

“Have any luck?”

“Yes. Although, I’m still trying to decide if I really need these monstrosities.”

“For what? Sailing?”

“Funny, real funny.” Samara put the underwear back and brought her purchases to the counter.

“Are you ready to go?” she asked after she’d shelled out a fortune for her new clothes.

“Honey, I was ready to go the minute we pulled into the lot.”

When they got back to the house Samara modeled her future wardrobe with the aid of a throw pillow. Connor burst out in gales of laughter when he saw her maternity bathing suit.

“That’s a little different from the bikini you wore in Jamaica. Why don’t you just wear your bikini and let your stomach hang out instead of trying to cover it up with all that material.” Connor’s blue eyes danced with mirth, and Samara was reminded of the sun shining through her mother’s blue glass figurines.

“Because my stomach isn’t the only thing getting bigger. My boobs would fall right out of the top of my bikini.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Connor asked, eyeing her still slender form in the huge bathing suit.

Samara’s usual wit deserted her as his gaze scorched her frame. She didn’t know what to say to break his sensual spell, so she took the pillow out from under the bathing suit and hit him over the head with it.

“Hey, it was a compliment!” Connor ducked away from the attack and tickled her ribs.

Laughing hysterically, Samara fought back, tickling him mercilessly until Connor pulled her onto his lap and held both her hands over her head.

“Stop you little brat. Enough.” Connor gasped for breath. He took the opportunity that presented itself and nudged the loose shoulder strap the rest of the way off Samara’s shoulder. The bathing suit stayed on Samara’s nipple by the faintest degree.

Her heart flipped over as his eyes devoured her. Heat raced through her veins and pooled low in her belly as he continued to stare at her barely concealed breast.

God, she wanted him to touch her again. Wanted to feel his hands on her body and fly apart under his skillful fingers.

Connor must have read her mind because he flicked the bathing suit off and cupped her breast with his callused hand. He pressed his lips against the slim column of her throat while he stroked her body like a master musician.

Samara knew she should stop Connor's wanderings, but it felt so good. Just for a little while she would let herself feel the fire that only Connor could start. She groaned and arched into him when he plucked at her sensitive nipple.

He released her hands to pull her bathing suit down, freeing both her breasts. A shiver raced down her spine as he cupped and kneaded the mounds, whispering hot promises in her ear.

Samara writhed on Connor's lap and pushed her hands through his thick black hair. She wanted his hands everywhere—she wanted to touch him everywhere. Her mind turned to senseless mush as she straddled his lap and attacked him with all the pent up desires clamoring within her.

The ring of the phone sounded at the edge of her consciousness.

"Let the machine get it," Connor mumbled against her breast, sucking the nipple into his mouth.

"Uh huh," Samara gasped, pushing her hands under the shirt Connor wore. She was in such a frenzied state of need that she almost didn't hear the message being left on the machine.

"Sam-Sam, it's Macayla, if you're there, pick up the phone. I was just looking over your blood work, and I need to talk to you. Sam, pick up."

"Wait Connor, stop, I need to get that." Samara got off Connor's lap with legs of water. She stumbled over to the phone and picked it up, not even realizing the machine was still recording.

"I'm here. What do you mean something's wrong with my blood test?" Samara asked thickly. Her blood still thrummed in her veins. It was next to impossible to concentrate on what Macayla was saying. Through her

lust-fogged eyes, she vaguely noticed Connor get off the couch and walk outside.

“Did I wake you up?” Macayla asked, concern in her voice.

“Something like that.”

“Sorry, but I want you to come into the lab today. When was the last time you ate?”

“I had breakfast, but not lunch. What’s going on?” Samara became a little more worried than she had been.

“Possibly nothing. Your gestational diabetes test came back borderline. I want you to take another one, only this is three hours instead of one. You’ll need to fast for six hours beforehand. When did you eat breakfast?”

“Around eight o’clock.”

“Can you come in around two? Will that give you enough time? I’d make it later, but the lab is technically closed at two. I’m pulling strings to get this done today.”

Samara looked at the clock. It was a little after one. If she hurried she could get changed, freshened up, and make it with a few minutes to find parking.

“Yeah, I should be able to make it.”

“Good. This isn’t a big deal you know. If it does come out positive, it just means can’t have chocolate for the rest of your pregnancy.”

“Cayla, that is a big deal.” Samara hung up the phone with Macayla’s chuckles ringing in her ear.

Connor came back in the house. His hair looked like he had tried to pull it out by the roots, but other than that, he appeared under control.

“Everything okay?” he asked, looking no lower than her chin.

“Yeah, Macayla wants me to go to the lab for another test, something about my blood sugar level being off. Nothing serious.”

“But serious enough that she wants you to go to the lab on a Saturday?”

“Well, yes, I guess so. I’ll be there for a while. Do you want to drop me off at the hospital so you can have the car?”

“No, if you don’t mind, I’d like to come with you. I’m part of this too.”

“If you want to, of course you can sit with me for three hours and be as bored as I will be. No offense, but you don’t strike me as the patient sort.”

Connor raised one brow at her, “Not the patient sort? I’ll have you know I’m one of the most patient guys you’ll ever meet. I’ve had to sit in an alley reeking of garbage and stale urine for hours without moving a muscle waiting for a bust. Not the patient sort? Ha. Just you wait and see how patient I can be.”

Chapter Ten

He made it almost two hours.

“Is this all you do? Drink some orange soda and sit here?”

“No, every hour I’ll give them some blood and pee in a cup. In the meantime I watch the same educational video six times and read back issue magazines and find out the six signs of heart disease.”

“Give me the keys.”

“You got it tough guy.”

Connor practically ran from the waiting room of the lab.

Samara snickered to herself as Connor fled the scene. He was holding up better than she could have hoped under the circumstances. But how much of it had to do with wanting to be there for the baby?

She couldn’t deny the fire that blazed between them—that was what got her into this situation in the first place. But was lust enough to base a future on? If he decided to stick around, would she always wonder if it was for the baby or because he wanted to be with her?

And would he wonder the same thing?

Tears burned behind her eyes and she swallowed hard to push them back. The secretary gave Samara a sympathetic look when she grabbed a wad of tissues from the reception desk.

“Darn hormones,” Samara mumbled before fleeing to the corner of the tiny waiting area.

Damn it. She wished they’d had more than one week to get to know one another. One week of fun in the isolated world of an island resort

didn't give her a whole hell of a lot to go on. She knew how he reacted when snorkeling, but how would he be when the baby cried for three straight hours and neither one of them had had any sleep for a week?

Could she trust her future to someone she knew so little about? Could she trust him with her baby's future?

Anxiety churned in her gut, mixing with the nasty orange drink she'd had to choke down earlier. Samara took three slow, deep breaths and tried to calm herself.

Making herself sick over things she couldn't control wasn't good for the baby or her peace of mind. It wasn't like she had to make a decision right now. The baby wasn't due until October—she had plenty of time to get to know Connor better and see where things went. No one said she had to marry him if it turned out he wasn't "the one".

"Ms. Murphy? We're ready for you."

Samara followed the technician into the lab and took the cup handed to her. When she returned to the chair where they waited to take her blood sample, she spotted Connor leaning against the wall near the lab.

The coward had finally come back now that the test was almost over. "So have you thought of any names for the baby yet?" the lab technician asked.

"If it's a boy, Howard," Samara said on the spur of the moment. She hadn't discussed names with Connor yet, so she picked the name of the officer she had met the other night out of thin air. "And if it's a girl, Eugena." Samara winked at the technician, but carefully pretended she hadn't seen Connor. The technician was trying so hard not to laugh, she almost dropped the blood collection tube.

"No child of mine will be named Howard," Connor stormed.

At his outburst, the technician and Samara laughed out loud.

"No? Well maybe it will be a Eugena."

"Over my dead body."

“I’ll leave you to discuss the matter. The lab is closed tomorrow, so you won’t be able to get the results back until Monday.”

“I guess Eugena and I can wait that long.”

The lab technician laughed as she walked out of the room.

“You don’t really want to name the baby Eugena do you?” Connor asked as they walked to the parking garage.

“No, I don’t have any one name I’ve settled on.”

“I guess I had better be around then when Spike is born if I’m to have any say in the matter.” Connor opened the car door for her. “Where to now?”

“I don’t care, as long as food is involved. A drive through is just fine.”

“Should you be eating fast food?”

“Listen, buster, I haven’t had anything since breakfast, and I recognize the smell of French fries in the car. You’re putting your life in jeopardy by arguing with a pregnant woman about food.”

“All right, all right. Copious amounts of fat and calories are headed your way. Boy, I thought drug dealers were a tough group. Next time I go in for a bust, I’ll make sure you’re my back-up,” Connor teased.

Samara didn’t know why, but his statement sent a shiver down her spine.

Fifteen minutes later, Samara happily munched on a burger and fries, but she did concede to Connor’s wishes and got milk to drink instead of a milk shake. His show of concern might have warmed her heart at another time, but right now she was *hungry*.

By the time they got home she felt a little less like a bear coming out of hibernation. At least enough to be civil.

Connor automatically scanned the interior of the house before he let Samara through the front door. Something about the break-in last night

still bothered him and he wasn't going to take any chances with her safety.

"Hurry up, I need to pee."

"Sorry, habit." He didn't want to worry her unnecessarily, but he had a bad feeling in his gut.

Samara bolted for the bathroom as soon as he stepped out of the way. Connor had noticed that she seemed to use the facilities quite often, but figured that was only one more change the baby had made in her body. From behind, not much else had changed. He felt his groin tighten as he watched her long legs and sweet ass charge up the stairs.

Memories of her writhing under him while he drove into her and clutched that sweet ass did nothing to stop his growing erection. He tried to think of puppies or nuns or anything to help him regain control. The shrill ring of the phone was a welcome distraction.

Without thinking about the propriety of his actions, Connor lunged for the phone.

"Hello?"

"Oh, I must have the wrong number."

"Who were you trying to reach?"

"I was looking for Samara Murphy, sorry to bother you."

"Just a minute, she's in the bathroom, I'll get her."

Samara walked in the room as Connor turned, handing her the phone. He sat on the couch to see how she was going to deal with her confused caller. Samara took the phone and walked into the kitchen.

Without the slightest twinge of guilt, Connor picked up the extension and listened in.

"Hello?"

"Samara. What the hell is going on? Katie was asking me who the hunk was and if he had a brother, and now he's answering your phone."

"Hi Cayla, nice to hear from you, too."

"This is not funny. I went down to the lab to wheedle your results out of the overnight crew, they're negative by the way, and I hear about this gorgeous piece of manhood with blue eyes, black hair, and a gorgeous butt. I had to fake like I knew what was going on."

"It was Connor, he wanted to go with me. He'll be staying here for a while."

"I thought he wanted nothing to do with you and the baby?"

"He changed his mind when he had more time to think about it."

"Oh, so everything is just hunky-dory now?"

"No, but I do want him to be a part of the baby's life, so we're working things out."

"Well, at least you don't have to worry about getting pregnant again."

"It's not like that."

Connor hung up and slipped into the kitchen, ignoring Samara's glare. She'd obviously heard the click of him disconnecting and wasn't too pleased with his eavesdropping.

Too bad. He wanted to see how she explained his presence to her friend. But if she thought he was only sticking around for the sake of the baby, she was deluded.

To prove his point, Connor wrapped his arms around her waist, just under her breasts. He nibbled on her ear as he adjusted his arms to show off her cleavage.

"Stop that." She hissed under her breath.

With his head so close to the receiver, Connor had no trouble hearing the other side of the conversation.

"Stop what? What is he doing? Is he right there? Oh, if I wasn't on call I'd be over there in a minute. I'll be over there tomorrow morning right after rounds. I don't care if I don't get any sleep at all tonight. Count on it." She hung up before Samara could even say goodbye.

“Not happy that the prodigal father has returned?” Connor asked, moving Samara’s hair aside so he could have better access to her sensitive throat.

“No, it’s not that.” Samara turned her neck to allow him the access he wanted. “She called last night after you left. She knew I was upset. She can be very protective.” Samara’s voice was faint, her eyes closed slowly.

Connor had completely forgotten about the phone call. He was too busy trying to slip his hands under Samara’s shirt without alerting her. He had almost gotten the hem up when the doorbell rang.

Samara jumped guiltily away from Connor and went to answer the door. “I can’t imagine who that could be.”

Her hands fumbled with her hair, smoothing it down as she went to the door.

Before Connor could warn her to check first, she opened the door and screamed.

“What. What is it?” Connor ran to her side, all senses on the alert for danger. Lying on the doorstep was the mangled carcass of some unidentifiable animal. Samara turned her face into Connor’s shirt as she gagged.

“Who could have done something like this?” Samara asked, visibly shaken.

“Go call the police. I’ll take care of it.” He had an idea who could do something like that, and he didn’t like it much.

Chapter Eleven

After the police had asked Samara all of their many questions, Connor waited for a chance to speak to one of the officers. Giving a meaningful look to one of the younger officers, he indicated the doorway. The cop picked up on the signal and took Samara in to the kitchen. Connor pulled the senior officer outside and spoke quietly to him.

“Do you know Detective Howard?”

“Yeah, newly promoted, but earned it. Did a lot of work with the gangs.”

“That’s him. He and I worked on a case about three years ago. I’m Officer O’Riley, DEA.”

“Do you think this is drug related?” the officer asked dubiously. “I’ve known Samara for a while, she wouldn’t know a drug if it jumped up and bit her.”

“I know. I’m not here on business. I’m here for Samara.” The cop didn’t need to know why he was with Samara. “I’m wondering if I’m the reason she’s had two incidents in two days.”

“You think someone here has a grudge against you?”

“Could be. That and some other strange things have been going on. My government file has been tampered with, and my company credit card was denied at the hotel I was staying in.”

“One thing’s an annoyance, two things a coincidence, three things a conspiracy huh?”

"That's what I think. Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean someone's not after you."

"True enough. Without something concrete there's not much I can do. I can have a car pass by the house on a regular basis, but why don't you two take a little vacation together in the meantime? No use asking for a third scare in so many days."

"That's not a bad idea. Let me give you my phone number." Connor rattled off his cell phone number as the cop scribbled it on his notepad. "Give me a call if anything turns up."

"Will do."

Connor went back into the house to check on Samara. She was cleaning up the kitchen, looking a little shaken but holding up well all things considered.

"Did the officer give you anything to go on?" Samara handed him a cup of coffee.

"No, just said probably some kids playing a sick prank."

"Yeah, that's what they told me too."

"Sam, I don't like seeing you upset, why don't we go to a place where you can relax a little?" He captured her hands and forced her to look up at him.

"I'm not upset, I'm pissed. I've got a ton of stuff to do and I'm not letting some sick punk scare me out of my own house." She tossed her hair over her shoulder and glared at him. "I have a business to run and I'm not going to run scared over a stupid prank."

"I see."

Crap. He had to find a way to get her out of the house until either he or the police could figure out what was going on. Judging by the look on her face, that wasn't going to be easy. "Will you just think about it?"

"I'll think about it, but I doubt I'll change my mind."

What a shock. “Why don’t you have a glass of milk and tuck it in. I’ll do another check around the house and head in, too.”

“Fine.” She chuckled the dishrag she’d been using to scrub the counters into the sink. “Good night.” She gave him a brief kiss and went up stairs.

Connor walked around the house, knowing he wouldn’t find anything he hadn’t found on the last six trips, but feeling a compelling need to *do* something. He walked back in the house, checked the locks on the doors, and rigged some devices on the windows so that no one could get in a second time. When he was satisfied that he’d done all he could to secure the house, he stripped down to his shorts.

After glancing at his watch, he propped his feet on the coffee table and grabbed the remote. He had surfed through a hundred or so channels without success when he heard Samara at the top of the stairs.

“Connor?”

“Come on, you made it longer than I thought.” Samara curled up next to Connor on the couch.

“Who would do such a thing? What kind of sick-o could deliberately massacre a poor animal?”

“I don’t know honey, I don’t know.” Connor rubbed her back until she fell asleep against his chest. Unfortunately, he knew only too well the type of person who could kill a stupid animal for no other reason than to send a message. He vowed to himself that Samara would never know what kind of monsters were really out there.

Connor carried Samara to her bed. One night on the couch was enough for both of them. Without a second thought, he climbed in next to Samara and pulled her close. He was strong enough to control his physical response to her nearness, damn it. And if he kept saying it, maybe it would actually be true.



Samara woke up the next morning and knew immediately Connor was in bed with her. She snuggled into the cradle of his thighs for just a minute. He was so solid, so warm—and suddenly so aroused. Samara gasped as his hand slipped up her shirt and his erection pressed into her backside.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning to you too,” Samara murmured. She didn’t want to breathe on him with her morning breath, but she didn’t want to get up and brush her teeth yet either. Just a few more minutes. She’d had a rough couple of days. She deserved a little treat, didn’t she?

After several minutes of lazy fondling, Samara was feeling a lot more than awake. If she didn’t stop now, she’d never be able to.

“Not that I’m not enjoying this, but maybe you had better stop. Macayla could be here any minute, and I really need to pee.”

“I could get to hate your Macayla,” Connor mumbled as Samara pulled her shirt back down and headed for the bathroom.

Half an hour later Macayla pounded on the door. Her face showed surprise when she saw Samara dressed and making coffee.

“All right, out with it. Where are you hiding him?” Macayla snarled, black circles rimming her eyes, and clutching a large coffee to her chest.

“Be quiet, he’s in the shower. Would you relax, it’s not like I’m some medieval virgin in need of chaperoning. I’m thirty years old. And pregnant, by him, for God’s sake.”

“I know. I just don’t want you to get hurt. You aren’t a very good judge of character you know. How do you know he isn’t just using you for a free meal and a good time?”

“Well, I don’t know that for sure, but he’s a DEA officer, so I know he isn’t a con man, and—” Samara stopped speaking when she saw Connor

come downstairs wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his slender hips.

“Honey, what did you do with my clothes, they’re not in the bedroom?”

“Uhm, they’re in the guest room closet.”

“Thanks, sweetie.” He winked at Macayla’s open mouth and went back upstairs, obviously not caring that the towel barely covered the lower crest of his behind.

“Oh my.” Macayla’s exclamation was frankly admiring.

“Indeed.” Samara shook herself out of her daze and walked Macayla into the kitchen in case Connor felt the need to put on another display.

“I take it all back. If he’s just using you for a free meal, I’m sure that I can be a better cook than you if I tried hard enough.”

“Cayla!”

“Just kidding. Wow. Now I know why you had the first fling of your life. Although, with that as your introductory experience, it would be hard to have an encore.”

“I’m hoping he’ll stick around and be my encore.”

“I would too. All right, I’m bushed, give my regards to tall, dark and studly. I’m going to bed for a week. Just promise me you’ll be careful. I know he’s hot, but he can still hurt you.”

“I promise. Thanks for worrying about me.”

Macayla gave her a one armed hug and stumbled out the door.

When Connor came downstairs, appropriately dressed in jeans and a faded denim shirt, he looked around for their guest.

“Where’s the redhead?”

“Macayla has gone home to go to bed for a week. Or so she says. She’ll be up and at ‘em in a few hours.”

“So she’s not going to point a shotgun at me and demand to know my intentions?”

“No, but after your display, I wouldn’t be surprised if she held you at gunpoint for another reason.”

“Really?”

“I believe her exact words were ‘tall, dark, and studdly’, but that was your purpose in coming down half naked, wasn’t it?”

“Who me?”

“Show off. Do you want some coffee?”

“Love some. Studly, huh?” Connor said with a smirk. He burst out laughing when Samara threatened him with the frying pan.

After helping Samara do the breakfast dishes, Connor brought down his laptop. “Can I use your Internet connection?”

“Sure, how did you fit that in your bag, too? Don’t you have any clothes in there?”

“Some. I bought more yesterday than I’ve had in a while.”

“I have a DSL line, but I’m not sure how to change it to your computer, so if you want to use mine, it’s in the office.”

“I’ll figure it out, thanks.” Connor wanted to use his laptop as it had some firewalls that would hide the origin of the inquiry. He wanted to do a little hacking of his own.

Two hours later he still hadn’t found out who was trying to bury him, but they were doing a good job of it. The only files he had access to were the ones he kept privately on various drug dealers and his financial records. The only way someone could access those would be if they had his laptop and several obscure passwords. If even one was wrong the whole program would shut down.

“Everything okay? I heard you swearing to yourself.”

“Yeah, just some weird things, why?”

“I’m going out to get some groceries. Is there anything specific you want?”

“No, wait a minute and I’ll go with you.”

“Don’t be silly, I’m just going down the street. I’ll be back in half an hour.”

“If you’re sure, don’t lift anything too heavy.”

“I won’t.”

Connor watched her pull out of the driveway and waited until she was a ways down the street. When he was sure she was really gone he pulled out his digital phone and dialed Jared’s number.

“Romero,”

“It’s O’Riley. I’m in trouble.”

“You only just figured that out? I thought you were smarter than that.”

“Yeah, well I’m not alone this time, remember that IP address? Well the owner of it is pregnant, with my baby.”

“Congratulations,” Jared said dryly.

“Yeah, except that in the last two days she’s had a break-in and a warning delivered to her door step. Plus, I can’t access anything, and my credit card is shut off.”

“Crap.”

“Hip deep.”

“Can you get her to a safe house with you while I do some checking?”

“I’m trying but she’s stubborn.”

“Just make her. If you can’t charm her, lay down the law.”

“You have obviously never met Samara.”

“Do what you have to do, just get the hell out of the center of the bull’s eye.”

“I will, somehow.”

Easier said than done. He didn’t want to scare Samara—it wasn’t good for the baby. But how could he convince her to leave without giving her a solid reason?

Damn, things were so much more complicated with a baby to think about. He wasn't sure he was up to juggling all this responsibility and finding out who was after him, too. Life was much easier when the only person he had to worry about was himself.

Connor's gaze traveled across the room, and he saw pictures of the redhead, Macayla, and Samara mixed in with an older couple that must be Samara's parents.

In the corner of the office lay a bunch of carefully stacked boxes. His eyes widened as he realized the boxes contained baby things. There was an infant seat, something that looked like a flying saucer with toys, and some sort of bath thing.

She'd already started shopping for the baby. For his baby. She wasn't just committed to having this child, she was looking forward to it.

Damn. Connor sank into the chair and expelled a pent-up breath. Sure, he was coming to terms with the idea of having a kid, but he hadn't really thought about it other than a responsibility he had to deal with. He certainly wasn't out buying things for it.

If anything happened to the baby because of him, Samara might never forgive him. He had to make sure they were both safe. And he had to do it soon.



Samara bought enough food for at least a month, or it would have been enough if it were only her eating it. She'd probably be back in the store by Friday the way Connor ate.

She hated to admit how much she enjoyed having him around. It was getting harder and harder to ignore the cravings of her body. Macayla had said that for some women during their second trimester their libido

kicked into overdrive. She didn't know if it was hormones or Connor, but her libido was on par to win the Indy 500.

With a rueful shake of her head, she unloaded the bags into the back of the car and pushed the empty cart into a little cart corral. As she turned to walk back to the car, a SUV turned down the lane she was crossing and gunned the engine. Samara only just managed to throw herself to the side in time to avoid being hit.

The dirt from the parking lot kicked up into her face, stinging her cheeks and blinding her. By the time her watering eyes cleared enough to see, the truck was gone.

"Miss, are you okay?" An elderly gentleman helped her up out of the tangle of shopping carts. "That maniac almost hit you. People these days in those huge hunks of metal, they don't pay attention to anything else on the road. You could have been killed."

"Did you happen to see the driver, or get the plate number?"

"No, miss, sorry, I didn't even think of it."

"It's okay, I'm not really hurt, only a couple of bumps and scrapes. I just wish I could give him a piece of my mind."

"I wish I could give him more than that. Do you need a ride home? Is there someone I can call for you?"

"No, I'm fine. I've got all my groceries in the car anyway. Thank you sir."

"It was my pleasure."

Samara took inventory of her injuries. It was pretty much as she had said, her elbows and knees were scraped, and her shoulder felt bruised by one of the carts. She would probably have a bruise on her chin as well, but she was alive and the baby was safe, if a little shook up.

Connor would have a fit when she got home. Something funny was going on, and she wanted to know what it was. He was more worried about a simple break in and sick prank than he should be. Not only that,

he was pushing her to “take a vacation”. There was definitely something fishy going on.

It was one thing to have a mutilated animal dumped on her doorstep, but when she was attacked in broad daylight, they were going too far.

Whoever “they” were.

It was time to get some answers.

Chapter Twelve

Connor wasn't home when Samara came back with the groceries, so she brought the bags in, ran upstairs and washed out her cuts and changed her clothes. She was putting bandages on the worst of the scrapes when she heard the front door open. Figuring discretion was the better part of valor, she crept as silently as she could to the top of the stairs to see if it was Connor or another intruder.

"Honey, where are you?" Connor called from the kitchen, apple in hand. "If I start putting things away, you won't be able to find anything."

"I'll be right there," Samara called down with relief.

"What the hell happened to your face?" Connor shouted when she came into the kitchen.

"I almost got run over by a SUV in the parking lot. I'm thinking it was intentional."

"That's it. It's time to get the hell out. Put the groceries in the car, I packed a bag for you already. I was going to be diplomatic about this but no more. Three days, three warnings, I know when to get the message even if you don't. Get anything you can't live without and meet me in the car. I'll get the groceries."

"Hold on a damn minute. What do you mean you already packed me 'a' bag? What the hell is going on? Where are we going? When will we be back? How can I let someone know where I am for work? How am I supposed to survive with only one bag of clothes?"

“Your life is more important than your work. Get whatever else you want together and I’ll explain everything on the way.” His laser blue gaze burned into hers.

Samara finally heard the intensity of his voice. He was scared. Seriously scared. That was enough to snap her out of her stubborn position and get her ass into gear.

Her stomach rolled with nerves as she grabbed her laptop and charger, and her phone charger.

While Connor loaded the car, she made some quick phone calls on her cell phone, leaving a message with the painters telling them she would reschedule and telling Macayla she would be away with Connor for a while. She guiltily made it seem like they were going away for a lover’s tryst because she didn’t want her to worry.

Her parents had left on a cruise on Friday morning. They would be cruising around Europe for a while, so she didn’t bother contacting them. They had her cell phone number if they needed to get in touch with her in case of an emergency.

When she was finished, she made sure the doors were locked, and everything was shut off. Connor took the perishable food items out of the fridge and packed those as well. The whole operation took less time than Samara would take to get ready to go out for the evening.

“Okay, you’ve got me on the run, now tell me what is going on,” Samara demanded.

“We are going to the closest company safe house.”

“Safe house? Like in witness protection program?”

“No, safe house, as in there is no record of it existing, no phone, no electricity lines, no cable, no nothing. It doesn’t show up on any tax list or real estate list. The federal agencies have these houses scattered all over the country. The nearest one to here is in Massachusetts, in the

Berkshires. We'll sit tight there for a little while until Romero gets an idea of what the hell is going on."

"If it has no electricity, how are we going to keep all this food from spoiling? It's probably still cold up there, but not that cold. And who's Romero?"

"There's a generator and a fully functional kitchen. Don't worry, we won't starve or freeze. And Romero is a friend of mine, a computer genius. He's doing some research into this whole mess."

At least someone was looking into it. "What exactly is this mess? How much danger are you in?"

"I don't know all the details yet. That's why Jared is snooping around. I'm pretty sure it's nothing big. If one of the major drug cartels was after me, I'd be dead already."

"Gee, that's comforting."

"Look, there's nothing you can do about any of this. Why don't you take a nap. It's a long way to the house, and we'll be busy when we get there. Who knows when the last time it was used, or by whom, so we'll need to clean it out."

"Great." Just what she wanted to do after almost getting run down by a lunatic, housework. Samara decided to take his advice. It looked like it was going to be a long day.

Once Connor was sure she was sleeping, he increased the pressure on the gas pedal. He wanted to get out of range before anything else happened. He didn't like the fact that it was his presence putting Samara in danger, but he could see no way of leaving her without making it worse. Hell, he hadn't even been at her house when it got burglarized. He didn't think it was going to stop if he left either.

They, whoever they were, would probably try to use her to get to him. Something was not right. This smelled of an inside job. No one, no matter

how good a hacker they were, could get into every government file that had been tampered with. Someone had to have the access codes or have access to someone with the codes. Drug dealers had plenty of money to go around, they could buy many a good employee, but they would have to buy a whole department to get all the information they had.

Or, they would have to buy a department head.

Connor drove even faster.



“Samara, honey wake up.” Connor shook her shoulder gently. “We’re here.”

“Huh, what? Where?” Samara mumbled, waking from a deep sleep.

Connor was sure her neck and body must ache from her earlier adventure.

“We’re at the safe house. Let me get the generator started and then we can see where we’re going.”

In a few minutes, he had the generator working and went back outside to unload the car. Lights clicked on as Connor walked by them. Motion detection lighting, good. Then they wouldn’t be surprised by any night visitors.

Connor looked around as he made a quick inspection of the perimeter. It was a rustic looking cabin. There weren’t that many windows, another protective measure. Even though they were in the woods, the area around the house had been completely cleared, with only a scrubby pine tree popping up here and there.

Connor was a city dweller, and he was amazed at how much light pollution he took for granted. Where the spotlights didn’t shine it was as black as the inside of a cave. The moon was only a pale sliver in the sky, and clouds obscured the stars.

Samara looked very small and pale sitting alone in the car. She was worrying her lower lip with her teeth, and he could tell the utter aloneness was getting to her already. He had better do something to keep her mind off their situation. She jumped when he tapped on the car window.

“The heaters are on, and I started a fire in the wood stove, but it will be a little while before it warms up. I put your coat on the bag behind your seat, why don’t you grab that and some of the groceries and I’ll get the rest. The place looks pretty clean, but it smells musty. We can air it out tomorrow when it’s warmer.”

“Sure, I’ll get some supper started while you haul the rest of the stuff in.”

“Good, I’m starving.”

Samara got the bags unloaded to her satisfaction in the kitchen while she browned some hamburger for chili. The kitchen had all the spices she needed, which was good because she hadn’t thought to bring any.

The kitchen was spacious. It had all the modern appliances a cook could ever want, even some that Samara had yet to figure out the purpose of. She set the stove down to simmer and went to check out the rest of the place. The center of the house was a huge, open living room with a cathedral ceiling. There was a master bedroom with a bathroom off the living room, and two more bedrooms in a loft area over the living room.

Connor had put both their bags in the master bedroom, and Samara suddenly felt awkward about their sleeping arrangements. She stood in the doorway looking at the two bags sitting side by side on the king size bed and debated what to do.

“Something wrong with the room?” Connor asked, bringing in more wood from a deck off the living room. “The baseboard heaters are electric, so I only turned them on in the rooms we’re going to use. It doesn’t make

sense to heat up the whole house when we don't know how long we're going to be here. The wood stove should keep us comfortable once the first floor warms up."

"That makes sense. I guess I was just reading more into things than were there. Sorry, maybe I'm overreacting after the stress of the last few days."

"No, you're not overreacting. I want you so badly I dream about it. I'm not above taking advantage of the situation we're in, but I won't force you to move faster than you're ready."

"I'm sorry Connor, I know it seems stupid. I mean I'm pregnant for heaven's sake. It's just, I don't know, I feel like I don't know you."

Samara tried to make him understand, "Do you realize I only just found out what you do for a living? I don't know if you have any brothers or sisters, hell, you could have a wife and five kids for all I know about you."

Connor almost choked at the mention of his non-existent wife.

"Why don't we eat some of your wonderful dinner before I expire on the spot, and over dinner I'll fill you in? There isn't much to tell, but I can assure you, I have never been married and I have no children running around, yet." Connor smiled sweetly and pulled her close for a hug. "We'll both talk, there's a lot I don't know about you either."

"That sounds nice, but I warn you, I'm pretty dull, up until recently my life has been work, school, karate, more work and more work. I'll probably put you to sleep."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that, okay? Now will you please feed me?" he wailed plaintively. "There is nothing more mouth watering than the smell of cooking chili, and I worked up an appetite lugging in all this wood."

Samara laughed at his pleading expression and dished up dinner.

“So, tell me all about you. I want to know everything,” she said when they’d finished the chili and lingered at the table. She’d been too hungry to grill him while they were eating.

“There’s not too much to say. I’m an only child, both my parents are gone.”

“How awful for you.”

“I’m pretty much over it. It wasn’t like they had a great love match or anything. They got a divorce as soon as I graduated high school. They’d spent eighteen years giving each other the silent treatment and frosty looks and then died within weeks of each other barely a year after the divorce. Not exactly a great example for how to live a happily married life.

“That’s so terrible. My mom may nag my father endlessly, but I can’t imagine them divorcing or dying.” She shook her head sadly as she cleared the dishes. “To lose both of them so close together. It must have been hard on you. Did you have any aunts or uncles to help with the arrangements?”

“No. As far as I could figure, they both appeared full grown one day. We never had any family gatherings at all. I think there might be cousins around somewhere, but I don’t know where.”

“What about friends of the family? Or neighbors? Did you have to do everything yourself?”

“Not everything. My dad was in the service so we moved around a lot. That didn’t lend itself to making close friends or neighbors, but the military took care of a lot of the arrangements.”

“Is that why you joined the army? Because your father was in the service?”

“Yeah, that and I didn’t really have anything I was interested in so it didn’t make sense to go to college just yet. Not that I had the money, anyway.”

“What’d you do in the army?”

"I started out as an interpreter. I have a photographic memory so languages come easily to me. Once the higher ups caught on to my memory and aptitude for languages, it wasn't long before I got promoted to special operations."

"And let me guess, if you told me about that you'd have to kill me."

"Something like that. Actually, I wasn't in special ops for very long before I got transferred to the Diplomatic Corps."

"Sounds exciting. Did you get to see a lot of different countries?"

"Not really. I was in Europe for a while but I mostly saw the inside of one embassy or another. It's actually really boring."

"Why'd you leave the service?"

"Once my tour was up I just felt I could do a lot more on the outside than I could standing guard duty at some stupid ball. I had signed up for the G.I. Bill and was ready for college by then. After college I entered the police academy. After a few years on the force I transferred to the DEA."

Samara was sure there was more to his climb up the career ladder than he let on but she didn't push it. She wanted to know more about him, not his job.

"I like working at the DEA. Not to sound cocky, but I'm good at it. With my memory, I can keep all the players straight. I've never gotten burned. At least not until this last time." He tapped his hand on his thigh in agitation. "I can't help but think that the same person who set me up is behind all of the attacks on you. What do you remember about the intruder on Friday night? Tell me every little detail, everything you can think of, no matter how insignificant."

"There wasn't much to tell, I was on the phone with Macayla, she woke me up after you left. I hung up with her, went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, and changed my clothes. I was getting into bed when I heard a noise downstairs."

"What kind of noise? Glass breaking? A door slamming?"

Samara thought about that night. Things had happened so fast she hadn't really examined each detail.

"I don't really remember, I thought it was you returning and I was going to rip you up one side and down another. I walked down stairs, turned on the light, and started shouting. That's when I noticed the guy in my house wasn't you."

"What did he look like? Are you sure it was a man? Could it have been a large woman?"

"He wore a ski mask, the eye holes were blacked out so I didn't get a look at his eyes, I was concentrating on his hands."

"His hands?"

"Yes, Dave always says you can tell the level of a person's training by what their hands do."

"Who's Dave?"

"My karate instructor. Anyway, this guy had no formal training, more of a brawler I think. He was taller than me, maybe five-eleven or six feet, thick, but not in shape. His gut was soft, and he had a layer of fat on his back."

"How do you know?"

"When he came charging at me he had his hands outspread, his center was wide open. I could have kicked him any number of places, but he moved pretty fast, and I didn't want him to grab me. He had some muscle under that fat, and I would lose a close confrontation."

"You thought of all of that in the two minutes he was in your living room?" Connor raised one eyebrow incredulously.

"No, while he was there I ducked under his arms, kneed him in the solar plexus, elbowed him in the spine and called 911. After I told the police the same story over and over again, I thought of all the details. Now if you give me a minute I'll try to think of where I saw him."

Samara replayed the scene in her mind yet again. “He was coming from my office, I think he knocked over the can of pens on my desk and that’s what caught my attention.”

“Was he already out of the office when you came downstairs? Think, this is important.”

“I’m pretty sure he came out of the office when he heard me shouting down the stairs.”

“If he was just a regular burglar he would have gone out the window he had opened to get in the house. He was after something specific in your office. When he heard you come downstairs, he should have fled. Instead he tried to grab you, not hit you, not throw something at you, grab you. He wanted something. When you fought back he probably decided to wait until he had some reinforcements before he took you on again.”

“Connor, I know it’s part of your job to be suspicious, but what could I have that he would want? Even the papers I’m working on are nothing top secret. It’s not like I edit papers dealing with national security. I edit mostly college dissertations, romance novels, the occasional pamphlet, and things like that. Nothing that is important to anyone but the writer. I don’t see how someone would be interested enough to break into my house for a dissertation on eighteenth century poetry.”

“No, I don’t think so either. Did anything happen before I came to your house for the first time?”

“Other than my computer catching a virus? No, well, I did sort of have someone hack into a file illegally.”

“Ah yes, the IRS file, find anything interesting?” Connor asked, a smirk on his face.

“Only that you didn’t exist,” Samara said and stuck out her tongue.

“I told you about that. Who did you say did the hack?”

“My friend Jack did when he came to fix my computer.”

“What’s this Jack like?” Connor asked with a frown.

“Oh, no one who would break in to a house. He’s a little shorter than I am. His life revolves around computers. He may have a little crush on me, but other than that he’s harmless.”

“Did you date him?”

“Heavens no,” Just the thought made her shudder.

“Good,” Connor grunted.

They retired to the living room and sat on the couch together under a knit blanket. Samara thought that a glass of wine would have made the evening perfect. *Ah well, you can’t have everything.*

“I think when your friend hacked into the IRS it set off flags that worried whoever is trying to bury me. My friend Jared was the one who notified me that someone was looking in my direction. He covered up for you by the way,” he teased. “I wouldn’t want my baby born in prison. Someone must have seen the hack before he cleaned it up though. He did some more checking and saw where I was being altered in the government’s electronic eyes.”

“That must have been some trick seeing as how Jack said you didn’t exist in the IRS computer files.”

“Oh, I exist all right. I pay my taxes like everyone else, but my file is classified. Even though your buddy got into the system, he couldn’t get into my file.”

“I have a sneaky suspicion Jack didn’t tell me everything.”

“Probably didn’t like you looking up another guy. Anyway, it doesn’t explain why someone was messing with my file.”

Samara had a thought, “How do you get paid?”

“Direct deposit, why?”

“To a local bank or what?”

“No, I move around too much to have a regular bank account. I have an internet wallet account where money is deposited and I pull from there when I need cash, why?”

“Okay, I’ve used an internet wallet to buy things online before. I think you should check out your history.”

“Where are you going with this?”

“Check your account now. If you can get into it, it’s only your government files that are being messed with. If your personal files are being invaded than maybe we’ll have another place to look. Don’t they always say follow the money?”

“You may be on to something.” Connor got up from the couch, and got his laptop. He plugged it into his digital phone, and tapped some keys. It took forever for the connection to go through, but once it did he swore a blue streak.

“My account jumped a few hundred thousand dollars. Someone made a big deposit a few days before I was shot. Looks like someone thought that I wouldn’t be around to use any of this money.”

“You haven’t checked your account since you were shot?”

“I haven’t thought about it. Most of my bills are paid automatically. I never check my account unless something’s wrong. With my memory I know how much money I have and how much is going out. I don’t need to balance my checkbook.”

Samara glared at him and his damn memory. She had to check her account almost daily to make sure she didn’t forget to record something and bounce a check.

She didn’t bother to share that with Connor. “Where would this money go if you died? Do you have a will?”

“No, until recently I had no one to leave the money too. I don’t know what would happen to it, probably get stuck in probate until they could track down a next of kin.”

“What about if you were implicated in a crime?”

“Then it would be taken—” Connor paused and Samara could have sworn she saw him shiver. “It would be taken as evidence and frozen until after a trial. If I was found posthumously guilty, then it would be confiscated.”

“I think someone was hoping you would die in that bust, and they had already started to erase your good record. I bet if we checked your files again they would show up with all sorts of misdeeds and things. I think someone is very interested in seeing you dead,” Samara said in a small voice.

“I think you’re right. The good things are being taken out and bad things are being put in. I really want to find out who is doing this. Unfortunately the very people who could help me track this down are also the people I suspect the most.” Connor got up and paced around the room for a few laps. “Let’s see if we can spike their wheel a little bit.” He returned to the computer and furiously entered commands, muttering under his breath when the connection took too long for his liking.

“There, now that will stir up a hornets nest.”

“What did you do?”

“I took out enough money to pay the few outstanding bills I have. Then I took the most recent deposit and dumped it into multiple charities across the globe. I picked them at random, so anyone searching for the money will have a very hard time finding it. Basically, if someone wants their money back, they’ll need this computer.”

“Clever, now what are you going to do when you clear your name? Technically you just stole several hundred thousand dollars.”

“Do you have a zip drive with all your stuff?”

“Probably, I’ll have to check my briefcase.”

“I’m going to copy the pertinent parts of my hard drive on a zip drive, then I’m going to wipe the puppy clean. I’ll leave it here for bait. Whoever

is after me is going to go after the laptop to get their money, and when they do, I'll reel them in like a fish on a hook."

"How do you know there's someone coming after us?"

"We're in a safe house. I had to get permission to come here. I give it a day, maybe two before we're found."

"Then maybe we should leave?" Samara suggested, sitting up quickly.

"We will, but I want to think about our next step instead of running blindly into a trap. Besides, I want to make it look like we're still here to slow them down a little." Connor's eyes lit up.

"You're enjoying this aren't you?" Samara asked in disbelief.

"I prefer to have an enemy to face. I like being able to plan things out one step ahead of them. Plus, I like the excitement."

"I'm so happy for you. I hate this. My whole life has been turned upside down, and I don't even know why. I've been having more 'excitement' in the last three days than I've had in my entire life. I'm scared that you're going to be killed, accused of some horrendous crime, or both. I think this sucks."

She was scared for herself, her baby and especially for Connor. She was also tired, cranky, and achy from being bruised and stuck in a car all day. And now to top it all off Connor was acting like he was a little boy playing war.

"I'm sorry, honey. When this is all over, I'll make it up to you, I promise. In the mean time, I'm afraid you're stuck with me. I don't have anywhere safe to leave you, or I would. I swear I'll do everything to keep you safe."

"Well who's going to keep you safe?" Samara waved her arms in the air. "You're the one someone is trying to kill. You're the one with a bullet hole in his leg. You're the one worth more to these psychos than me. How are you going to protect yourself? This baby deserves a father you know,

and by God you had better keep yourself alive for him or her or I'll...I'll strangle you!" Samara stormed off and slammed the door to the bedroom.

Okay, so she wasn't exactly being reasonable. It wasn't his fault that someone was after him. If she had never tried to hack into his IRS file those wackos never would have noticed her. In some ways it was her own fault that she had been traumatized over the last few days.

Of course, she had no intention of admitting that to Connor. She was scared, angry, and pregnant—she wasn't apologizing for anything.

Now that's logical. She snorted at her ridiculous train of thought. She needed to pull herself together. Maybe if she took a hot shower, that would make her aches feel a little better, and improve her mood.

Standing under the showerhead, the rush of hot water relaxed some of her tense muscles. Her scrapes stung a little, but that small discomfort was worth it compared to the relief she felt from her aching shoulders.

She rolled her head under the spray and closed her eyes against the water. The sound of the shower door opening startled her. Before she could protest, she felt Connor's hands on her neck and shoulders, massaging gently.

"I don't think you should be in here, but I'm not sending you out until your hands cramp." The steamy bathroom felt like another world, the heat was making her feel so loose, and Connor's hands were magical.

Connor rubbed her neck, her shoulders, her back, even her arms. Samara felt the tension in every muscle slip down the drain with the water.

"I suppose I should apologize for shouting at you for something that isn't even your fault." Samara's voice didn't exactly ooze sincerity

Connor chuckled at her grudging apology. He turned her around and looked right into her eyes. "You were right. I'm used to being in danger, it does excite me, but that doesn't mean I'm oblivious to the possibility of

you getting hurt. I will do everything to keep all three of us safe. I swear it.” He cupped her face in his hands and leaned in to kiss her gently.

She was sure Connor had meant to make the kiss a sweet one to seal his promise, but Samara had other ideas. She wrapped her arms around his neck and yanked him close. She was tired of fighting her attraction for him. The thought that he could be dead tomorrow and she’d only have their one night together kept running through her head.

What was she worried about anyway? If he left her when all this was over, she would be just as destroyed whether she slept with him or not. If she was going to be miserable afterwards, she might as well enjoy herself now.

Connor was not doing anything to change her mind. He grabbed her around the waist and plundered her mouth, heedless of the slowly cooling water. Unfortunately, the water was pulsing full on Samara’s back and she caught the brunt of it when the hot water ran out.

“Connor. I’m freezing. Get us out of here.” Samara danced under the spray.

Connor, ever the man of action, pulled both of them out of the shower, grabbed some towels and switched on the overhead heat lamp.

She watched with growing heat as Connor toweled off his hair and dried his legs quickly. When she bent over to wrap the towel around her dripping hair, she felt his thighs press up against her derrière as he grabbed a breast in each hand.

“Ah Samara, what delights you’ve been hiding from me. This is the first time I’ve seen you naked since Jamaica. My memory did not do you justice.”

“You seem a little, uh, more than I remember as well.” Samara gasped as she felt his erection pressed against her backside. She straightened back against him and let him fondle her to his heart’s content. He drew big circles with his palms, across her nipples, over her

stomach, over her thighs, until she was almost mad with desire. He turned her towards the bathroom mirror, "Open your eyes. Look at us," he growled in her ear.

Connor's tanned hand showed up strongly against her pale skin. The rapture on his face as he kneaded her breasts took her breath away. His hand moved away from her chest and rubbed over her stomach to the junction of her thighs.

She gasped when his finger entered her. Moaned as she watched his hand move in and out of her body. She shuddered when his thumb rubbed the tight nub of her pleasure, and almost dropped to the floor when she finally climaxed.

When she was able to open her eyes again, she saw Connor's dark head thrown back, tendons stretched tight as he tried to control his passion.

"If you don't mean to finish this Sam, tell me now," Connor gritted out between clenched teeth.

"What, and waste all this?" she said, grasping his erection in her hands. She trailed wet, hot kisses down his chest, promising herself she'd spend more time on that delectable part later. She knew how much stamina he had, and she planned on plumbing its very depths tonight. She had months to make up for. "Connor, can we finish this in bed, my knees are a little too scraped to kneel on this tile."

Connor wasted no time picking her up and depositing her on the bed. He didn't bother with any more foreplay either, but plunged right into her tight sheath. It was Samara's turn to gasp as he grabbed her behind and slammed into her again and again. She lost track of who gasped next, but then she no longer cared.

Chapter Thirteen

Connor woke up when his digital phone began to ring. It was dark in the room, but he was able to find the phone in his coat pocket on the chair by the bed. He checked the display before he answered, after all a little paranoia could be healthy.

“Romero, tell me you’ve got something.” Connor walked out of the room and softly closed the door. There was a pause indicating a scrambled signal before he heard a reply.

“Are you in a safe place?”

“Well, it’s nice to visit...”

“Can you come down to Miami? I need you to do a little checking with some of your sources.”

“Why can’t you use your sources? I don’t want to leave Samara alone up here.”

“Then bring her with you. I don’t have any street cred. I can’t get the information I need from my sources. As far as I know, most drug dealers don’t use computers to track their deals and that’s the information I need if we want whoever is after you to do prison time.”

Connor’s mind kicked into overdrive. “Can you get me some IDs, one male, one female, married couple, maybe visiting family? Also, I need some cash, I’ve got no access to anything and I don’t want to leave a paper trail.”

“You don’t ask for much do you?”

“How important is it that I get there”

“Damn important.”

“Then get me the IDs and quit bitching.”

“Wait for my call then move. I wouldn’t stay any one place too long if I were you.”

“I’m way ahead of you man.”

Connor got back into the bed as quietly as he could, but Samara was already awake.

“Good news or bad news?”

“Interesting news. How would you like to take a trip to Miami tomorrow?”

“What if I said I’d rather eat paint?”

“You’d still be going to Miami tomorrow.”

“Well gee, since you’re asking, I’d love to go to Miami. Did you pack any shorts in the bag you packed for me? I noticed none of my pajamas made it in there.”

“We’ll leave our luggage here. Romero will get us more when we pick up our new identities. And tell me again, how are you different from the wise cracking woman I met in Jamaica?”

“I’m better,” Samara said as she pushed Connor onto his back and proved how much better she really was.

Samara was barely awake when she stumbled into the kitchen and saw Connor drinking coffee at the table. He’d left the package of filters out and the can of coffee sat with the top off on the counter. With a touch of irritation, Samara began cleaning up the mess.

“Leave it.” Connor, pushed away from the table. “We want to make it look like we’ll be coming back at any time. In fact, try to make as big a mess as possible. Anyone who’s coming after us will think they caught us unaware.”

“Okay.” A shiver of apprehension chased down her spine. Connor might get jazzed up by this cloak and dagger shit, but it scared the hell out of her. “But it goes against my nature to leave a mess. My grandmother is spinning in her grave.”

He leaned in and gave her a quick, soft kiss. “I think you can be forgiven for emergency situations. Get what you can into your briefcase and we’ll take it with us. I’m leaving my computer here for a decoy. I’ve got something that will trace whoever grabs it.”

Samara did as she was told and left towels on the floor in the bathroom and dishes in the sink. A little devil whispered in her ear and she raided the medicine cabinet.

When Connor came back into the house after cutting more wood the smell of baking bread wafted through the house.

“What a waste, we won’t be able to eat that. Maybe Romero won’t call until it’s done. It smells great.”

“You’d better not eat it. I’m taking your advice and making it look like we’ll be back any minute. If one of the wackos comes in, he may just have a slice of my fresh made bread, then we’ll have a longer head start.”

“What did you do, poison it?”

“No, what if a raccoon got in and ate it? I wouldn’t want to kill it by accident. I made it with prune juice and added a laxative. I also took all of the related medicine out of the first aid kit.”

He let out a low whistle. “Remind me never to piss you off. You play dirty.”

“Oh, and I suppose trying to run me down was playing fair? They started it.”

Connor laughed, “I’m glad you’re on my side.”

The call from Jared came while they were driving on some horrendous back roads, trying to find a way to the highway that wasn’t an obvious sign of flight. They made it to the airport in record time.

Samara couldn't believe her car could go that fast. When they went to the locker Jared told them about, Connor did some quick-fingered trick and had the previously locked door open.

Inside there were two licenses with close enough pictures to pass them off as Mr. and Mrs. Conrad and Samantha Bellevue. There was a wallet, loaded with tens and twenties, a new digital phone, a credit card, and an engagement ring with matching wedding band. There were also two boarding passes, and luggage claim tickets.

"Wow, he thinks of everything. Didn't you say he was already in Miami? How did he do all this since last night?"

"I don't even want to know. Here, put these on, Mrs. Bellevue."

Samara couldn't help but wish he was putting a wedding ring on for real. She shoved the thought out of her mind. Connor wasn't the family type, she had to keep that thought in her head at all times.

Samara's heart pounded anyway, it didn't know this was all a sham. Connor must have felt her racing pulse because he looked at her with a curious expression on his face.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just a little nervous. I'm not used to running for my life."

"Let me worry about keeping us alive. You worry about keeping junior there happy. Did you remember to pack your vitamins?"

"In my purse. Shall we go to our gate, Conrad? I hate to be last one boarding the plane."

Connor and Samara had plenty of time before their plane took off so they ate in the restaurant and stopped at the newsstand. Samara bought a couple of paperbacks, and Connor picked up a newspaper. They were back at the gate a few minutes before the plane boarded.

Jared had them booked in coach class, which had Connor muttering under his breath as he folded his long frame into the cramped seat. "He could have at least made us a wealthy married couple."

“What and have everyone notice us when we got off the plane? At least it’s a direct flight, only one take off and landing.” Samara forced a smile even as her gut clenched.

She didn’t have a strong stomach on the smoothest of flights. God only knew how she’d react flying while pregnant. She ate some of the crackers she had taken from the restaurant and asked the flight attendant for some bottled water as well. She hoped that would be enough to get her safely to Miami.

It wasn’t.

Samara threw up for the entire four-hour flight. Connor held a wet washcloth to her head, disposed of the airsickness bags, kept her hair out of the way, and did his best to keep her sipping water.

By the time they reached Miami, Samara was sweat drenched, bloodshot and miserable. When they got off the plane her own mother wouldn’t have recognized her.

Samara wasn’t sure how they got to their hotel, or how Connor knew which bags were theirs, never mind how he got them from baggage claim, all she knew was the bed wasn’t moving, and neither was her stomach.

“Honey, I hate to leave you like this, but I have to meet Jared. Are you going to be all right?”

“I’ll be fine, really. I’m pretty good at puking now. I’ve had a lot of practice.” She laid a wet washcloth over her eyes and waved off his concern. “I’ll take a little nap and then order some room service. If I get bored I’ll read the books I bought. Honest, I’ll be fine.”

“If you’re sure. I want you to bolt the door behind me. Don’t let anyone in, no matter who they say they are. No one passes through that door but me, understand?”

“Loud and clear, especially the loud. I’ll wait to order room service until you get back. Go, all I want to do is lay on this nice big bed.”

“Sleep now, you’ll need it later.”

“Right.” She lifted the cloth off her forehead and gingerly sat up. “I’m sure you’re so overcome by lust after watching me hurl for the last six hours you can’t wait to get me into bed.”

“Honey, *I* could be hurling for the last six hours and I’d still want to get you into bed. But if you’re not up to it, I think I can control myself. For a little while anyway.”

Samara’s toes curled at the look in his eye. The man was obviously deranged to be attracted to her in this state, but she’d enjoy it. Sanity was overrated.

“Go. I want to lay down so I can be fully recovered by the time you get back.” Samara kissed him lightly and followed him to the door to bolt it. As soon as the lock slid home she slunk to the bed. With a sigh of relief, she curled up into a ball on the bed and slept.



Samara searched for the alarm clock, hitting every button she could reach, trying to shut it off. Finally, her brain clicked in that the noise she heard was a fire alarm, not a clock alarm. Her mind still numb with sleep, she grabbed her purse, slipped on her shoes and headed out the door.

Stumbling down the stairs with the rest of the hotel guests she saw many of them trying to slip on bathrobes and other coverings as they trudged into the parking lot. Hotel employees tried to get people to move away from the building so that the fire trucks could pull in and investigate. Police officers were already on the scene, fighting to control the exodus. Being Miami, they were probably there to make sure no one took advantage of the confusion to loot the place.

People milled about, some got in their cars and left, others talked quietly in small groups. Samara looked around for Connor, hoping that

he had returned from his meeting with Jared , but he was nowhere in sight.

She headed towards the pool entrance, thinking she could sit on one of the lawn chairs and get a little more sleep when a cloth-covered hand wrapped around her mouth and nose. She reacted with an elbow to the stomach and a shin rake before she passed out.



Connor met Jared at a corner store and slipped into the non-descript sedan.

"I need to get some things at the bus station. Drop me off a few blocks from there so no one sees us together."

"No shit."

"What do you need for information?"

"I need dates where big deals got changed with little notice. My suspicion is there's a leak in your department and somehow you got in the middle of it. I need to track bank deposits with failed drug busts."

"Got it."

As they approached the rundown neighborhood near the bus station, Connor turned to Jared. "I need you to keep an eye on Samara. I won't be able to concentrate if I'm worried about her."

"She's in a freaking hotel, what can happen?"

"You'd be surprised how much trouble that woman can find without even trying. Go watch her and I'll meet up with you later."

"Fine." Jared grimaced. "You realize you owe me big time for all of this."

"I'm sure you'll make me pay."

"Count on it."

Jared dropped Connor off at a seedy-looking bus station and took off for the hotel. It bugged him that he couldn't go along but he knew when to delegate. Connor had worked the streets for a long time, he had the contacts and the street cred Jared lacked. So instead of working the streets, he'd get a bite to eat while he waited.

Sitting outside a hotel while a woman slept inside was a serious waste of his considerable skills, but that was part of the job. Not that he was actually getting *paid* for the job. Hell, with all the running around he'd been doing, he'd actually lost money, but friendship was more important than money. At least his friendship with Connor was.

The night sky flashed bright as day with red and blue strobes. Cops and firefighters swarmed the hotel parking lot and Jared had to sneak in a side entrance to see what the hell was going on.

Hundreds of people wandered about in various states of undress.

Shit.

How the hell was he supposed to find Connor's woman in this mob? Jared climbed out of the rental and searched for the blonde that Connor had described. This being Miami, there were plenty of blondes in all shapes and sizes, but none matched the description Connor had given him.

As he walked around the parking lot examining every blonde in sight, he saw two men pushing a laundry cart. It seemed a little ridiculous that they would still be doing laundry when there was a fire alarm sounding. His gut told him there was something seriously wrong here, and he always trusted his gut.

He followed them to the back of the building, hiding behind a nearby car, and watched them stop behind a van. The men scanned the area, and apparently seeing no one, they pulled the "laundry" out of the cart and dumped it into the back of the van. As they were doing that, a shoe fell out of the pile. They quickly picked up the shoe and threw it into the

van as well. Jared's pulse raced as the workers abandoned the cart and took off.

"Fuck!" He just knew that was Connor's blonde. Christ.

Jared flew to his car and drove after them. He caught a glimpse of the van getting on the highway and managed to change lanes in time to get on, too. He was better able to keep them in sight on the highway so he held back behind several cars.

When they took the next exit, he followed them and pulled into a gas station where he pretended to use the pay phone. He waited until they turned the corner then pulled out after them. He was a little worried they had caught on when they turned into an abandoned parking lot, but they had the key to unlock the gate so Jared figured they had reached their destination.

He never slowed down, but continued on until he got to the next on ramp. He made a split second decision and pulled the car off the road. Hitting the hazard lights, he got a gas can out of the trunk and climbed down the embankment. Moving with all the silence his training had ingrained in him, he found the back of the building and jumped the fence. He knew what his instinct was telling him, but Connor would not be happy if he worried him for nothing.

Jared kept to the shadows as he made his way to the building. It appeared to be an old warehouse, probably abandoned considering the lack of garbage and abundance of weeds. Hiding behind a rusting barrel, he held still and listened to see if he'd been detected. When he was sure the coast was clear, he crept closer and peered through a broken window.

It was pitch black inside the building. The wan light of the moon couldn't penetrate the filth on the windows to lend any illumination. He listened for footsteps, conversation, coughing, any signs of a human presence, but heard nothing. Pulling his sleeve over his arm to protect it,

he reached through the broken window, unlocked it and climbed in. Landing silently, he again jumped back into the shadows and listened to see if his presence was detected.

Still nothing. So far so good. These guys were either really confident that they hadn't been followed or really, really stupid.

Jared waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. After a minute he could make out shapes through the gloom. A few rows down was a ladder to a catwalk.

Perfect.

Wasting no time, he climbed the ladder and walked silently across the catwalk looking for the two guys with the laundry. He found them in an office on the other side of the building. They had a TV blasting and were eating a pizza. No wonder they didn't hear him jumping in the window, they wouldn't have heard if he'd broken the window.

He didn't see any sign of the bundle they had grabbed from the hotel. Where could they have dropped their burden?

Automatically dividing the room into a grid, he searched from his perch for any clues to her whereabouts. Just as he was about to give up, he spotted a blonde length of hair hanging out of a bunch of towels. They had dropped her, towels and all, on a ratty carpet near the front door. Jared couldn't risk a closer look, but he made sure he saw at least three breaths lift the towels up before he left.

Sweat ran down his back as he scurried across the catwalk. He didn't bother wasting time trying to be silent as he shimmied down the ladder. He'd be out the window before they hit a commercial break. The need to clear out the hotel room and get Connor spurred him to quicken his pace as he ran up the embankment.

He just prayed he'd find Connor before they moved her—or worse.

As soon as Romero pulled away from the bus station, Connor slipped to the lockers and removed a key from the sole of his shoe. This very expensive—and very illegal—key could open any locker in the entire bus station, but in this case it opened one that contained a banged up backpack. Connor took it to the bathroom where he locked the door, took out the contents of the bag, and laid them out on the counter.

In seconds he'd changed into the baggy jeans, loose shirt, scraggly baseball cap and expensive basketball sneakers. He slipped the handgun into his waistband and checked the thin knife he carried in the thick sole of the sneaker.

He stuffed his other clothes into the bag and slipped it over one shoulder. With a final look in the mirror, he adjusted his face to the bitter, angry, look that was the uniform for the people he was meeting, and sauntered out. Had anyone bothered to take note, they might have wondered how the disreputable character got the bag from the gentleman who went into the bathroom earlier and hadn't come out.

Once on the street, Connor affected the nervous-eyed look common to the neighborhood. The bus station was a few blocks from his normal roaming area, and he moved as quickly as possible without running and attracting attention.

He'd only been gone an hour or so when a familiar car drove up to him.

"What are you trying to do? Get me killed, or yourself?" he snarled at Romero.

"Get in, the bastards got your girl."

Connor felt fear congeal in the pit of his stomach. He slid across the hood of the car and got in.

"Tell me what the hell happened. You were supposed to keep an eye on her."

“Shut up and listen, I know where they’ve taken her. I’ll tell you on the way.”

Chapter Fourteen

Samara slowly became aware of her surroundings. The first thing she noticed was the odor. She smelled mildewed towels, stale cigarette smoke and other things better left unknown. The combination made her already delicate stomach mutinous.

Luckily, she had nothing in her stomach so all she did was retch dryly. Her mouth, already dry as cotton, felt even worse with the addition of her stomach's acid. Her head felt like it was stuffed with the same cotton that had been left in her mouth, and her arms and legs were leaden.

It seemed like too much effort to try to move the towels off her, so she lay still and tried to figure out where she was. Her head was doing the cha-cha, and her stomach wasn't much calmer, but she forced herself to remember what had happened. She remembered leaving the hotel for a fire alarm, then being grabbed. She must have been drugged because the next thing she remembered was waking up here.

One part of her mind shrieked at her to get up and get away while she could. The more rational part of her mind advised faking unconsciousness until she knew what was going on. She carefully pulled one of the towels down enough so she could get a glimpse of her surroundings, and was blinded by overhead lights. She quickly closed them against the glare. Squinted this time and tried again.

She was against a wall, probably near a door, because there was a faint breeze blowing by her face. Turning her head as slowly as she

could, she tried to get a better look around without alerting any watchers she was awake, but she need not have bothered. No one was anywhere near her. If she craned her head far enough she could see two huge men sitting in a glassed-in office. They were watching TV at a concert level volume that was doing nothing to help her headache.

She was considering her escape options when the door near her slammed open. Her heart pounded in her chest as she tried to feign unconsciousness. She watched through slit eyes and saw a man storm into the room, kick open the office door and turn off the TV.

“What the hell! There was still fifteen minutes left,” An unfamiliar voice shouted.

“I realize you two aren’t rocket scientists, but didn’t it occur to you that this is supposed to be an abandoned building? I could hear the TV when I came through the main door. Where is the lock for the gate? Did you want to invite O’Riley in for tea as well? Idiots. He could have already taken the girl and you two wouldn’t even have known.”

“Relax, she’s not going anywhere, she’s still out from the knock out drops that Ronny gave her. She’s over there by the door.”

Samara’s heart leapt to her throat and adrenaline made her knees weak. It was all she could do to lie still and fake unconsciousness.

“What are you so afraid of? O’Riley will exchange the computer for her, and he’ll never even know you were involved.”

She dared another peek and saw three men in the office. One goon sat and propped his feet back on the desk.

As he reached to turn on the TV, the new man kicked goon boy’s feet off the desk and threw the TV to the floor.

“Don’t underestimate O’Riley, you idiot. He has more lives than a cat. I’ve sent better than you after him and all have failed. Did you hear what happened to Rick and Sam up North? He poisoned a loaf of bread, which the idiots ate, and they’re probably *still* on the can. He didn’t even know

someone was after him, and he was still a step ahead of us. I sent you after the computer, not the girl.”

“We didn’t have a choice, cops were everywhere and we couldn’t get into the hotel. O’Riley will trade the computer for the girl, trust me.”

“Not as far as I can throw you. I don’t know if this will get me the computer, but I’m at the end of my rope. You two screwed up big time, and now I have to clean up your messes.”

Samara saw him run a hand through his thinning hair in obvious frustration.

“If I don’t get access to the money in his account, my life span will be counted in minutes. And I guarantee you that if I go down you all go with me. Now one of you patrol the outside of the building, the other stay with the girl. I’m going to look around the warehouse and make sure there’s nothing else you overlooked. If you hear anything, take the girl and run for the van. He won’t do anything if it means hurting an innocent. Fool that he is.”

One of them slowly got up from his seat in the office, hitched his pants over his gut and headed Samara’s way. She closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe deeply and evenly. As he walked by, Samara could hear him complaining.

“I gotta walk around because Reynolds is scared of his own shadow. We got guns, we got numbers and we got the girl, what is he so damn worried about?”

Samara heard nothing else from him. She concentrated on her muscles, tensing them and relaxing them one at a time. If they thought they could throw her around again without a fight they were going to be in for a surprise.

Connor watched a thug puff on a cigarette outside the door to the warehouse.

Come on buddy, just a little bit further, come on.

After crushing out his cigarette, the man started to walk leisurely around the building.

Two more steps, one more, yeah.

Connor wrapped his hand around the guy's mouth then hit him in the temple with the butt of his handgun. As the guy collapsed, Connor caught his weight, lowered him to the ground, wire tied his hands and feet, then used his own sock to gag him.

Grunting with effort, he rolled the unconscious man behind a pile of scrap metal. Connor didn't go to the door, he went around to the back of the building, checked his watch, and eased himself through the window Jared had opened for him.

The plan was that Connor would take care of any outside patrols while Romero made sure the coast was clear inside. Once any wayward guards were taken care of, Romero would create a distraction while Connor grabbed Samara.

If they had hurt her or the baby, Connor vowed they would pay in more horrendous ways than they ever imagined were possible.

Once inside, Connor used the catwalk to move towards the area where Samara was laying. His blood pounded in his veins, every instinct screaming at him to grab Sam and run. What the hell was taking Romero so damn long? He should have been able to take care of the wanderer by now.

He'd only got a brief glimpse of the third guy when he and Romero were casing the building, but he didn't seem like much of a threat. Hell, none of these idiots were. Still, something about the way that one moved reminded Connor of someone, but he couldn't place him at the moment. He'd figure it out later. Everything that he saw, heard or read stayed in his memory for good. When he had a moment to think clearly he'd examine the nagging sensation more closely.

Connor felt the building rock with an explosion. *Thank God.* Before the first tremors had settled, he was moving toward the spot Jared had seen Samara. He kept praying she was all right.

When he reached the front of the building he saw another thug struggling with a fully conscious Samara. She was pale and drawn, but on her feet. Connor saw her smash the guy's nose, and dodge out of the way of his swinging arms. She jumped in for a quick kick to the ribs, then one to the knees before she jumped out again.

Unfortunately, she didn't have enough body weight to make a dent on the much larger man. He was still standing, and now obviously enraged.

Samara looked weak, but held up her guard and kept out of his reach. Connor circled around, trying to find an angle without distracting Samara. His jaw dropped when she took two long steps and performed a flying sidekick to the midsection of her jailer.

The air whooshed out of him with an audible gust. Connor didn't waste any more time. He slammed the butt of his gun against the guy's thick skull and grabbed Samara off the floor where she had fallen after the kick.

"Wait. My purse is in the office."

"Forget it, we'll buy you a new one."

"No, I need that one, it has all my stuff. It's right here." Samara limped into the office, grabbed the purse off the desk and came back to him.

"Can we go now?" he asked, practically bouncing with impatience.

Connor didn't wait for an answer, he lifted Samara up into his arms and jogged to the car. Jared had it running and in gear.

"What took you so long?"

"I had to wait my turn." Connor lowered Samara into her seat and shut the door. Jared was moving before they were even buckled in.

"Where are we going now? Back to the hotel?" Samara ran a hand through her hair and fiddled with her purse.

"No."

"But what about all our stuff, my computer is there."

"I have someone taking care of it," Jared responded from the driver's seat.

"I don't think they would buy me as your husband this time," Connor said, indicating his scruffy attire. "We need to find another place, preferably far, far from here."

"All my safe houses are documented. It wouldn't take long for them to figure out where you were. Any ideas?" Jared didn't sound hopeful.

"None that're safe for Samara too. Oh, Jared Romero, this is Samara Murphy."

"Call me Jared. Under the circumstances, I think we can forgo the formalities."

"Thanks, call me Sam. And I may have a place for us to go. How accessible does it have to be?"

"Not very. Why?"

"My uncle had a cottage on Cape Cod. It's been deserted for years. My family stopped using it when I got out of college. It's in the middle of Truro, not a very busy area of the Cape. It doesn't have much in the way of amenities, but it's isolated, and would be hard to trace to Connor."

"You have any better ideas?" Connor asked Jared.

"None offhand. How do we get in?"

"I have the key in the pocket at the bottom of my purse. My mother gave me the key when they moved to Florida. Now aren't you glad I went back for it?"

He ignored her smug smile and spoke to Romero. "Guess we're going to the Cape." Leaning back he pulled Samara into his arms and held her

close like he'd wanted to do since he saw her in the warehouse. Jared flipped the rearview mirror up and kept driving.

Less than an hour later Jared dropped them off at a private airport. They had to wait several hours for him to get them clothes, new IDs and groceries. His theory was that if anyone saw them getting on a propeller plane with groceries they would assume they were going someplace nearby.

"After all, who would take a prop plane for a long trip, no one would want to be in one of those for how long it would take to get up north," Jared assured them.

Samara grimaced. She had yet to recover from her flight yesterday, and was not looking forward to an even worse flight home in a plane that looked like it doubled as a crop duster.

She didn't mind the wait. It gave her time to brush her teeth, get something to eat, and find an ice pack for her hip. She'd been none too steady when she struggled with the goon, and she would be muscle sore tomorrow. Right now her hip hurt where she met the floor after the flying sidekick, and her ankle was swelling because she hadn't used the correct foot formation.

Overall she felt that she accounted for herself pretty well. Dave would be proud, after he finished yelling at her for incorrect foot formation, ridiculous kick selection, and not running when she had the chance.

Samara was resting on one of the hard plastic chairs in the "lounge" area. She had another chair pulled up under her feet and had Connor's backpack as a head rest. She could not believe what had happened to her in such a short period of time. Things like attempted murder, kidnapping, and running away in the dead of night just did not happen to sensible people like her.

Of course, Samara had never fallen in love with an undercover agent before. The impact of her thoughts brought her upright in her chair.

Connor looked over at her with a concerned glance. He'd been conferring with the pilot about the best route to take, and what to put in the logbook to throw off any pursuit.

"Something wrong, honey?"

"It's nothing, just heartburn," Samara finished lamely. How did one say, *I just figured out I'm in love with you and it scares the hell out of me?*

Connor had hinted a couple times that he cared for her. Heck, he demonstrated regularly that he wanted her. But he'd never said he loved her.

She didn't know if he'd asked her to marry him because he wanted to be part of the baby's life, or if he felt like it was the right thing to do. He could very well want to marry her because he felt guilty about all the trouble she'd gotten into since she met him.

Although those might be valid reasons in his book, but they didn't cut the mustard in hers. Her parents had been married for almost thirty-five years, and she wasn't going to settle for anything less than what they had. She wasn't going to marry Connor unless he was as stupid in love as she was.

But his parents had a crummy marriage. What if he had no good example of what a marriage was supposed to be like? How would he know that it took more than sex and a baby to make a good marriage? Would he even recognize love if it bit him in the butt?

Calm down, Murphy. She had no control over his emotions, only over her own, and that control was a little flimsy right about now. If she loved him, she loved him, she couldn't unlove him. Especially when he did considerate things like save her life, hold her hair while she puked and carry her when he caught her limping.

How was any girl supposed to be immune to that? That was, of course, if a girl could get by his fabulous body, devastating blue eyes, and oh-so-sexy smile. Here she was four months pregnant, bruised,

battered, sore, and aching, and all he had to do was shoot her one sexy look and she was a puddle. It just wasn't fair. If she made it through this ordeal she was going to make sure he fell in love with her, too.

"That's a very determined look you have on your face." Jared pulled up a chair next to her and straddled it.

"Really? I was just thinking about this mess we're in."

"Don't worry, if anyone can get you out of it Connor can. He's one of the original white hats. And if he can't get you out of this mess, well, I have a few tricks up my sleeve as well."

"I appreciate all you've done. I'm sure you saved our butts a few times already. I just hope we can figure out what is going on and how to get out of it."

"Don't worry, we'll get through this in no time. You just worry about that baby inside you. When I saw you unconscious in the warehouse, I almost messed my pants. Connor would have killed me if something had happened to you, friend or no friend."

"How did the two of you meet?"

"What did Connor tell you?"

"I didn't ask Connor, I'm asking you."

"Well, the short version is we met in the army in Special Ops. We were both recruited at the same time, both similar backgrounds, similar personalities. Connor is much more heroic than I am. I tend to look out for myself first, and if there is anything left, then I'll look out for who's next."

"I have a hard time believing that. You've done an awful lot for us. Not the least of which was covering my illegal activities." Samara readjusted her position on the uncomfortable chair.

"Well, I haven't done it because I'm some nice guy you know."

“Of course not,” Samara said with as serious an expression as she could manage. Why did some men find it so hard to admit they had a softer side?

“Don’t look at me with those rose colored glasses. The only reason I’m helping you two is because Connor saved my life when he could have easily turned the other way. I got him kicked out of Special Ops and sent to diplomatic assignments.”

“Connor didn’t mention that he got kicked out of the army, only that he went to guard diplomats.”

“It’s one of the worst punishments a Special Ops recruit could have, and he did it without complaint. All because of me. You don’t just turn your back on something like that.”

“You know what, Jared? I think you’re not as tough as you’d like to believe, and I’m wondering who you’re trying to convince more, me or you.”

“Well, you don’t know much, do you? If you need to use the bathroom better do it now, you leave in ten minutes.” Jared stood and stalked off.

“What did you say to Romero to piss him off?” Connor asked as she hobbled by him on her way to the bathroom.

“Nothing, I just told him I didn’t think he was as tough as he made himself out to be. Honestly, you men act like having emotions and showing them is akin to wearing a pink tutu and a feathered boa. He said we’re leaving in ten minutes.”

“Good, we’re almost through here. Honey, I’m sorry but we’re going to have to stop a few times to get more fuel. This plane doesn’t have a big enough tank to get us to the Cape. It might not be as bad as we’re not going quite as high as we did on the trip down here.”

“Do you think I got my diplomas from a cereal box? Do you really think I believe that load of bull you just spread out? I know this is going to be hell. I can live with the facts believe me. I’d rather have the naked

truth in all its horror than have some prettily spoken lies. Don't try to con me." She glared at him, furious that he thought he could bullshit her.

Connor held up his hands in mock surrender. "I'm sorry! I was just trying to reassure you. I won't sugar coat the truth again. I swear."

"Good. Now I'm going to the bathroom. Why don't you see if the vending machine has any ginger ale. Oh, and while you're at it, you might as well look for a bucket of some kind, I imagine I'm going to need it."

In the dingy little bathroom, she pulled her hair back in a ponytail and shoved several wads of toilet paper in her purse. The restroom boasted no paper towels, or she would have taken those. Knowing she only delayed the inevitable, she unlocked the wobbly door and limped out.

Jared waited with Connor near the plane on the runway.

"I realize we're in a precarious situation here, and I'm not too intelligent when it comes to this cloak and dagger stuff, but is it possible for me to make a phone call on my cell phone at one of our stops? I want to call Macayla and find out if the stuff they used to knock me out will harm the baby. Also, if this situation doesn't get resolved soon, I'm going to need to keep in touch with her as my time gets closer. As much as I trust you two, I'd rather be prepared. I would like to give birth in a nice sterile hospital with doctors who give nice, large pain killers."

"Don't borrow trouble. We'll get you to a hospital before you're due. We've got all summer to finish this." Connor's face held a hint of panic.

"Who's Macayla?" Jared asked.

"My friend and my doctor. She thinks I'm off with Connor on vacation."

"Give me her number and her address. I'll get her a phone with a scrambler, and she can use it to talk to you on a regular basis. Just keep

the conversations short and random and there shouldn't be any problem."

"Thanks, Jared, you're a dear." She kissed him on the cheek and climbed into the puddle jumper, wincing at the small space for passengers. She was going to die.

Chapter Fifteen

She didn't die, but by the third take-off she wanted too. After they hit turbulence over the Atlantic, she'd begged Connor to kill her outright or let her walk to Cape Cod. Samara would have happily given everything she owned to sit on something that wasn't moving, bumping or shaking.

If she survived this she would never take another plane again for as long as she lived. When they finally touched down in Hyannis, she could do little more than whimper.

All she wanted to do was lie still, but that didn't look likely. The car that waited for them was an SUV that had apparently seen better days. Somehow she didn't think its suspension was in any better shape than its rusted exterior.

Her whimpers increased as she climbed into the truck and felt a spring in the seat stab her in the butt. The truck would be hell on the twisty roads they had to cover. Of course, if the cottage was as remote as she remembered, they would need the four-wheel drive and bigger wheels.

"Jared was right, the son-of-a-bitch is as mean as they come. The next time I see him I'll be sure to apologize for thinking he was a nice guy. Rat bastard." Samara climbed into the truck, grabbed a baseball cap from the dashboard and pulled it down over her eyes. Biting back another groan when the truck started, she closed her eyes and tried to sleep.



Connor woke her up when they hit the Truro town line. He had no idea how to get to the cottage and didn't know this area of the country at all. It seemed so isolated and empty. There were signs on many of the businesses stating they were closed until Memorial Day.

The road had very few cars on it, and the farther out they got the fewer cars he saw. There was something very desolate, but at the same time soothing, about the place.

"Samara, honey, wake up. I need you."

"Not now, Connor, I can't." Samara curled up in the seat.

Connor smiled, thinking it wouldn't be too long before he was pestering her for more pleasurable endeavors, but right now he needed directions.

"Sam, sweetie, we just crossed the Truro town line, I need directions."

"Huh? What?" She rubbed her eyes and examined her surroundings. "Oh, right. Hold on, let me get my bearings, it's been years since I've been out here." Samara sat up and looked around. "If I remember correctly the turn off to the cottage is more of a trail than a road, and it's off another main road."

"I don't suppose you remember the name of the road?"

"I don't remember the name of the road, but I know it's after a trailer park."

They passed the main road twice before they found it. The road was in terrible condition and was blocked by a decaying scrub pine that had fallen over in some long ago storm.

Connor was able to push the tree aside enough to fit the truck through. He'd push it back and cover the tire marks after he got Samara settled in the cottage.

“This might need a little cleaning before we can live in it. It’s been closed up for years, ever since my uncle died.”

“We have some supplies with us and we can get more later. We’ve got a small generator, gas, sleeping bags, and food. If the well hasn’t run dry, we’ll be set for a while, if it has, we’ve got some bottled water and we’ll figure something out.”

“Okay, but don’t forget, I warned you.”

The cottage wasn’t as bad as it could have been, but neither was it in livable condition. The windows had been boarded up, which kept out the worst of the elements and animals, but it smelled like something had gotten caught in the chimney and died there some time past.

Samara came gagging out of the cottage two seconds after she went in. It was Connor who pulled the boards off the windows and opened the house up. By using a fishing pole he’d found in the shed he was able to snake the carcass out of the flu and bury it some distance away.

He cut some fresh pine boughs and brought them in the house to mask the scent a little, then pulled all the sheets and plastic coverings off the furniture and put them downwind from the house.

A few hours later the stench was cleared enough so that Samara could walk into the house without gagging, and she set to work. Connor first checked the generator that the cottage had. Although out of gas and an older model, it appeared to be sound. A few gallons of gas, some start-up pulls and it was humming along nicely.

Hoping for the best, he checked the water pump. Someone had drained it before they closed the house down, luckily, so no pipes had frozen. The pump made some audible clanks before it started running, but Samara announced that the faucets were indeed working.

When Connor came in from the shed where the generator and pump were stored, he found Samara cleaning out the kitchen, throwing out old boxes of baking soda, turning on the refrigerator, cleaning out the sink

and the stove. The kitchen was small, about the size one would expect in a vacation cottage where you would spend more time grilling outdoors and going out to eat than cooking five course meals.

The cottage itself had three rooms and a front porch. It had a living room that was open to the kitchen, and two other rooms, the bedroom and the bathroom. The bathroom was the size of a closet. It had a pedestal sink, a toilet, and a shower stall with stained tiles.

The bedroom had enough room for the double bed and a dresser. There was one closet that they would have to share. It was probably a good thing they had few clothes between the two of them.

Connor helped her pulled the mattress cover off the ancient mattress, and looked for a linen closet. The closet was in the bathroom, and not only did it have pillows and bed linens, it had towels as well. They smelled musty from disuse, but hanging the pillows on the clothesline and washing the linens could solve that.

“We aren’t going to be able to wash this stuff unless we go back into town and get some detergent,” Samara said, dismay evident in her voice.

“We can at least air everything out. That’s all we can do until it’s safe to get some more supplies.” No matter how bad it smelled in the cottage, it wasn’t worth the risk to go back to town this soon. He knew she was a neat freak, but she’d have to suck it up for a bit. Her safety was more important than fresh sheets. Besides, he’d slept in far worse conditions and lived. It wouldn’t kill her to do it for a little while.

Running into town very well could.

“Jared loaded the truck up with the essentials, maybe he thought to pack spare linens too,” Connor offered

“I doubt it.”

“Don’t give up now, honey, it shouldn’t take too much to put this place to rights. I haven’t unloaded half the stuff Jared crammed in there.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, how did he arrange everything and have it ready when we arrived?”

“He flew into Boston on a direct flight and then took a commuter jet to the local airport. It only took him a few hours to get here. More than likely, he was done and gone before we finished our second leg.”

“Well isn’t that a fine howdy-do. I go through ten hours of hell, and he’s here and gone in five.”

“Honey, you know why we had to fly in the little plane. Every major airport could have people on the look out for us. No one knows about my connection with Romero, he has all the freedom to move around that we don’t. We need him to have that freedom. Besides, if he didn’t get here in half the time, we’d have been in a world of hurt.”

“I suppose you’re right. But I’m still mad at him.”

“If that makes you happy,” Connor said, feeling a smile pull at the corners of his mouth.

They continued cleaning the cottage and unloaded the supplies into the house. Jared had indeed remembered laundry soap, dish soap, hand soap and bathroom cleaner.

“Are you sure a woman didn’t help him pack all this stuff?”

“No, I would imagine that he did it by himself. How would he explain packing a truck to leave it on a runway? Why do you ask?”

“I have never known a single man who even thought about laundry until they were down to their last pair of shorts, never mind one that would remember to pack not just hand soap, but dish soap and laundry soap, forget about the bathroom cleaner. He amazes me.”

“Does that mean you forgive him?” Connor asked.

“Not yet, but he’s working his way back into my good graces. What else is in that truck?”

Connor unloaded bags of groceries. “I have no idea. But if there’s anything we desperately need, I’ll find a way to get them as soon as possible.”

Samara started putting the groceries away. They had some of the groceries still left from the things they had bought in Miami, but those were more as a decoy than actual basics.

Luckily for them, Jared had gone all out. There was pasta, rice, potatoes, canned chili, juice, tea, coffee, cereal, bread, bagels, tuna, muffins, pancake mix, syrup, vegetables, and of course the ever necessary macaroni and cheese.

Connor marveled at Jared’s resourcefulness as he carried two coolers into the kitchen.

“Don’t tell me he was able to get us milk too.” Samara’s mouth gaped open in disbelief.

“Not only milk, but eggs and butter.”

“What, no cheese?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t checked the blue cooler yet.”

Samara took that one from his hand, and he unloaded the eggs and milk into the refrigerator.

A gasp escaped from Samara as she lifted the lid. Connor saw her rapt expression as he closed the heavy door.

“What else did Jared bring? You look ready to canonize him. Did he remember cheese?” Connor hid his smile. He knew damn well what was in the cooler.

“Even better, chocolate ice cream, chocolate chip ice cream, and chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream. And they’re all mine.” Samara clutched the dripping containers to her chest.

“That’s okay, he packed me beer.” Connor smiled at her greed.

“Why don’t we unload the rest of that truck, grab the sleeping bags, and indulge in our vices?”

“I can handle that.”

“Now which flavor should I have first?” In the end she took a spoon and ate some out of all three.



Jared stared at the condominium in front of him. According to the address given to him by Samara, this was where her doctor lived. Jared had a hard time believing a doctor couldn't afford better than this.

It wasn't that the complex was run down, in fact, it was unbelievably neat and orderly. The yards were well cared for, there were spring flowers coming up in flower beds, the paint was fresh and the sidewalks swept sparkling clean. It was a perfect place for a young couple just starting out.

But the information he'd unearthed on the good doctor revealed she wasn't part of a young couple, she had been in her group practice for three years, and was anything but a big spender.

She drove a seven-year-old car that she had paid off in three years. She owned the condominium outright and apparently had no college loans. Something was fishy. The puzzle pieces didn't line up right.

Jared felt compelled to do more than just drop off the phone with a few terse instructions like he'd originally planned. He wanted to meet this conservative doctor. When things didn't add up, there was usually a reason, and Jared was cursed with a mind that couldn't leave things alone.

Parking his car on the street, he walked up to the gate and acted like he had a card to swipe to get in. In reality he had a card that threw off the mechanics of the lock for less than a minute. As long as no one else tried to get in before that minute was up, he could get in undetected.

He walked to the condo and checked the front door. It made sense that she wouldn't use the front door, she would probably come in from the garage. Her car was in the garage, so she should be home.

Jared had scoped out her hospital schedule, and she had come off rounds an hour ago. He hoped to find her asleep, wake her up, give her the phone and instructions, and be out before she could ask too many questions

There was no way he wanted her involved in this any more than she already was. He was having enough problems keeping Samara out of trouble, the last thing he needed was another civilian to worry about.

He picked the lock on the door handle with ease—he could pick almost any lock in under thirty seconds. The dead bolt was another story.

She was smart to use both. Most people who had dead bolts tended to leave them unlocked because they were a pain to open. A normal burglar would generally bypass a house with a dead bolt because for most burglars the only way to get by one was to break the doorframe. Not impossible, but time consuming.

Jared was not a normal burglar.

He took another, stronger pick out of his wallet and had the lock sprung in less than a minute. Easing the door open he stepped through quietly, he didn't want to wake her up until he'd nosed around a bit.

He never got the chance.

"You have ten seconds to tell me what you are doing breaking into my house before I blow holes in your midsection." A gorgeous redhead held a dainty looking handgun aimed right at his midsection.

She wore only a towel, and her hair dripped down her back. She stood on the staircase back far enough so that Jared couldn't disarm her without serious injury to himself. Her face was all business and she held the gun with the posture that said she knew how to use it.

“Why don’t you just point the gun in another direction, and I’ll tell you why I’m here,” Jared said in a very calm voice, raising his hands over his head to show he was unarmed.

She pointed the gun at his groin. “You now have five seconds, talk quickly.”

“Okay. I’m a friend of Connor’s. He and Samara are in a little trouble, and they are not able to have contact with anyone for the time being. Samara had an, ah, accident and she wants to talk to you about it, but she can’t call you on a phone that can be traced. I have a phone and a number for you to use so she can call you when she has other questions.”

“You bought yourself a little more time. Using two fingers get the phone out, dial the number, and then slide it over to me. If you move so much as one extra muscle, I’ll shoot you in the kneecaps and work my way up until you stop moving. Do you understand me?”

“Loud and clear.” Jared did not like being ordered around, especially by a woman, especially at gunpoint, and most especially by a woman in a towel, soaking wet, who he figured he could pick up with one hand. She was precariously close to spilling out over the towel, and didn’t seem in the least bit worried about it. She must have ice water in her veins.

Most women would be screaming hysterically if they caught some man walking through their front door. This one pointed a gun and gave orders like a drill sergeant.

He very carefully did as she asked, but promised himself retribution when she put the gun down.

Macayla watched as the tall stranger did her bidding. She had finished her karate work out, and just stepped out of the shower when she heard a scratching at the front door. Without thinking, she ran to her closet, pulled her ammunition out of one safe and her gun out of the other.

She only had time to load the clip when she heard the dead bolt click open. She bolted down the stairs, slamming the clip home and waited to see who dared to break into her place.

She'd almost dropped the towel when the tall, dark stranger stepped into her foyer. She was glad she was standing on the stairs as he was close to a foot taller than she was. Scared as she was, she'd still made sure none of her nervousness showed on her face as she waited for him to explain why he was in her home in such an unorthodox manner. His story about Connor and Samara could be easily checked out, and she was far enough away from him that if he tried something she would be able to get one shot off before he reached her.

He slid the digital phone to her, and told her to wait for the scrambler to work before speaking. She stepped down, never taking her eye off him and felt around for the phone. Her towel was coming close to falling off but she would forsake modesty for safety.

He didn't look real happy about being ordered about, and she wasn't taking any chances. He radiated danger, and she wasn't stupid enough to believe he would remain docile if she took the gun off him. It wasn't easy, but she managed to pick the phone up and keep her towel covering at least the front of her body without taking her eye off him for a second.

She waited while the phone rang, watching him run his eyes over her body. He was probably doing it to try to unnerve her. As a strategy it was working pretty darn good. She felt the heat of his gaze burn over the skin exposed by the towel, which was most of her body. Her mouth went as dry as cotton and her hands began to shake with something other than fatigue.

"Hello, I'd like to speak to Samara Murphy." She spoke slowly and clearly.

"Macayla. It's Connor, I'll get Samara." Macayla could hear Connor handing the phone to Samara and advising her to keep it short.

Macayla verified it really was Samara with a few questions then promised to call back when she had shown her visitor out.

“Macayla, I have to ask, do you have your gun pointed at him?” Samara questioned.

Macayla felt a blush spread down her neck to her breasts. “Uh, yes as a matter of fact, I do.”

“I kind of figured as much. Be careful, he’s a good man, but I don’t think he’s a very nice one.”

“I’ll take your word for it. I’ll call you back.”

Macayla ended the conversation, and pointed the gun to the ceiling. Almost as if she had pressed a release lever, Jared shot across the room faster than Macayla could believe possible. He grabbed her wrist in a grip that was almost, but not quite, painful.

“I’ll relieve you of this for now, thank you,” Jared said softly, removing the gun from her hand and sticking it in the waistband of his jeans.

“I’ll bet you just hated that, didn’t you. You’re the type of guy who hates to be told what to do, especially by a woman. I’ll bet you’ve been plotting revenge ever since I threatened your dick, huh? Well go ahead tough guy, give it your best shot.”

He was a great deal taller than she, and quite muscled. He had the clean cut bearing of ex-military; she could spot the influences of the armed services a mile off.

“So, you think you’ve got me figured out so well. How do you know so much about me?”

“I almost married someone just like you, God help me. I learned pretty quickly how men like you feel about being told what to do. Everything is just fine and dandy when you’re giving the orders, but have the situation reversed and you revert to a cave man. Well go ahead, try

and get your revenge. If you want to break my wrist, you're doing a pretty lame job of it."

Macayla knew she was goading him but couldn't seem to help herself. Something about his cool, unruffled manner bothered her. She knew he was mad, she could see the emotion burning in his eyes, but nothing else showed on his passive face.

Balancing on her toes, she waited for him to make his move. She figured he'd have to do some form of violence to make up for her daring to hold a gun on him. Her ex-boyfriend would have already slapped her by now. Well this time around she was ready. She was no longer anyone's punching bag. She'd been training for eight years, figuring if her ex ever came back, she'd have a surprise for him.

"So, you think you've got me figured out, do you."

"Yeah, as a matter of fact I do."

"Well, I bet you didn't expect this." Jared used his free hand to cup her face, and gently pressed his lips to hers. The contact was more devastating than getting hit.

Macayla, expecting violence was totally unprepared for gentleness. Her confused mind couldn't comprehend his kissing her. Her body, which had been without male company for years, responded with all the pent up longings it had been hoarding. She let go of the towel and wrapped her free hand around Jared's neck. The contact made her groan softly. With a sigh of longing, she gave herself totally into the act of kissing him back.

Jared obviously was not expecting such enthusiasm, but he reacted with the fervor of man starving to death at an all you could eat buffet. He released her wrist and grabbed her bare behind to pull her body into his aroused one.

Macayla reached up on tiptoes to get as close as possible to him. He responded by using both hands to lift her completely off the stair she had

been standing on, and wrapped her legs about his waist. Using one hand to keep her in place, he used the other to pull her head back and feast on her neck, her face, her ears, and the tops of her breasts.

Macayla squeezed her legs harder, holding on as her world spun out of control. Her blood sang, and her mind had disappeared into some far corner. All she knew was she would die, just die if he stopped kissing her.

Jared tugged at the towel, which had stubbornly clung to her breasts, brushing his knuckles along the sensitive skin. A shiver shook her and her mind melted. Her heart raced a mile a minute and she was breathless with longing.

The shrill beeping of a pager sounded like an alarm in the lust-induced silence. The effect was of a bucket of ice water being thrown on both of them. Macayla practically leapt off him, grabbed her towel and streaked to the bedroom to get her robe.

When she cautiously walked back to the landing, she thought for a minute that he had left already, but then she heard water running in the powder room by the front door. She had no idea what she was going to say to him. What did one say to a person after they had held them at gunpoint, then almost attacked them? Had she really let him grab her naked butt?

Let? She practically pleaded with him to take her on the staircase. Thank God her powers of speech had been rendered incapable, or she probably would have begged him.

She was shamed to her core.

She had never been so out of control in her entire life. She felt like aliens had taken control of her body and she was just now getting it back. Maybe she could hide in her room until he left? But he still had her gun, and as it was the only one she had, she wanted it back.

Jared stood in the small bathroom for a few minutes, letting cool water run over his hands. He had hoped the cold water would cool his blood, but he doubted if he jumped into a cold lake he'd be able to cool his blood. His control had absolutely snapped. He had been curious about this lady before, now he wanted to know everything.

That would have to wait, some of his bait had been taken and he needed to see what it had caught. He ran his hand through his hair, unintentionally wetting it. As much as he wanted to stay, duty called.

Hell, she'd probably come to her senses by now anyway and was upstairs looking for another gun. Just to be on the safe side, he put the gun in the drawer near the sink. It was probably better for her not to have access to it until after her was gone. He'd be lucky if she didn't take pot shots at him as he was leaving.

Damn but she was worth it. He'd never lost control like that in his life, and he'd bedded more women than he could easily name. Christ, he didn't have time for emotional crap like this. He had to get moving and he wasn't going to squeeze through the tiny bathroom window to get out.

He walked out of the room, and she was standing right where he had first seen her, only this time she was covered head to toe in a terry cloth robe.

"I, ah, left your gun in the bathroom. I'd appreciate it if you gave me a running start before you started shooting at my hide."

Macayla flinched at the sound of his voice. She was blushing to the roots of her hair.

"I'll give you a head start as long as you leave now."

Jared was surprised at her blush. He couldn't believe after the incident on the stairs she would be embarrassed now.

"What's wrong, afraid I'll attack you, or you'll attack me?" Jared couldn't resist goading her.

Macayla got redder, if possible. “Get out. You may not use violence to humiliate women, but the result is the same. I’ve been duly chastised for daring to hold a gun on you. Now I would like you to leave.”

“I didn’t kiss you to humiliate you. I did it because you are the most desirable woman I have ever met. I’m leaving now, but this isn’t over. I’ll be back.”

“Then I’ll be sure to keep my gun on you.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

Chapter Sixteen

Samara hung up with Macayla with a feeling of foreboding. Macayla wasn't one to calmly accept brief explanations. She had to dig and delve into every little detail until she worried an issue to death. She also wasn't one to back down. If Jared came across with his tough guy routine, she might very well shoot him.

"Did I hear you say gun?" Connor asked, wrapping his arms around her.

"Oh yes. She has a gun, and knows how to use it. Her father was in the FBI and made sure she was well trained."

Connor chuckled out loud at the picture of Jared being held at gunpoint by the petite redhead.

"I still put my money on Jared. He's always been able to talk himself out any problem he's faced so far. I haven't met a woman yet who could withstand him for long."

"You don't know Macayla very well. She's got more fight in her than any three people I've ever met. But that's beside the point. I know at least one time Jared hasn't been able to talk himself out of a problem?"

"Oh, and when was that?"

"When you saved his life," Samara said triumphantly.

"How did you find out about that?"

"Jared told me that you lost your position in Special Operations because you covered for him. He didn't give me any details. Why don't you fill me in?"

“There really isn’t all that much to tell.”

“That’s okay, I don’t mind.” Samara dug in her heels, she wanted to know everything about the man she had fallen in love with.

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head.

He let out a sigh that ruffled the hair on the nape of her neck. “Fine, but remember I warned you it was no big deal.” He dropped his arms from around her waist. “We were in training in a small part of South America—I can’t tell you where, be happy I’m even telling you this much.”

Samara nodded her understanding. She didn’t care where their training facility was, she wanted to know more about Connor.

“We had a one day pass to go into town and blow off some steam. Jared was something of a loner, he didn’t talk much, kept to himself, didn’t boast like the other guys did, you know. Anyway, a group of us went to find some, ah, entertainment, and we had all gotten a little drunk. We were headed back to the training facility when I noticed Jared wasn’t with us. I told the other guys to go on, and I went back to town to look for him.”

A nervous feeling twisted in Samara’s gut. Connor might have said this was no big deal, but she knew there was more to it than he let on.

“I checked back at some of the bars we had been too—there weren’t all that many to chose from in this village—but no one knew anything. Some of the locals were sick and tired of us gringos coming into town and taking all the best girls. They found Jared alone and decided to take their frustrations out on his hide. He was holding his own against at least six or seven of them. He probably would have been okay if one of them hadn’t smashed a bottle over his head.” Connor took a deep breath and drank a sip of his beer.

Samara held his hand, her heart going out to these young men that were so far from home. Although, apparently they weren't all that lonely. She'd have to grill him about their "entertainment" another time.

"Go on, what happened next?"

"I jumped in and managed to get us out in one piece. When we got back to the training facility, I told the C.O. that it was my fault we got into a bar brawl. He gave me a royal chewing out, gigged me for a day, and that was the end of it. Or it would have been if Jared had kept his mouth shut. When he recovered from his headache he went to the C.O. and told him everything, insisted that he get the gig, and that I be let off. The C.O. called us into his office one by one and found out the story. When it was my turn he asked me why I didn't tell him the truth. I told him I was just sticking up for a buddy. He told me to get my priorities straight, that my loyalty was to the superior officers first, then the company, then to individual members. I told him that maybe I didn't belong in Special Ops. He agreed, and sent me to the diplomatic corps until the end of my tour. End of story."

Samara knew there was more to it than that, but decided not to push.

"Now why don't you tell me one of your deep dark secrets? How did you and Macayla meet?"

"Nothing as exciting as your meeting with Jared. We met in karate class. Why don't I make us some dinner and we'll talk about it a little later. I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry." Connor laughed at the mock punch Samara threw at him.

After dinner they lounged on the couch. Samara propped her feet on Connor's legs and stretched out. He checked out her ankle as he massaged her arches.

“How’s your ankle doing? It doesn’t look swollen.”

“Feels great now, as long as you keep doing what you’re doing.” She closed her eyes and relaxed against him.

“I’m serious. You’ve been on it a lot since we’ve been here, and I don’t want you hurting yourself.”

She heaved a sigh. “It’s fine. I just tweaked it when I kicked the goon. It was stupid. I know better than to use the incorrect foot formation. Macayla’s going to bust my chops when she finds out.”

So how did you meet Macayla anyway? You promised you’d tell me after you ate, again.”

“You don’t forget anything do you? It’s not nearly as interesting as your meeting with Jared. Like I told you before, we were the only two girls in karate class for the longest time. We worked our butts off, and then when it came time for sparring, most of the guys wouldn’t even try to hit us. We only had each other to beat up on. I don’t know if they were afraid that they’d hurt us or we’d hurt them, but it didn’t help us to get any better. Now, there’s no one that can take us anyway, so we continue to beat up on each other.”

“How long have you been studying karate?” He knew she had some pretty good moves, but he wasn’t sure how much training she had.

“About eight years. I have my second-degree black belt. I sometimes think I’m hot stuff, then Dave dumps me on my butt, and I realize how much I have to learn. Even if I could only defend myself from an enraged ten-year-old, it’s still worth all the time and effort I’ve invested for the self-confidence I’ve gained.”

“How so?” Connor was really interested in her answer. She seemed like the most confident woman he had ever met in Jamaica. Since he’d been with her in the U.S. he’d seen a more hesitant side to her. He wasn’t sure where the real Samara fit in.

“When I started karate I was just out of college. I had gotten a teaching job and was doing everything my parents had scripted me to do except get married and make babies. I liked working with kids, I was getting money towards my master’s degree, and I was making a decent salary, but I wasn’t happy. My parents thought I needed a man. They said I should find a nice little hobby that would help me meet people, more particularly, a nice marriage minded man.”

Connor laughed at her expression.

“When I started karate, they figured I’d drop it once I met someone. When I didn’t meet anyone there worth dating but still continued going they were surprised. When I entered a tournament and won first place in sparring, they were even more surprised. They finally realized that I had my own agenda and was going to go my own way. Things have been easier ever since.”

“So karate gave you a way to fight your parents?” Connor asked.

“Not just that, it was the first thing I had ever done well. I felt better about myself, so I didn’t need a man in my life to make me feel like I was beautiful. I was strong, and that mattered to me. Karate is hard for me. I had to work at it, I still do. Even worse, I had to fight Macayla, who was out to prove that just because she was short didn’t mean she was soft. The first time I had to spar her she kicked my butt because I didn’t fight back like I should have.”

“I bet that pissed you off.”

“Well, after that I learned never to underestimate her. We work well together. I tend to go along with the flow. I only fight back when it really matters. Macayla would say no to an ice cream sundae if someone told her to eat it, just because someone told her to do it. She makes me fight for myself more. When I was sick of the politics that went along with teaching, Macayla told me to get out and do something I liked. When I told my parents of my decision to work as an editor, and for myself at

that, they had a fit. They couldn't understand why I wouldn't want to have the security they both craved. It was hard to go against what they thought was best, I'd been doing it for so long, but I did. Now they only nag me about it occasionally. They can't believe I can make the mortgage all on my very own."

"And with some to spare," Connor added.

"How would you know?"

"You're not the only one who did some checking. I know your gross annual salary, college transcripts and even your social security number. There's no place you can hide from me, my dear."

"Really?"

"Really." Connor smirked.

"So, you knew about this cottage after all?" Samara asked with a smirk of her own.

"All right, there was one place, but unless you have a plethora of reclusive uncles lying around, I've got you now."

"That's what you think." Samara pushed Connor over the arm of the couch and ran out the door of the cottage.

"Why you little minx." Connor laughed and chased after her.

He knew he could catch up to her any time he wanted, even with his sore leg still bothering him he was faster than a pregnant woman.

She threw a teasing look over her shoulder and ran towards the dock at the edge of the pond.

She wouldn't really go in, would she? He ran a little faster.

When she reached the edge of the dock, she skidded to a stop, precariously close to the crumbling railing. "Now, you wouldn't hurt a pregnant woman would you? Especially when I'm carrying your baby." Samara held her hands up as he ran towards her.

Connor halted in front of Samara and swooped her into his arms. He held her out over the water as she screamed.

“Now admit it, there’s no place you can hide from me.” He dipped her over the railing.

“All right. I admit it. You win. I can never run away from you. You’ll find me no matter where I go. Now, can you please put me safely on the ground? Please.”

“What’s it worth to you?” Connor asked, trying to wiggle his eyebrows in a suggestive manner.

“Chocolate chip cookies?”

“With nuts or without?” Connor asked.

“Well, since we have no nuts, without.”

“Lucky for you I like my chocolate chip cookies without nuts. You’re safe, this time,” he said as he slid her body down his.

Later, as she mixed up the cookie-dough she hummed quietly to herself. She was content. More than content, she was ecstatic. For some reason, this beautiful man wanted her, plain-Jane Samara, the ice queen.

He could have any woman he wanted but for some crazy reason he wanted her. How did she get so lucky? He never seemed to get enough of her. No matter where she was in the cottage, she could feel his eyes on her. Whenever he got close—which was often in the tiny cabin—he touched her. It wasn’t always a sexual touch, quite often he would just brush her hair back, or give her small pecks on the cheek. It seemed like he couldn’t keep his hands off her.

She didn’t know where this was going, but for right now she had cookies and Connor. Life didn’t get much better than that.

After eating far too many cookies, she decided to burn off some of those calories by scrubbing the years of accumulated dirt off the faded linoleum in the postage stamp kitchen.

Connor sat on the dilapidated couch reading one of her maternity books.

“Are you trying to get me worked up on purpose?”

Samara, who was on her hands and knees, in ratty jeans, a loose T-shirt, and had hair hanging in damp strings down her face looked at him incredulously. “What on Earth are you talking about? I’m cleaning the floor, not doing a striptease.” She sat back and blew the sweaty strands of hair off her face.

“Yeah, but your beautiful butt is wiggling in the air, your shirt is so loose I can see your breasts, and it just looks so inviting, I’m about to embarrass myself. Why don’t you come over here and spare me the humiliation.”

Samara, who two minutes ago was feeling dirty, fat, and sloppy, now felt like Delilah. She stood and pulled her shirt over her head as she walked towards Connor in what could only be called a strut. She stepped out of her oversized jeans, letting them fall to the floor, and stood in front of him in her bra and panties.

As he watched with hot eyes, she reached behind her back and unclasped the bra. Letting the straps fall from her shoulders, she kept the bra covering her breasts and turned her back on him. Shooting a simmering look over her shoulder she bent down to push her panties off, slowly. As she stood up, she let the bra fall to the floor with the rest of her clothing.

Connor was gasping for air on the couch. She could see his erection pressing against the fly of his pants and couldn’t wait to get her hands on him. The thought that she made him mad with desire was a powerful aphrodisiac.

“What’s wrong, Connor? You asked if I was trying to get you worked up, well now I am. Are you afraid to do something about it?” She climbed

on top of his lap, straddling him. She could feel his fierce erection and was getting quite stimulated already, and he hadn't even touched her.

He made her feel like a temptress, and it was fun acting the part. She pulled his shirt over his head and let her hands roam over his chest. He had a beautiful torso, hairy, hard, and muscular. He wasn't blown out of proportion, just well defined and solid. She kissed his chest, sucking on his flat, male nipples. Her hands slipped inside the waistband of his jeans and she heard him suck in his breath. She fondled him inside his pants for a few pleasurable moments, but then felt constricted by the tight jeans.

"Agent O'Riley, is that a weapon in your pocket or are you happy to see me?" she asked as she unfastened his fly and eased his pants over his hips.

"Trust me, I'm very happy to see you." He stared at her with such heat it was a wonder she didn't burn up on the spot. She debated torturing him some more, thought about all the nasty, pleasurable things she could do, then decided she didn't want to wait any longer.

With her pulse pounding in her veins and her skin on fire for him, Samara guided his shaft inside her, then hung on for dear life as he thrust violently.

Samara licked and kissed his shoulder as his body heaved under hers. When he grabbed her butt and sucked on her sensitized nipple at the same time she screamed with release. Waves of pleasure rolled over her as her body flew over the edge.

Their bodies slid together, slick with sweat as Connor continued to thrust into her. His harsh breathing sounded loud in the nearly silent cabin.

When he reached the pinnacle of his pleasure, his shout rang out like a cry of victory. Samara collapsed against him, reveling in their combined pleasure.

“I can’t believe I just strutted across the floor in my bra and panties, almost five months pregnant,” she said once she could find the energy to speak again.

He made her feel like she was the most beautiful, most desirable woman in the world. She remembered telling Connor that she didn’t need a man to make her feel beautiful, but Connor did. He made her feel hot. What would Chad say if he saw her now?

The thought made her snicker.

“What’s so funny? The fact that you can lay me low in ten seconds flat?”

“No, I was just remembering something. Do you know what Chad called me on the night you spied on us?” she asked with a smile.

“What made you think of him?” Connor asked.

“He called me an ice queen. I was just thinking that you make me feel like I’m boiling over all the time. If I had any ice left it would be hard to find.”

“What does he know?” Connor swooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bedroom.

Long pleasurable hours later, Samara had no doubts Connor found her very attractive.

Chapter Seventeen

Harry Reynolds, director of the Miami DEA, was in big trouble.

Very big trouble.

How the hell had his world crumbled around him so quickly?

It had all seemed so easy in the beginning. Wasn't that what every criminal he'd ever busted said? If a life of crime was hard to get into, no one would do it.

But this. This was too easy.

He dropped his head into his hands and thought back to the first time he'd been approached with a bribe. God, he'd been so self-righteous, so indignant about the whole thing. He'd refused the bribe of course, but he hadn't arrested the guy who offered it. Maybe that's where everything went wrong.

The man who'd approached him didn't look like Harry's idea of a drug lord. He looked like a banker or a CPA in his three piece suit and wingtips. Harry told the very normal looking character "no" under no uncertain terms.

He had just been promoted to director and took it very seriously. So what if people said he got the position because he kissed the mayor's butt? It took a little grease to make the wheels of progress run smoothly, and he was going to run with the best. He was going to be the director who cleaned up this city's drug trafficking.

After a few months on the job his stress level was through the roof, his marriage over, his social life gone, and he wasn't sleeping. He started

gambling to pass the empty hours when he couldn't sleep. It helped relax him, blow off steam, a simple pastime that hurt no one. After all, he no longer had his wife to nag him about couple time, they never had any kids, so he wasn't like some men, gambling their kid's college funds away.

So what if occasionally he lost a few thousand? He'd make it back the next time. Only the next time he'd lose more, and more, and more. He'd missed his mortgage payment three times, and he was living off the stale donuts at work.

The next time the guy in the nice suit and leather shoes came up to him, he was desperate enough to ask what he had to do for the money. He wasn't so far gone that he was going to turn his back on years of service just because he was down on his luck for a little while.

No, the suit assured him, no one would be hurt. All he had to do was just call the number on the card if he knew about a bust happening in this particular area and leave a message on the machine. No one would answer the phone, no one would be able to connect him to the call, and the money would be delivered to a locker in the bus station the next day. The key to the locker would be in his mail, and no one would be the wiser. He might even save the lives of some his men by preventing a massacre.

The first time he called the number, Harry shook so badly he thought he'd drop the pay phone. He left the message, then went out and got stinking drunk. The next morning he had almost convinced himself it was a dream.

Then he found the little orange key in his mailbox.

He thought about leaving the money and just ignoring the whole thing. Maybe if he didn't take the money they would leave him alone. So he'd made one mistake, he had been a good officer for years, one mistake was understandable. Feeling better he decided to go to the horse track,

certain he'd be rewarded for doing the right thing. His horse would come in first he just knew it would.

It didn't.

Now he was further in debt. He had no reserves. The debt collectors were going to take everything from him. He could probably borrow from one of the loan sharks that hung around the track waiting for guys like him, down on their luck.

Except, he did have enough money to cover his debts. All he had to do was collect it from the locker at the bus station.

He'd wrestled with his conscience, tossing and turning at night, unable to sleep, thinking about the money waiting for him.

All he had to do was take what was already his. He had already made the call—he couldn't take it back now. He might as well get the money before someone else did. This would be the last time after all, with this money he'd be all set, he'd never have to do it again.

How naïve he'd been. Or had wanted to be. It started with one phone call, now two years later they owned him, body and soul. The more money he got, the more he lost. It seemed like no matter what game, race or dog he picked, he always lost more than he won. He was addicted worse than any junkie he'd ever put behind bars.

It had come down to gambling his soul to the drug dealers for one final pay off. After this, he'd find a way to quit cold turkey, he kept swearing to himself that this was it. Always before the tips had been about little deals, small time things. The man in the suit hinted that if Harry looked the other way for two weeks while they unloaded some ships, the payoff would be even bigger.

He had graduated from payoffs in the bus locker to having the money electronically transferred into a special Internet account. He didn't know how he would explain that one to the IRS, but at this point that was the least of his worries.

Harry sent his agents off on wild goose chases all over the city. When the two weeks were up he looked for the money in his account, only it wasn't there.

Harry called the tech support number and waited hours for customer service to finally come on the line. When he explained that a deposit was supposed to come into his account, but wasn't there, they asked for the routing number of the bank it was supposed to come from. He had no idea how the money got in the account, it just did. The drug dealers probably didn't use a legitimate bank for their payoffs, so Harry hung up the phone.

Luckily, he was able to find some computer genius who could find anything, for a price. Harry paid the weasel a thousand dollars to find out that the money had gone into Connor O'Riley's account. Apparently, their accounts were only one digit apart. Of all the stupid luck.

How was he going to get his money back? O'Riley was an undercover agent, he had no known family, he was a loose cannon, recognizing almost no authority other than his own. Harry rarely saw the man. Since Harry had taken office, he'd only been in contact with O'Riley three times. Of all the people to get his money, it had to be the one whose access was the most difficult.

Harry called the man in the suit to explain the problem, the suit said that it wasn't their problem now; they paid the money, if Harry didn't get it, that was too bad. Harry had been pulling out the last few remaining hairs on his head when in walked the very person who'd been on his mind. He had wanted to grab O'Riley by the throat, but he'd restrained himself.

Did O'Riley know about the money? Is that why he barged into the office? He'd been in deep cover for a while with little or no contact with the office. There was no way he could have checked his account and not blown his cover.

He couldn't know about the money. Harry just had to play it cool.

"O'Riley, you've been gone a while, what can I do for you?"

Connor hadn't wasted any time telling him, "I've been doing some checking, and do you have your head up your ass or what? The word on the street is the biggest deal to go down in years is happening not two blocks from here and there's not a thing planned."

"What the hell do you know?" Veins stood out on his neck. "I've had people all over this city for the last two weeks, if something was going down, I'd know about it. You undercover guys are all alike. Two junkies exchange tales of 'the big one' and you think you can march in here and tell me how to do my job."

"Well someone ought to. There is so much blow on the street it's starting to look like a winter wonderland. Just give me two units of back up and I'll take care of it for God's sake. If you're too chicken to commit a full unit to the job, I'll handle it."

"Fine, you got your two units, handle it hot shot." And Harry smiled for the first time that day. He had a lot of work to do, but when he was done, the money would be back where it belonged.

Everything went according to plan, the back up was delayed, and the drug dealers alerted to his coming. Everything went fine, except O'Riley didn't die. Harry decided he'd have to take matters into his own hands. He bided his time and waited for the watch to be taken off his hospital room. O'Riley was being treated like a frigging hero, and Harry's superiors were breathing down his neck as to why he was sent into the biggest bust of the year with only two units of back up.

Harry couldn't wait to kill him. While he was laid up in the hospital was perfect. He'd be weak from his wound, and unable to fight back. When Harry had finally given it enough time, he went to the hospital with a syringe in his jacket pocket. He could put it right into the IV and not even leave a mark.

He waited until it was shift change and entered the room, only to find out O'Riley had left against medical orders. He couldn't have gone too far, he was still weak from blood loss, but damn, no one could find him. He had been put on medical leave so Harry couldn't even call him into the office. Harry thought he was caught in a bad dream, a nightmare. This couldn't be happening.

Harry had frantically contacted the computer hacker who conducted a smear campaign on O'Riley's files. He had wanted to make it look like O'Riley was not only working for the drug dealers, but that he'd been doing it for a long time. That would explain the sudden deposit in his account. When he was discredited, the money would be taken for evidence, and Harry would be able to control it. For now, all he wanted was to find O'Riley before he could figure out that there were several hundred thousand unexplained dollars in his account.

If O'Riley figured out what was going on and alerted someone before Harry could get the money out of the account, Harry's life wasn't worth a dime. He was counting on getting his hands on that money to cover up any mistakes he made tracking O'Riley.

When he told his computer criminal why he wanted to find O'Riley, the creep had the nerve to call him an idiot.

"You don't have to kill him to get his money, all I need are the passwords to his account. I can get the money back, for a price, say half."

"Half. What are you insane? It will take more than half to bail me out of this mess."

"Well if you had told me what you needed in the first place I wouldn't have had to work so hard to plant evidence on him. Get me his computer and I can transfer the money to your account in seconds."

"I thought all you needed were his passwords?"

“Do you think he’s just going to give them to you? If you get his computer, I can pull everything I need off it and he’ll never know.”

“Great, if that’s all I had to do I could have grabbed it while he was still in the hospital. Now I don’t know where the hell he is.”

“Why don’t you use his credit card number to trace him?”

“Because I don’t have it. Is there any way for you to get it?”

“Give me his social security number and I’ll find his credit card and him.”

Harry had waited for the computer weasel to search the cosmos for O’Riley. Harry didn’t understand computers, and didn’t like them unless they were attached to a slot machine. He blamed them for the mess he was in right now and wished he had some other way of tracking O’Riley. The man was too slick by half. He should have been dead, or still in the hospital, instead he was gallivanting all over the free world with Harry’s money.

“What’s this?” the hacker asked with surprise.

“Did you find him?”

“No, but someone else is looking for him as well. They’re checking his IRS file, but he’s restricted. Too bad, if we didn’t do such a good job of painting him out to be a double agent, this guy could find him for us.”

“Do you think O’Riley is searching his records because he suspects something?”

“I thought you said he would be out of commission for a while?”

“He was supposed to be dead.”

“That’s not part of my job.” The weasel squirmed at the mention of killing O’Riley. “I can track the hack, and maybe that will lead to him.”

“Than do it.”

“It will take me a few days. I’ll call you when I get something.”

Harry had almost bitten his nails completely off by the time he heard back from the him.

"I traced the hack into the IRS. The IP address originates in Connecticut. I can get you the home address, too."

"Excellent, can you tell me where he is now?"

"I can check to see if he's made any purchases recently."

"Well, what's stopping you?"

The computer geek muttered and swore as he worked diligently at the keyboard until he found Connor's name on a flight from Jamaica to Hartford, Connecticut.

"Well, lookie here, he just made a trip to Connecticut. What a coincidence."

"Can you do anything to keep him in place?"

"I can cut off his credit card, that would keep him in place."

The card was cut off, and Harry had thought that would keep O'Riley and his damn computer in one spot. Harry got on the phone to some contacts he had and got some hired muscle to make a trip to West Hartford that night. He had told the hired thugs to steal any computer they found, but the idiots bungled that job.

Then O'Riley had figured out someone was out to get him and had gone so far underground Harry hadn't been able to find him. He had thought his luck had changed when one of the eyes he had paid to watch the airports saw someone matching O'Riley's description getting off a plane in Miami with a woman and, more importantly, a laptop.

Harry immediately sent someone to the hotel where O'Riley had booked a room, using another name of course. The thugs saw O'Riley and the woman check in, then saw O'Riley leave without the computer.

The plan had been to get the girl out of the room and steal the computer, but the screw-ups he'd hired couldn't even do that right. They'd come back with the girl and no computer. Trading the girl for the laptop wasn't the best idea he'd ever heard, but he jumped on it like a drowning man, only to lose the laptop and the girl.

Now, everything had gone wrong, he had no girl, no computer, he may have been identified by whoever was helping O'Riley, and there was an internal investigation being conducted. He had nothing left to lose. He had no money, his career was shot as soon the mistakes he couldn't cover were found out, and O'Riley still had all his money. The drug lords were not going to let him go. He had saved their butts too many times for them to give him up. His life was worth less than nothing to them once his usefulness was ended.

He was a man at the end of his rope. The idea of taking his service revolver and just ending his entire pathetic life ran around and around in his head, but he didn't have the courage to take that final step. If he was going to die, he was going to take that bastard O'Riley out with him. This was all his fault.

Harry Reynolds had never taken responsibility for his mistakes in his life. He wasn't about to start now when he had a scapegoat to place the blame on instead. He was going to find the bastard and kill him. When O'Riley was dead, Harry would find a way to get out of this mess. He was sure of it.



Samara was worried. She didn't say anything, but Connor could tell. She still smiled all the time, responded to his every touch, look, word, but every once in a while he would catch her with a frown on her face. He was afraid she was regretting her pregnancy.

Connor wasn't used to dealing with women out of bed. His mother had been prone to long silences whenever she got mad. She'd acted affronted if Connor's father asked her what was wrong. When pressed, she would huff and turn away as if he should know what was wrong and do something about it. Connor didn't think that Samara was that way.

She tended to tell it like it was, and when she was mad you knew it. He just didn't know why she was worried. He took a deep breath and walked up to her where she was sitting on the porch steps.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"Is that all they're worth?"

"Tell me what's on your mind and I'll pro-rate it."

"Oh nothing, I was just worried about the baby."

"Is something wrong? Do you want to call Macayla?"

"No, she said the stuff I was given probably had no effect on the baby, but she wants to listen to the heartbeat anyway. I'm worried about how I'm going to see another doctor without leading anyone to us. There are so many forms you have to fill out. It's too easy to leave a paper trail. Besides, I don't want any old doctor, I want Macayla."

"Then you'll have her. I don't want you worried to death about this. We'll figure something out."

"I don't want to put her at risk. What if her place is being watched?"

"Then we won't meet at her place. There has to be somewhere we can meet that can't be tied to the two of you. Think about it, and when you're ready we'll call Dr. Red."

"Oh, you're brave. I dare you to call her that to her face."

"I'm brave, not stupid." Connor gave her a wink.

Macayla had an idea, but she needed to make a few calls before she knew if it would work. She gave Samara a time when she would call her back.

Connor had no trouble hearing both sides of the conversation since he was practically glued to Samara's side. He wanted to make sure he could intervene before she said anything that could get them in trouble. The phone was scrambled but that didn't mean it couldn't be traced.

Samara glared at him when he tilted the receiver so he could hear too, but didn't push him away.

“How are you doing? You feeling okay? How are things going with lover-boy?” Macayla asked, making Connor grin.

“I’m feeling great, and I’m gaining weight like crazy. We don’t have much to do but eat and, ah, sleep.” Samara shot him a look.

“Yeah, I believe that. Don’t gain too much weight, and take it easy on the chocolate. The caffeine isn’t good for the baby.”

“How did you know I was eating chocolate?”

“Sam, we’ve been friends for eight years, when haven’t you eaten chocolate?”

“Okay, smarty pants, I’ll cut back.”

“That’s all I ask. Let me check some things out, and I’ll get back to you. Behave yourself and stay out of trouble.”

“I will if you will.”

“When have I been in trouble?”

“I don’t know. But tell me, why haven’t you mentioned what happened with Jared?”

“Jared? Nothing happened. Why what did he tell you?”

“Nothing, it’s the fact that neither one of you said a word about it that has me curious. I don’t know Jared that well, but I know you like I know my own reflection. If you were annoyed you would have complained about him. If you were angry, you would have chewed my ear off about him, but you’ve not said word one. Makes me think you like him.”

“Like that boorish, overgrown, caveman. Are you insane?”

“How did he kiss?”

“Like a god.”

“Gotcha.”

“Damn. It was just to get even with me for pointing a gun at him, it didn’t mean a thing.”

“Fine.”

“I mean it, it meant less than nothing.”

"I believe you."

"I'm serious."

"Great, I'm glad that a kiss by a gorgeous man who you yourself said was god-like meant nothing to you."

"You're impossible. Now let me go so I can plan a way to meet you, although why I should go through the trouble for an ungrateful wench like you I don't know."

"Because you love me, and I love you, too. Call me back. Bye."

"Bye."

"What was that all about?" Connor asked once she disconnected.

"I think she may be attracted to Jared."

"If you say so. How do you figure that?"

"Neither one of them said a word about their meeting."

"I see, that makes perfect sense, they must obviously be madly in love if they haven't mentioned the meeting."

"You idiot, don't you think they would have at least complained about the meeting? After all she did hold a gun on him. I don't know Jared, but I do know Macayla. When she feels strongly about something, she clams up about it, like if she talks about it, it will ruin whatever it is."

"That makes no sense whatsoever."

"I didn't say it made sense, I said that's the way she is." Samara pulled Connor down next to her on the couch.

"When she was studying for her boards, she didn't mention them until after she not only took them, but got the results back that said she passed. It was the same way when she was trying to get into the group practice she's in now. She didn't even tell me she had interviewed with the head of the practice until after her first day. If she is mildly annoyed with something, she rants and raves about it. She can complain for hours about getting cut off in traffic, but when she feels strongly about something, she closes up tight as a drum."

“I still think you’re making more of this than there really is.”

“I didn’t say she loved him, I just said I think she’s attracted to him. There is a difference you know.”

“Oh, so you think you’re an expert on love do you?”

“Maybe. I’ve had two very good examples of lasting love.”

“So because your parents have a good marriage that makes you an expert?” Connor was warming to his subject now. He was going to get her to admit she loved him. He knew that she did, she was just too stubborn to admit it.

“It means I know what real love is, long lasting love, not infatuation.”

“Why don’t you tell me, what is ‘real’ love?”

“Well, it means putting up with the other person’s annoying habits, listening to the other person’s hopes and dreams, having the same goals in life, wanting to grow old with them, being able to laugh with one another. It’s more than just physical, it’s more important than just the sex. It means that even when you’re old and droopy you will still be lovely to your partner. Love is a process, not a one-time event. It changes and grows, it makes the hard times easier, and the easy times better. It’s waking up in the morning, with bad breath, bedhead, bags under your eyes, and your partner still thinks you’re beautiful. That’s my idea of love as shown to me by my parents, who I might add are off on yet another honeymoon and probably have a better sex life than I have had until just recently.”

“Well, I guess you do know a lot about love. But there is one thing you’re missing.”

“Oh, and why don’t you tell me what that is, smart guy?”

“The fact that you love me.”

“Oh, do I?” Samara looked like a deer caught in headlights. Her eyes were wide with shock, and her breathing was rapid. She got up from the couch and moved into the kitchen.

“Yes. You. Do. You are madly, passionately, desperately in love with me.” Connor stalked her across the room.

“And how do you know this?” Samara asked, backing up to the counter.

“Because I am in love with you, and if you are not as stupidly, head over heels in love with me, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Oh, well in that case, of course I’m in love with you,” Samara said, heart in her eyes.

“Is that the best you can do? After that whole speech about what love is, all you can say when you confess you love is ‘of course I’m in love with you’ what kind of declaration is that?”

“What do you want? A formal statement to the press?” Samara asked, now pressed into the corner of the cabinets by Connor’s large body.

“For a start.” Connor, nibbled on her neck.

“What should I say, that for the first time in my life I understand the play *Romeo and Juliet*? That I’ve never been so happy, even though I’m in more danger than any point in my life? That I couldn’t ask for a better father for my child? That I would just die if anything happened to you? That you have become the most important person in my life? That you mean more than anything to me? Is that what you want me to say?”

“I think that will cover it. But what about that I’m the sexiest man alive? Or how about how I make you scream in passion? Aren’t those things important?”

“I suppose so. Well, I’m waiting?”

“For what?”

“I think I deserve a little declaration from you don’t I?”

“After I had to drag yours out of you? Why should I?”

“Because if you don’t, I’ll tease you, then get a headache.” Samara rubbed her breasts against his arm and placed nibbling kisses up the column of his throat.

“That’s blackmail.” Connor groaned at her manipulations.

“That’s such an ugly word, I prefer ‘encouragement’.”

“I’m encouraged all right.”

“Well?”

“Okay, let me get the words right. If you don’t stop teasing me, you’ll get very few words, but a whole lot of something else.”

“I’m waiting.”

“When I saw you get on the bus in Jamaica, I thought that you would be very hard to forget, I was right.”

“That’s it? That’s all you have to say?” Samara asked, her eyes narrowing.

“I’m not done yet. This isn’t easy for me you know. I didn’t have too many good examples to follow. I’m treading on new ground here.” Connor took a deep breath. He wanted to get this right, but fear made a knot in his stomach. What if he screwed this up? Shit, fighting druggies was easier.

“After you left Jamaica, I didn’t want to be there anymore. In the past, one woman was the same as another, or none at all. If I couldn’t find anyone to meet my needs it was no big deal, and if I did, it was no big deal either. When I met you, I knew no one else would do. Do you think I normally spent that much time and attention on someone who didn’t sleep with me after the second night? I wanted you, and there was no one else that even came close to filling your spot.”

Connor took a deep breath and ran his hand through his hair. This wasn’t as bad as he thought, but it wasn’t easy going against thirty years of emotional silence.

“After you left, I took the first opportunity to leave the resort. It just seemed so lonely without you. It was the first time I had ever minded the fact that I hadn’t gotten the address and phone number of a woman. I knew I could get the information easily enough, but it seemed like you

didn't want any ties either, so I wasn't about to look you up without some sign from you. While I was in the hospital, all I could think about was how it would be nice if you could come visit me. How for the first time ever, I wanted someone to hold my hand and say 'there, there everything is going to be okay'. I had never minded being a loner before I met you. I went back to Jamaica thinking I would be fine, instead I kept looking for you to walk into the Rasta Mon and ask for a wine with ice. When Alex told me you had called, I could have killed him for telling you I wasn't the sort to stick around. Later, when Jared told me that you were looking for me, I got excited. Maybe you felt the same way I did? When I got to your house, and you weren't home, I felt like maybe I had been lying to myself, maybe I read more into it than was there. I was calling myself several kinds of idiot when you pulled in with that jerk. I almost lost my mind when he kissed you. I really was mad enough to hit him, repeatedly. Then to find out you didn't look for me because you missed me, but because you were pregnant, well I got even madder."

This was the longest speech he'd ever given in his life. Being with Samara had changed him from a loner to someone who could share his feelings without shame. It wouldn't always be easy, but he finally knew that he'd have someone there to help him through the tough time.

"Oh Connor, I—"

"I'm not done yet. You wanted a declaration, well I'm going the entire distance. Enjoy it while it lasts, this may never happen again." Connor kissed her teary, upturned face before finish the last of his epiphany.

"When I heard that your house had been broken into, I saw it as a great excuse to be near you again. I think I would have done anything to make it up to you after what I said. I never meant any of it."

"Oh, Connor, I know that. I did contact you because I wanted you in my life. The only reason I didn't try to call you sooner was because of my pride. I wasn't going to chase after a man who didn't want me. I thought

the reason you didn't talk about your family or your job was because you didn't want anything permanent. Do you think I would have slept with just anyone? I've only slept with one other man in my entire life. I kept telling myself that this was just a fling, that it was time I did something like that in my life, that I was getting old and stale. I needed some spice in my life, and you were it. I was fooling myself too. I think I loved you from the moment I saw you dancing like an idiot at the bar just because I dared you."

"I didn't look like an idiot," Connor said, mortally affronted.

"Yes, honey, take it from a woman who loves you, you looked like an idiot, but I love you anyway."

"Keep saying it, honey, keep saying it." Connor wrapped her legs around his waist and carried her to the bedroom.

She did.

Chapter Eighteen

Macayla called back late that night. Samara had just gotten back to bed after going to the bathroom yet again. Connor was pulling her into his spoon style embrace when the digital phone Jared had given them rang. Samara picked it up and waited for the scrambler to kick in before she spoke.

“Hello? Macayla?”

“Who else would be calling you this late at night?”

“No one who valued his or her life. Actually I was just getting back to bed after peeing again. When does this stop?”

“Two months after delivery. Just wait until you see why you have to get up in the middle of the night then.”

“Thanks, you’re all heart. I assume you have news, or did you call to pick on me?”

“Fun as it is, no. I have a plan.” She paused dramatically.

“Well, are you going to tell me what the plan is, or do I guess?”

“You take all the fun out of things. Okay, here’s the plan. I have a friend from medical school that works for a clinic in Boston. It’s in Roxbury, not the nicest section of town. I suggest you take tall, dark and dangerous with you. You’ve been out of the karate studio for a while, you might be rusty.”

“You want to spar with me to keep me in practice?”

“What, and take advantage of your condition? I wouldn’t dream of it. Now stop rising to the bait, and listen to the particulars. Friday is my day

off. I'm going to drive to Logan airport in Boston, then take the 'T' to Roxbury. You're going to take the bus from the Cape to Boston, but not the one that goes to the airport, the one that goes to Boston center, and meet me at the clinic. Fill out the sign in form as Sandra Desmond—that was one of our professors in medical school. When the nurse announces that name to my friend, he'll get me and I'll go to your exam room. We'll have our appointment, Fred will take me out to dinner, and I'll go home. We'll do the same thing every month until you two get this mess figured out. Any luck so far?"

"Not much, Connor is going nuts, he can't do anything without giving away our position, and he doesn't want to put me in danger. Jared has some feelers out, he called yesterday to say the trap he had baited caught something, but he wouldn't say what. He's so closed mouth sometimes, he reminds me of you. It's infuriating."

"Thanks so much. Well, if he's your only hope, I'll see what delivery facilities Fred has available. You better hope Jared is better than I think he is, or you'll be going through labor without those drugs you want."

"He'll get it figured out, or he'll really regret it."

"That's my girl. See you Friday."

"Thanks, Cayla."

Connor left early Friday morning to stake out the bus station and see if there was anyone watching it. Samara paced the confines of the cabin, worried about Connor, and anxious to get out for a while.

She jumped when she heard the truck pull up the drive, but relaxed when she saw it was only Connor returning. He gave her the thumbs up and she shot out of the cabin.

God it felt good to be out of the cabin. She was getting really sick of the same two rooms.

"I can't wait to see Macayla again," Samara said as they bounced along the bumpy road that lead to Route 6. She really missed her friend.

“Why? You just talked to her last night.”

Connor obviously didn’t understand the girlfriend factor.

“It’s not the same. Even when we’re both busy with work, we still see each other a few times a week or at least talk on the phone. I miss that connection.”

“What am I? Chopped liver?”

“Don’t get me wrong honey, being with you is great. I’ve loved having this time alone with you, getting to know you, and the sex ain’t half bad either. But sometimes you just need another woman.”

“If you say so.”

Samara sighed, “It’s a girl thing.”

Connor snorted but remained silent the rest of the way to the bus station.



By the time Samara and Connor got to the address Macayla had given them, she wasn’t so sure this was a good idea. Besides the bus, they had to take two different trains to get to the station near the clinic. Samara felt dirty, achy and crabby. Plus, she had to pee very badly and didn’t want to use the restrooms in any of the stations they stopped. She prayed the clinic was cleaner on the inside than it appeared from the street, otherwise she would be peeing in the alley next door.

By the smells emanating from the alley, she wouldn’t be the first one to do so.

The clinic was actually a pleasant surprise. It was clean and bright with professional looking nurses running around. She didn’t know what she had expected; something dirty with green sheets separating the patients, maybe. Instead it looked like an average doctor’s office,

complete with a harried looking secretary, frazzled nurses, and constantly ringing phones.

The posters and pamphlets were in both Spanish and English, but that was probably the only clue this wasn't a standard doctor's office. Samara and Connor sat down in the waiting area with several other people, mostly young women, and waited for their turn. Samara was only partly through the article on exercises for pregnant runners when her assumed name was called. The nurse asked her to pee in a cup, took her blood pressure, weighed her, asked her if she was experiencing any problems, then told her to change into a gown and the doctor would be right in. Macayla came in a few minutes later. They hugged briefly, but tightly, and laughed in relief.

"I suppose I should formally introduce the two of you, Connor O'Riley, meet Macayla Sullivan, Macayla, this is Connor."

"Nice to meet you with clothes on, although it was quite a first impression you made." Macayla shook his hand.

"You pack quite a punch yourself. I can see you holding a gun on Jared without even straining my limited imagination."

Connor watched the color rise in her face, and thought that Samara might be on to something.

"Yeah, well I only point guns at people who deserve it. So does that mean I'll be pointing one at you, or will you be marrying my little girl and making an honest woman of her?"

"Macayla. What are you doing?"

"I'm looking out for your best interests, that's what. Someone has to make sure this baby has a name."

"I can handle this, honey," Connor said to Samara. "As soon as I can get my name cleared and the license obtained, we'll be getting married. The baby will have my name regardless."

"Good, do you want to see the baby now?"

“Can you do that?” Connor asked in surprise.

“Of course, Fred has everything here. Besides, he’s making me see patients while I’m here as payment for using his clinic, so I can do anything I damn well want. Come on, the ultrasound machine is in another room.”

“I didn’t drink all the water I’m supposed too, how are you going to see anything?”

“Oh, you only need to do that in the beginning, now you have plenty of water in the amniotic sac. Let’s go get some baby pictures.” Macayla led them through the office with little regard for Samara’s state of undress.

In the ultrasound room she put the bottle of conductive gel in a cup of warm water. “While we wait for that to warm up a little, I’ll measure your belly, and listen to the heartbeat. You’ll be able to see the heartbeat as well, but it’s kind of neat to hear it for the first time,” Macayla told Connor as she took out her measuring tape and made some notes on a piece of paper. “I’ve removed your file from the practice. I’ll keep my own private ones from now on.”

Connor watched as Macayla poked and prodded Samara’s growing stomach. It still really wasn’t all that big. Samara kept saying she was as big as a house, but Connor thought she looked like an earth goddess, lush and ripe. He loved the fact that it was his child making her grow and change.

When Macayla put the Doppler listening device on her stomach, Connor almost jumped at the sound. “Is that the heartbeat?” Connor asked when he heard the strange swishing noise, it sounded like the ocean.

“No, that’s the fluid in her uterus. The steady slow beat is Samara’s heartbeat, now if the little fella will cooperate, we’ll get his too. There we go.”

Connor sat stunned, he couldn't believe he was hearing the sound of his child's heart beating. He sat down in the uncomfortable plastic chair near the bed and just listened.

"If you could see the look on your face right now," Macayla said to Connor. "I just love new fathers."

"Is it supposed to beat that fast?" Connor couldn't believe how fast it was beating.

"Sounds good. Maybe a little fast, but definitely within the normal range."

"It's probably fast because you pissed me off earlier. Now let's get to the fun part. The last time I saw the baby I was only nine weeks along. I'm much farther along now. I'll bet there's lots more to see this time."

Macayla squirted the gel onto Samara's stomach and turned the monitor so they could see the display.

"I'm going to take some measurements just to be sure the stuff they used didn't hurt the baby, but this is pretty much just for fun. I won't be able to do this every time because Fred might need the room, but it was free today so let's play."

Macayla fiddled with the dials and moved the receiver around on Samara's stomach. "Ah, there you are you little stinker. Do you still want to be surprised about the sex?" Macayla asked Samara.

"I really do want to be surprised, but Connor, if you want to know, we can try to peek."

"No, some things should be left to God. I'll be happy to find out in October what we're having. Is that the baby's head?" Connor asked, looking a little closer at the monitor.

"Here, I'll get a clearer picture, you should be able to see the arms, legs, hands, and feet, including fingers and toes, as well as some dark blobs which will mean nothing to you, but will tell me if all of Spike's organs are growing properly. Oh look, the baby is sucking its thumb."

Macayla snapped a picture of that to print out on the machine. “I’m trying to get as many good angles as I can.”

Connor squeezed Samara’s hand so tightly he’d be surprised if she didn’t have bruises. His attention was completely focused on the images on the tiny computer screen. The baby turned and looked like it waved at him.

“Did you see that? He waved at me.”

Connor couldn’t believe he was watching his child. There was really a living, breathing person inside Samara’s stomach. He could see fingers and toes, and tell that the baby sucked its thumb. This was the first time he really, really felt like a father. He could see this new life, one that he helped to create, moving around.

He suddenly couldn’t wait for Samara to have the baby. He wanted to hold it, to see the color of its eyes, to see it smile at him. October seemed so far away, it was the end of April, and they had the whole summer to wait.

“Can we see the baby again next time?” Connor asked hopefully.

“Only if the room isn’t needed. I’ve got plenty of pictures for you to take home. We had better clear out of here before Fred thinks I’m slacking. Why don’t you two go to Founders Square, get some dinner. Samara, everything looks great, there appears to be no harm from the stuff you got hit with. Relax, and I’ll call you when we can do this again. Congratulations, Connor, you really are going to be a father. Here’s the baby’s first picture.” She gave Connor the picture of the baby sucking its thumb.

“Thank you Macayla. Thanks so much, for everything.”

“Just keep her safe, I don’t want to have to come after you with a gun.”

“If she’s not safe, there won’t be enough left of me to use a gun on.”

AD

Once back at the cottage, Connor put an exhausted Samara to bed. After he was sure she was asleep, he slipped into the kitchen and grabbed a beer. The house seemed even smaller and stuffier than usual, so he moved to the porch.

For a minute he just sat there, staring at the multitude of stars overhead. He looked at the picture of his kid by the light on the porch, then carefully put it in his wallet. It was time to start really thinking about his life, his family, his future. He wanted to get his name cleared so that he could get on with his life with Samara and the baby. He knew now he could never go back to work for the DEA, doing undercover work or anything else.

Something Samara had said when they were in the safe house came back to him. She told him that he had the responsibility to be alive for their baby. It wasn't enough to just have made the baby—that was the easy part. He had to be there for the birth and raising of the baby.

It scared him how much he wanted that. He wanted to be the one who got up in the middle of the night, the one who the baby would look to for help, the one who would hold Samara's hand as she struggled to bring the baby into this world. He didn't want to be hiding in some alley while Samara was counting minutes between contractions.

The thought of getting killed in another bust and never seeing Samara or the baby sent chills down his spine. There were other ways Connor could make a difference in the world. Just like he had made the decision to leave the armed service because he felt like he could be doing something more meaningful somewhere else, he now felt that he could make a difference in the war on drugs somewhere else too.

Connor couldn't do anything right this second, but at least he had made up his mind about his future with Samara and their baby.

"It really is beautiful out here, isn't it?" Samara sat next to him.

"It's very peaceful, relaxing," Connor agreed, wrapping his arms around her. "What are you doing up? I thought you'd be asleep for days after the way you crashed."

"I had to pee, and when I got up you were gone so I went looking for you."

"I just wanted to enjoy the silence for a bit."

"Enjoy it now. By Memorial Day the college kids will descend upon the bars and the beaches, and come mid-June the families with mini-vans packed to the gills and bikes strapped to the roofs will swarm any available vacancy. Route 6 becomes bumper to bumper every Saturday as one family leaves their rented home and the next family arrives. The locals hate the summer, but complain all winter about how lonely it is out here."

"That's human nature I guess, you're never happy with what you have."

"I don't know, I'm pretty damn happy right now."

"Even if there are people out to kill us?"

"Hey, at least we're together."

"Yeah, for now. You know, I've been thinking...."

"About what?"

"You and our baby. I was really floored by the ultrasound yesterday."

"I never would have guessed."

"Stop being smart. I thought you said you weren't a smart aleck?"

"No, I said I don't go out dancing every night, and that I didn't sleep around. I said nothing about not being a smart aleck."

"Great. Anyway, wise ass, I was really floored by actually seeing the baby on the screen. It made me think about everything I had missed in the months before I knew you were pregnant. I was thinking about how I didn't want to be in the middle of some huge, undercover, sting operation while you were in labor. I didn't want to miss weeks at a time of my

child's life so I could socialize with drug dealers. I'm not going back to the DEA."

"But Connor, I thought you left the army to work for the DEA because you thought you were making a difference? I don't want you to quit because of me."

"I'm not. I'm going to quit for a lot of reasons. Not the least of which is that I don't even know if I can get my job back anyway. There isn't just one reason I'm leaving, there are many. I've been feeling dissatisfied with the job for a while, the names and faces change, but the people stay the same. I don't feel like I'm making a difference, I just feel like I'm getting in deeper and deeper. I want to try another way to make a difference. I'd like to work with the school systems, identifying kids at risk for drug abuse, working with the younger kids to help them find alternatives to drugs. I want to work in the neighborhoods to help them get rid of the drug dealers that prey on their kids. I keep thinking that the way to get rid of drugs is to stop the demand, not the supply."

"I'd be lying if I said this didn't make me happy. Every time I look at that scar on your leg, my stomach clenches. I hate the idea of you being in danger all the time. I know you'd do an excellent job in the school systems, because you know the nitty-gritty, not just the theories that go along with drug use and abuse. I just don't want you changing your life because you think that's what I want. I want you to be happy, and if that means you have to work undercover, well, I'll bite my tongue and welcome you home with open arms. If working a safer, more mundane job will make you happy then I'm all for that as well. I just want you to think this through very carefully. I'll be here for you no matter what."

"Have I mentioned that I love you?"

"Maybe once."

"Oh, than I guess I don't have to say it again."

“Maybe you better refresh my memory.” Samara stroked the inside of his thigh.

He scooped her into his arms, carried her into the house and refreshed her memory all night long



Connor answered the phone on the first ring. Habit made him look at the caller id on the phone, even though he knew it must be Romero, as he and Macayla were the only ones with this number. The clock said it was close to three in the morning. This had better be good.

“Romero,” Connor growled.

“Well aren’t we cheery.”

“It’s almost three in the morning, if you want cheery, go to a diner. What have you got?”

“What makes you think I have anything?”

“Cut the crap. You didn’t call me at o-dark-hundred to chat. You have that annoying tone to your voice that says you know something, so give. We’ve been here forever, I’m starting to go stir crazy.”

“What, romantic bliss isn’t so blissful?”

“You try spending twenty-four hours a day in the same two rooms with anyone and see how blissful you feel. I’ve never been in the same *building* as anyone else this long, never mind the same two-room cottage. If Samara wasn’t so great I’d probably be committed by now.”

“She must be great to put up with you.”

“She is. Now tell me what you’ve got before I reach through the phone line and kill you.”

“They took the bait.”

“How do you know?”

“What am I suddenly? An idiot? I know they took the bait because I’ve been waiting around doing nothing else but fishing for them for the last three weeks.”

“Tell me everything. I’m living vicariously through you right now.”

“Don’t rush me. A week after you left Miami I heard from some sources that there was an interested party looking for a way into the hard drive of computers wiped clean. What I figure is that whoever put the money in your account didn’t know what he was doing, and was trying to get the money out. When the smear job didn’t work, they tried to steal the computer to get your passwords and accounts.”

“Then why did they grab Samara?”

“Probably as a bargaining chip, how the hell do I know? Anyway, when the hacker finally got your computer, he thought he had scored, but then realized it wasn’t your run-of-the-mill laptop. When he ran into trouble he went looking for someone who could break into the hard drive of government wiped computers.”

“Which is where you come in.”

“Yes sir-e.”

“How did you get the word out without being obvious?”

“Do you think I just started this game last week?”

“Romero. Enough with the ego. I trust that you did it with your usual finesse. I’m dying here. I want this done so I can get on with my life.”

“I’m trying to understand that you’re not used to depending on anyone to do your work for you, but try to trust me, I do this sort of thing for a living.”

“I do trust you, go on, and tell me the rest of your brilliant strategy.”

“Okay, so the hacker gets the laptop, doesn’t want to admit that he can’t get into it, professional pride you know, anyway he puts the word out to people that are better left out of the light of day. They get in touch with people, who get in touch with people, who get in touch with me. I’m

going to meet the guy who has your computer tomorrow—well make that tonight. We have a meeting set up, I'm going to plant some tails on him and find out who turns up to check on his progress."

"Follow the money."

"Lesson number one."

"I hope this works out soon. I want the jerk who did this, I want him bad."

"If I can, he's yours. Are you staying under cover?"

"Yeah, how did you manage to get us a dump sticker on this truck? It's been bothering Samara that you thought of everything, even that."

"I have my ways."

"You're a big help."

"I wouldn't want things to be too easy for you."

"You're all heart."

"I'll keep you posted."

"Do that."

Samara listened to Connor's half of the conversation and figured out something must be happening with their situation. *Thank God*. Connor had been like a caged animal and she couldn't take much more. If something didn't break soon she was afraid he was going to fly to Miami with a big sign that said *Come and get me!*

"I'm sorry, honey, did I wake you?" Connor climbed in to bed.

"No, the phone did. I'm a pretty light sleeper. What's going on?"

"Someone contacted Jared about the computer. He's meeting with the hacker tomorrow, or rather tonight and is going to track him to find out who hired him."

"Jared thinks that whoever hired the hacker is the one responsible for all of this?" Samara asked.

"That about sums it up."

"I sure hope the jerk shows up soon."

"Amen."

"When he's caught, what next?"

"We'll get married and have our baby and spend the rest of our lives madly in love."

"Not with us, you stinker, with your job."

"We've already talked about this, I'm not going back."

"But won't you have to explain what you did with the money, and what about everything that they put in your files, all the bad stuff?"

"Everything will come out in the wash. If Jared is as good as I know he is, he'll be documenting everything, and will probably be taping every meeting as well. We'll be able to prove my innocence, don't worry, honey, I won't leave you and Spike alone while I rot in a jail cell somewhere."

"You had better not, I don't plan on giving birth alone anymore, and I'm counting on you to be there when Spike decides to make his grand entrance." Samara smiled up at Connor and reached up to give him a kiss. As she stretched up Connor felt a faint movement against Samara's stomach.

"I think Spike agrees with me."

"Was that a kick? Did you feel that?" Connor asked excitedly.

"I've been feeling some movements for a while, but that's the first time it's been that forceful. Spike must know we're talking about him or her."

Connor had moved out from behind Samara and put his face right next to her stomach.

"Hello, Spike. Can you hear me in there? This is your daddy speaking" Connor rubbed Samara's tummy and waited for another kick.

"Nothing huh?"

"Sorry, just that one kick, it must have worn him out."

"Figures. Not even born yet and already the little guy isn't listening to me."

"It could be a little girl you know."

"Probably is. Girls never listen to their fathers."

"Would you mind?"

"If my daughter doesn't listen to me? Of course I'm going to mind."

"No, you pinhead. If it is a daughter instead of a son."

"I don't mind, what about you? Will you mind if it's a son instead of a daughter?"

"I just want this baby born healthy, with all its parts, and with two parents who love it. I could care less what sex it is."

"I agree. I guess a little boy would be nice, to carry on the family name, go to baseball games with, stuff like that, but I could do that with a little girl too. Of course if she looks like her mama, I'm going to stay up nights worrying about her."

"You won't worry if it's a boy?"

"Yes, but about different things. I'll worry that he'll get killed doing something stupid to impress a girl, not that someone will try to take advantage of him. No one is ever touching my little girl. Ever."

"Oh, and I suppose I'm the first girl you ever slept with?" Samara was fascinated by his attitude. He had freely admitted that he was quite experienced with women. Didn't he think they had fathers who thought of them as their little girls?

"That's different. It was always between consenting adults."

"And what if our daughter is a consenting adult?"

"She damn well better not be. No guy is ever going to touch my daughter. We're not letting her out of the house until she's thirty."

"How will we get grandchildren if our daughter doesn't get out of the house, and never has sex?"

"Our son can produce them."

“Gee, I wonder what my dad is going to think when he meets you. After all, I’m his little girl, too, you know.”

“I don’t suppose he doesn’t know you’re pregnant yet?”

“Oh no, they know. In fact when they get home from Europe in September, they’re coming to Connecticut for an extended stay, to help me get ready for the baby and to be there for its birth.”

“How extended?”

“I don’t know, six, seven weeks. Two months at the most.” Samara was trying so hard not to laugh she thought she was going to burst.

“Two months?”

“Don’t worry Connor, I’m sure if we’re married by then my dad won’t take a shotgun to you. They may even let us sleep in the same room if we can prove we’re married.” Samara couldn’t believe she got that last part out without laughing. He was looking so stricken she couldn’t help herself. She burst out in gales of laughter.

“I can’t believe you bought that. What did you think my parents were like? They know I’m an adult. And, no they weren’t happy that I was having a baby by myself, but they’ve supported me in everything else I’ve done, and they’re supporting me in this as well. They’ll be thrilled to meet you, whether we’re married by then or not. I’m not saying they won’t want us to get married, but my father’s not going to force a shotgun wedding on you. They’re coming up in October so that they can help me out once the baby is born. Relax, my parents just want me to be happy, and if you make me happy than everything will be just fine.”

“And do I make you happy?”

“Yes, you make me very happy, except when you start telling me how I should eat, or that I should get more exercise.”

“Well, I was just repeating what the book said.”

“Yes, dear, and I’m glad that you want to be involved, but telling a pregnant woman that she shouldn’t eat so much is like lighting a match

in a dynamite factory. I've got no other vices left to exploit. I can't have a drink, I can't have a cigarette, I can't go out dancing, I can't stay up late, hell, I can't even dress in skimpy clothes without looking ridiculous. Eating is my last bastion of vice. I'm being careful not to gain too much weight, and up until this debacle I was still working out and taking karate. I suppose now that the weather is improving and it's not going to rain every day, I can start hiking around the woods."

"No." Connor interrupted. "I've planted some traps and I don't want you to get caught in one by accident. I'll take you out walking if you want to go."

"Traps like to catch animals, or traps to catch humans?"

"Humans."

"So you are expecting trouble to come here."

"I like to be prepared. I don't plan on taking any chances with your safety. You don't know the hell I went through when you were kidnapped in Miami. I won't ever let anything happen to you again if I can possibly help it. If Jared's plan doesn't work, they may be able to trace it back here. If that happens, I want to be ready."

"Maybe you had better tell me what is lurking out there, just in case you're not home and I hear something." Samara wanted to be sure he didn't inadvertently trap an innocent hiker.

"Nothing deadly. A few ankle traps, they're close to the house which is why I want you to be careful. They won't kill you, but I don't think you really want to hang upside down by your ankle until I return from wherever I've gone. I'm not stupid, Samara. I only put the traps where someone would step if they were casing the place. There're none on the main paths that people from the trailer park might use by accident.

"What else have you done?"

"There's an alert on the road. If someone moves the tree a light will blink in the kitchen. I'll show you where it is tomorrow. If you see it

blinking and I'm not home, I want you to hide in the shed with the pump and the generator. I have some weapons hidden there and you should be able to hold someone off until I return. I'm not going to leave you alone for longer than it takes me to get to the dump anyway. But just in case. how are you at handling a gun?"

"I'm pretty good with Macayla's Walther. Not as good as she is, but I can hit a target at fifty paces. I don't know if I could kill someone, I just don't have that in me. That's why I don't own a gun. Macayla said that if I point it, I have to be prepared to shoot to kill."

"She's right. You have to be willing to pull the trigger. But you take karate. Can't you kill someone with your bare hands?"

"Yes, but when I use my karate for self-defense, I have control over what I'm doing. I don't have enough control with a gun to know I'm going to hit what I aim at. I might be aiming at their leg and hit them in the chest. They might move while I'm shooting and I'd hit them in the head instead of the arm. When I'm fighting hand to hand, I know how much pressure to use to break an arm, to smash a nose, to break a kneecap, or to just bruise someone. I could possibly kill someone by smashing their nose into their brain, but I have the control to give them just a broken nose, or even just a bloody one."

"But if your life was in danger?"

"If someone comes here and tries to hurt you, my baby, or me, well I'll let the bullets fly where they may. I won't aim to kill, but no one is going to hurt this baby, no one. If that wacko tries to come here and kidnap me, or shoot you again, he's in for a big surprise. He doesn't know what fear is like until he messes with a pregnant woman with a gun."

"No, but I think he'll figure it out pretty quickly should he make the mistake of confronting you again. I almost feel bad for the poor jerk."

“Don’t. No one hurts those I love and gets away with it. He’s gotten both of us once. I’m not going to give him another chance.”

“Amen.”

Chapter Nineteen

Harry Reynolds could not believe how bad his luck was. Maybe God was punishing him for letting drug dealers loose on the streets. Maybe the fates really *were* against him, or maybe he had done something horrible in a past life. But whatever the reason nothing was going right.

How could his luck be so bad and O'Riley's so good? It had been a month since he had gotten his hands on the girl, and nothing had changed. They'd finally gotten the computer. O'Riley hadn't even brought it with him to Miami, he'd left it in the safe house up north. Now if Harry got caught they could add abduction to his charges.

And it was all for nothing.

It had taken them a week—a *fucking week*—to get the computer down to Miami. He'd given the laptop to his computer weasel and thought his problems were solved.

Oh, how wrong he'd been.

Now, the weasel told him that it was going to take time to get all the information off the hard drive. And why didn't Harry tell him about the government wipe? Like Harry even knew what that was. How come Harry didn't know what safeguards were in place for field agents? Nag, nag, nag, all he wanted was the damn money transferred to his account before he lost his job, his house, and his life.

How could something so simple at the start turn into this raging fiasco? Harry was definitely cursed.

The phone at his belt rang, Harry checked to make sure it wasn't a bill collector. He'd gone to a loan shark in desperation, figuring he could pay him off, with interest, when the weasel got him his money. He never should have trusted the little snot.

All you have to do is get me the computer, I can get anything I want off it. And Harry had believed him.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief when the number on the phone was one he recognized. He figured the loan shark's enforcers probably wouldn't call him to give him a message, they would just break his arm.

"Tell me you have good news," Harry barked into the receiver.

"I've got good news. I have a lead on how to get past this government wipe, but it's going to cost you."

"Not me, you. You told me all I had to do was supply the computer. If you want half the money you're going to have to get it out of O'Riley's account. I did my part, and it cost me enough. It's your turn now."

"I knew you were going to be difficult. Listen, this guy wants some money up front. He's a heavy hitter, not someone I usually deal with."

"Can he be trusted?"

"Not with the information, but he can get me through the government wipe to the hard drive. How could you not know about this?"

"I'm lucky if I can figure out how to get my e-mail. How the hell was I supposed to know what field agents had on their computers? I can't get my hands on one without several layers of bureaucracy. I didn't even realize the computer he had was issued by my department."

"You really are slipping. You probably had to sign a release for him to get it. This is no cheap machine. If I can get the hard drive back, I'm going to keep it."

"If you can get the hard drive back, I don't care if you use it for a coffee table. Get me that money."

"I will, but these things take time, it's not something you can beat to death to get information out of it."

"No, but I can deal with this guy directly and cut you out."

"There's no need to make threats. We're in this together. If you screw me, I can screw you too. Let me deal with this guy, I'm meeting him tonight. I'll make sure he's legit, then I'll make a deal with him."

"You do that, and don't get me involved any further. If this drops in my lap, I'll make sure what I have on you gets to the DA's office before I go down." Harry hung up without further ado.

"Bastard. He has no idea that I can bury him as deeply as I buried O'Riley." Gene turned off the tape recorder. After carefully editing the tape, he filed it away for safe keeping.

Reynolds thought Gene was stupid, thought he knew nothing about the real world. He'd figure out the truth when he was rotting in prison. Gene wasn't going to go down, no way. He'd already created a new identity, and the money he got from this job was the icing on the cake.

He had accounts in a small Caribbean bank and had a passport and plane tickets just waiting for him. He needed a little more cash to secure his future, then he'd be free as a bird.

After he got his money, he'd make sure the dirt he had on Reynolds went to the D.A.'s office. Gene had made it a point not to let Reynolds know his real name, address, or anything else about him. Reynolds was an idiot and babbled everything. It was so easy to take advantage of someone so desperate. All he had to do was get this money. He had no intention of giving Reynolds his share. Once this guy told him how to get the hard drive back, Gene was long gone.

Of course, that was the heart of the matter. Gene had to rely on someone else to get the money, and he'd want his share as well. Gene knew that Reynolds wasn't going to give in on that point. Reynolds had

no money. He was so far in debt, even if he did get this money, he might not make it. No, Gene thought that the money would be much better spent in keeping him safe and happy on some sunny island.

Gene's hands shook with adrenaline as he took meticulous care getting ready for his meeting. He wore non-descript clothing, pulled a baseball hat down low over his balding head, put on a bulky jacket, and put a tape recorder with a new tape in the pocket of his jacket.

He made it a point to record every illegal transaction, and edit it to his satisfaction. Not that he believed he could get caught, but if he did he wasn't going alone. He hated face-to-face meetings and rarely had dealings in person.

A surge of excitement shot through him. He was made for computer crime. The power was addicting. He sometimes felt like God, like he could alter anyone's life with a few keystrokes. With a few keystrokes he could go into a person's credit report and make it so that they could never get so much as a gas card for the rest of their lives. In under ten seconds he could shut off someone's electricity, make their gas bill skyrocket or charge their credit card. He could do just about anything he wanted.

Of course that would be a foolish waste of his power. Eventually the mess would get straightened out, and one day he would be careless and it would get traced back to him. Which was why he was very careful about how often he hacked into someone's personal accounts.

It was only when he got cases like O'Riley's that he was able to let the power surge. It was better than sex. He could do it with impunity. If it ever got traced, the trail would lead directly to Reynolds and Gene would be long gone before he was found out.

Gene left for the meeting way ahead of time. He wanted to check the place out, to make sure it wasn't a trap. He took a circuitous route to the diner he was meeting the other hacker in, and sat in the parking lot for an hour.

The diner was in a shady part of town. Pawnshops, rundown bars, and adult bookstores lined the streets. Most of the diner's customers were strung out drug addicts and prostitutes getting a few minutes off their feet.

The diner itself fit in well with its surroundings. The "Eat Here" sign had lights burned out, so it read "Fat Here" which Gene thought was probably more appropriate. Gene would rather eat dirt than whatever salmonella infested offering was the special of the day. He hadn't picked it for its culinary mastery, but for its location.

When it was almost time for the meeting, he drove out of the lot, parked down the street and walked to the diner. He had told the hacker to get a table and put a laptop on the end of the table. He wanted proof that this guy could do what he said.

Gene knew he was good at what he did. He found it hard to believe that someone else was that much better. As he walked into the diner he saw a couple junkies, some obviously drunk bar hoppers, and a few hard-looking women.

His knees shook with nervousness when he thought the guy hadn't showed, but then he saw the neat little laptop sitting at the edge of a booth way in the back.

"That's an interesting model you have there, mind if I take a look at it? I'm something of a computer buff." Gene clicked his recorder on silently.

"Sure, have a seat. This is a very unique model, you probably haven't seen one like this before," the man replied

"I know something of computers, but this doesn't look familiar. Where'd you get it?" Gene asked as he slid into the booth. He'd already established that this was his contact, but he wanted to get a better idea of what this guy knew.

“A government contact...gave it to me. These models aren’t available to the general public. In fact they’re only manufactured one at a time, for government personnel.”

“How did you get your hands on one then? I didn’t think you worked for the government.”

“Let’s just say I have quite a few friends who give me the things I need, and leave it at that. Now that you’ve established my credentials, give me my money and tell me what services you require.”

Jared had a recorder of his own, somewhat more sophisticated than anything a civilian could get his hands on. He’d also planted bug on the back of the mark’s seat. When the guy sat down it would stick to his jacket like a burr.

The tiny homing device couldn’t do more than emit a signal, but for something that was smaller than a piece of lint, that was enough. All Jared had to do was stay within a twelve-mile radius of the homing device and he would be able to track it down.

Before the mark could answer, a waitress came over to their table.

“What do you want?” she grunted, barely looking at them. She had bleached blonde hair that was showing her dark roots in an inch wide stripe down the center. Her pink uniform was too tight for her expanding girth, and pushed her wrinkled cleavage into clear view. The nametag pinned to her ample bosom said “Carrie”, but she never bothered to introduce herself.

“Just coffee for me,” Jared answered. He was brave, but not brave enough to try anything cooked in a place like this.

“Same for me.” The mark waited until the waitress waddled off before resuming his conversation where they had left off. “Here’s your money.” He slid a plain brown envelope across the table. “Now this is what I need from you. Tell me how to get around a government wipe.”

“Whew, you don’t want much do you.”

“Either you can do it or you can’t. If you can’t, give me the money back.”

“Hold your horses, I didn’t say I couldn’t do it, I just said it was a big deal.”

“Then if you can do it, you can explain to me how to get around the wipe.”

“No way. I’ll get you the information off the hard drive, but I’m not telling you how to do it. That’s my bread and butter. I’m not about to give away trade secrets.”

Jared knew the guy was going to grumble about his position a little bit, but when push came to shove he would give in. After all, no one could get through a government wipe.

He was right. After some hemming and hawing, the guy backed down and they came to terms. Jared followed him as he left the diner and drove around the city aimlessly. With the homing device working, Jared didn’t have to keep him in sight to know where he was going. He waited until the wily bastard got sick of trying to cover his trail and went home.

“Nice try buddy, better luck next time.”

He had to use some sophisticated surveillance equipment to identify the exact apartment the homing signal was in. From the appearances of the place, the hacker didn’t spend his ill-gotten gains on his surroundings.

The apartment building looked like it had once been a nice place, but time and negligence had taken its toll. The brick façade had crumbled in places and the windows on the ground floor had cardboard taped over missing panes. The driveway was cracked and filled with weeds. At one time there was probably a garden in front of the place, but now it was just a circle of dirt with weeds running wild.

Jared had seen people throwing garbage out of their windows. Competing boom boxes blared from windows, causing him to wince often while scanning the building with his equipment. He didn't want to discuss what he had overheard in the course of using that surveillance equipment. Once the apartment was identified, Jared planted some video cameras opposite his victim's door and waited to see who came calling.

He didn't have to worry about stealth in this place. When he walked into the building, no one even asked what he wanted. People either looked the other way, or completely ignored him.

Jared called Connor from the secure phone in his car.

"He took the bait. I'm waiting to see who comes to visit the little fish."

"Anyone yet?"

"No, he's made some phone calls. I'm trying to get the phone logs but since I don't have a warrant I can't get those very easily."

"Come on, you're the hot shot computer wizard, can't you just hack into the phone company and get them?"

"Sure, if you want me to leave here so I can get to a secured connection. I thought you wanted me to keep an eye on the little bastard and see who came to call, but if you want me to leave, I'll go now."

"You're right, you're right. Do you have any idea who you're looking for? Would you recognize any of the guys from the warehouse if you saw them again?"

"Maybe, I don't have your memory, but I might remember something. I'll send you the surveillance tapes if anyone shows up. If I don't recognize someone, you should. It has to be someone who knows you, ergo, you should know them."

"I just hope they come soon, I'm climbing the walls here. When do you meet him again?"

"He's doing a blind drop of the computer tonight. I'm supposed to beep him when I've gotten through the government wipe."

“Are you sure he doesn’t realize that there is no way through a government wipe?”

“Absolutely. Guys like him don’t believe that there is anything that can’t be hacked into. Just because he doesn’t know the way, doesn’t mean that someone else doesn’t. It may hurt his ego that he can’t do it, but he figures he’ll be able to discover how I did it when I give the hard drive back to him. Little does he know I’m giving him the original hard drive. By then we’ll have our man.”

“God I hope so. Three days after that, I want you to be my best man.”

“Wow. Isn’t that rushing things a little bit?”

“Not when you consider we’ll be married only slightly before our first child is born. Hopefully. If you don’t stop screwing around we’ll end up married when Spike is ready for college.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah I get the picture. I can’t fix it too fast or he’ll be suspicious. Give me a week to spring it on him, then I’ll reel the big fish in.”

“I think I can make it a week, but not much longer than that.”

“No sweat. Just cover your ass and let me do the rest.”

As the connection dropped, Connor felt a surge of impatience. He hadn’t been joking about not making it much longer. He wanted to be down in Miami helping to find the guy who did this to him, not waiting in the tiny cottage that had become his home.

The only thing keeping him from risking his life and taking the first flight to Miami was the fact that it would be putting Samara in danger. He didn’t want to leave her alone again. The sooner this whole thing was taken care of the better.

Connor was getting an itchy feeling between his shoulder blades, as if someone was watching them. He checked and re-checked his traps daily, made Samara stay in the house as much as possible, kept their trips to

town down to the barest minimum, but he still felt that they were in danger. Samara laughed at his caution.

“You’ve lived in constant danger your entire adult life, you don’t know how to relax. No one could find us here. The house is registered in my uncle’s name, which isn’t even the same as mine for that matter. This was my mother’s brother’s cottage. I doubt anyone would even know it was still standing, never mind hiding us. Would you relax and trust Jared? He knows what he’s doing. He’ll find whoever it is who’s after you, and then we’ll be free. I don’t think I’ll ever enjoy a vacation to the Cape again. And to think this used to be my favorite place.”

“I’m sorry, honey, I know that I’m tough to live with. I’m not usually this...wired. It’s just that I know there’s something we’re forgetting and it’s driving me crazy. I’m so afraid that if I don’t think of it that will be the thing that bites me in the ass. I just know that I’m missing something.”

“You’re paranoid.”

“Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean that someone isn’t after you. Better paranoid than dead,” Connor said.

Samara laughed a little uneasily, but Connor wasn’t laughing at all.

He realized he wasn’t being fair to Samara. She had always lived in safety and comfort. She had no idea what it was like to have someone tracking you with a gun. It was up to Connor to make sure she never found out.

Chapter Twenty

Samara looked at the clothes she had taken from the bag Macayla gave her at her last check up. The clothes were of good quality, some of them even stylish, but they still looked like something Abdu the Tentmaker would sell as opposed to something Samara wore on a regular basis.

The problem was Samara's belly had long since grown out of her regular clothes, but these shorts with their stretch panels on the front were still too big. They were definitely more comfortable than the clothes she had been squeezing herself into, but they were just, well, pregnant looking.

The baby moved in her tummy at that point, almost to remind her there was a reason she looked like this, and that was to bring a new life into the world. She would eventually be trim again. For now she needed to check her ego and enjoy the miracle that was growing inside her.

Samara sighed and put the clothes in the dresser in her room. So what if they weren't couture. It wasn't like she was trying to win Miss Pregnant America or anything. Scratching her itchy tummy, she walked into the living room and checked out the window for the truck. Connor had gone to town to take the trash to the dump and get some supplies.

She had to stifle a twinge of envy. It wasn't that she didn't realize the danger of anyone seeing them, but she was getting really tired of these same four walls. Maybe when he got back she could go down to the dock

and read for a while. The only way for someone to see her there would be if they were in a boat.

Another sigh escaped her as she leaned against the counter. She used to love to lie in the sun by the pond when she came here as a kid, but now it was the highlight of her day. It felt so relaxing to have the sun on her face and hear the lapping of the water against the dock. And right now she'd take any relief in the tension that filled the house.

God, she hoped Connor would be a little less torqued when he came back from town. He was so wound up these days she thought he would explode if something didn't happen soon.

The sound of the truck pulling up the drive brought her out to the porch. She caught her breath as she saw Connor pushing the tree back across the road. He had taken his shirt off and Samara could see every muscle in his beautiful chest ripple as he dragged the tree back in place. Next he took one of the pine boughs he had cut earlier and went to the bottom of the lane to brush out the tracks. His dark hair glinted in the sun and Samara couldn't believe how good looking that man could actually be.

"If you are a boy baby, I don't know what I'm going to do if you look like your father. I'll be beating girls off with a stick. Of course if you're a girl, your father will never sleep again. Either way we're doomed."

"Hi honey. Did you miss me?" Connor teased when he walked up the porch with his arms full of grocery bags. Giving her a quick kiss, he carried the bags into the kitchen.

Samara followed, amazed at the amount of food he'd bought. "Wow, did you buy out the store? I didn't realize I had that many things on the list."

"You didn't, I bought some things on my own. I'm going to make supper tonight. Why don't you go relax by the pond? I'll get you when supper is ready."

“Are you sure? I really don’t mind making dinner.”

“I’m sure. I want to do something for you, I know this hasn’t been easy on you and I want to make it up to you. Go, lay out in the sun. Don’t forget to use sunscreen, and take plenty of water so you don’t dehydrate.”

“If I take plenty of water I’ll spend the whole afternoon running back and forth to go to the bathroom.”

“Smart aleck. Go to the pond now or stay in the room the rest of the day,” Connor threatened.

“I’m going. I’m going.” Samara ran to the room to put on shorts and grab some sunscreen. It would be nice to be outside and not have to worry about making dinner. Of course, she’d be cleaning up the mess for days, but it was worth it to see Connor in a good mood for a change.

As she took the lawn chair out from the hut near the pond that held an old raft, fishing poles, and other water toys, she wondered what Connor could be up to. She slathered on the sunscreen and tried to remember if she’d been bitching about cooking before he’d left.

No, she didn’t think so. She might have whined a little bit about the fact that he got to go to town while she was stuck at the house, but she didn’t think she’d said anything about cooking.

Who could figure men out? But she wasn’t going to complain. Any time she didn’t have to cook was a blessing. She hadn’t realized how much she relied on take-out before, to break up the monotony of cooking regularly.

The webbing of the chair creaked as she sank her weight into it, but held. *Ahh, sun, water, and a hot man cooking for me. What could be better than this?*

Maybe not having maniacs trying to kill us?

She’d let Connor worry about that. Right now she was going to follow his orders and enjoy herself.

Once Samara was out of sight, Connor put the groceries away with slightly shaking hands. There was no reason for him to be nervous, but he felt like a rookie on his first bust.

Carefully, he read the directions on the frozen lasagna and garlic bread, and set them out to defrost. That looked easy enough. What else did he need? Oh yeah, salad. He opened the bag of salad greens, poured water over them, and then dumped them into a bowl. There, the salad was done. Should he put it in the fridge? Nah, it was just lettuce, it wasn't like it could go bad, right?

While the lasagna defrosted Connor put the candles he had bought around the cabin. Flowers went in a glass and he put them on the table. More flowers went in the living room, and he laid out the massage lotion next to the bed. He wanted tonight to be perfect.

He knew he had been difficult to live with. Hell, he'd been an absolute bear lately. And Samara hadn't ripped him a new one. Talk about patient. If the shoe had been on the other foot, he'd have ripped himself a new asshole. Now he wanted to make it up to her, and then some.

While he'd been out, he'd gotten some money from the account Jared had set up. Romero probably hadn't planned on loaning him quite so much money, but it would be worth it. Connor took the jewelers box out of his pocket and looked at the pear shaped diamond with a shiver. He had never proposed to a woman before, he wanted to do it right.

Samara was a romantic, and she hadn't had too much romance in this whole affair. He hoped to make it up to her tonight. Glancing at his watch, he checked the time before he stuck the lasagna in the oven. He had an hour to practice his proposal, and he was afraid he didn't have enough time.

When the lasagna had twenty minutes left, he stuck the bread in the oven. The bread was supposed to be cooked at a higher temperature, so

he turned the heat up before he went to get Samara. He wasn't surprised to find her sleeping on the dock.

The sunlight made her hair shine like gold, her book was lying across her stomach, and a butterfly flirted with the flowers on her shirt. Connor wished he had a camera to capture this picture for the rest of his life. She was so serene, so delicate looking. No one would ever believe she could take out a thug twice her size after being knocked unconscious.

Connor pushed aside the anger that thought brought forth. He didn't want to think about anything but Samara, and making her his wife. Everything else would take a backseat tonight. He walked over to her and ran a finger across her forehead.

"Samara, sleepy head, time to get up."

"I'm not sleeping," Samara said with a yawn. "I'm just resting a little. It feels so good in the sun."

"I know, but it's almost dinner time. You have time to take a shower before we eat if you hurry."

"If you insist. What are we having for supper?"

"Lasagna, garlic bread and green salad."

"Lasagna? I'll get up for lasagna." Samara folded up the chair and stuffed it back into the hut. "I hope we're out of here soon, that chair won't take much more weight, and I really enjoy my afternoons in the sun."

"Soon, honey, soon. Jared says it should be over in a week or so."

"Thank God, now let's go get dinner, I love lasagna."

Connor laughed at the relish on Samara's face. He loved the fact that she didn't hide her enjoyment of eating. He was glad she didn't fret about gaining weight during her pregnancy, he loved her growing tummy and couldn't wait to see her as big as a house. It was probably better to keep that observation to himself.

When they reached the cottage Connor hustled her off to the shower before she could get a good look at the table and the candles.

While she washed up, he ran back to the kitchen to check on dinner. The bread was a little burnt on the edges, so he took it out and scraped the burnt part off. He cut the bread up, and put it in a basket he found. The middle was still a little cold, but he didn't want to put it back in the oven.

He pulled the lasagna out of the oven and almost dropped it. Catching the pan with his bare hand, he juggled it around as the heat tore through his fingers. Some of the lasagna slipped over the sides of the pan as he dropped it on the counter. He wiped up the worst of the mess and put it on the table. Christ, who'd have thought cooking could be so damn painful? At least he couldn't screw up the salad.

The salad was almost forgotten when Samara came out of the bathroom in the nightie he'd laid out for her.

"Where did this come from?" Samara asked, indicating the light blue nightgown. It had spaghetti straps with a tie under the breasts. The rest flowed down from the tie to the top of her thighs. There were matching panties to go with it. The whole thing was quite lovely, and quite transparent. Her nipples strained against the diaphanous material, and her breasts almost spilled out over the top of the flimsy bodice. "This is what you want me to wear to supper? I'll get sauce all over it."

"That's the least of your worries. I'd be more concerned about not making it through dinner. You're beautiful. Absolutely ravishing. But to answer your question, Macayla got it for me, at my request. I really do owe her big."

"That remains to be seen. She could have at least gotten something that hid my big belly." Samara covered herself self-consciously.

"I love your belly, and the baby growing inside it. Now sit down to dinner."

“It smells delicious. And candles and flowers too, boy you’ve been busy today. What’s the occasion?”

“Nothing, I just realize I’ve been impossible to live with lately, and I want to make it up to you. Here.” He handed her a thin stemmed wine glass. “Have some non-alcoholic wine, with ice cubes.”

“You thought of everything.”

“I tried.”

Connor cut the lasagna and put a giant piece on each plate. The lasagna was only a little cold in the middle, unlike the bread. The edges were delicious though. The salad was a little better, somewhat soggy, but still edible.

“This was so wonderful of you Connor, the flowers, the candles, the dinner, even the wine. Thank you for trying so hard to give me a special night.”

“It’s a disaster. I wanted things to be perfect, instead I made a mess of everything. I’m not that great in the kitchen, but I figured even I couldn’t screw up frozen lasagna. I guess I didn’t let it defrost long enough. I’m sorry.”

“Oh Connor, it’s wonderful. You’ve given me a very special evening, it doesn’t matter how it came out, and it’s the thought that counts. It was sweet of you to go through all this trouble for me.”

“Well I’m not done yet. Why don’t you give me a minute then join me in the bedroom. I’ve got a few more surprises for you.”

He rushed into the bedroom, lit the candles, ran back into the bathroom and ran warm water over the lotion. When it felt warm enough to be comfortable on Samara’s skin, he led her to the bedroom.

“I piled up some pillows so you can lay on your stomach comfortably. As much as I want to do it, you should take off the nightie, I don’t want to get lotion all over it. I’m not that great in the kitchen, but I can make up for it with my massaging skills.”

“Oh, that sounds nice.” Samara gave Connor a look that brought him painfully erect. She’d better have had a nice nap earlier because if she fell asleep now, he’d wake her up anyway.

Samara sprawled across the bed and Connor straddled her backside, careful to keep his weight off her. He put the lotion in his hands and rubbed them together to warm it up even more. His slippery hands slid over her back and shoulders, easing out the kinks and soreness of carrying around the extra weight of pregnant breasts and a pregnant belly.

Her moans were music to his ears, and he could hear her breathing get more rapid as he caressed the sides of her breasts and her gorgeous legs. He concentrated so hard on keeping his control while he stirred her up, that he lost his balance when she quickly rolled over and covered him.

“Don’t you think you should massage my front too?”

“I like the way you think.” Connor could barely keep his hands off of her. Sweat dripped down his back and his hands shook at the passion in her golden eyes.

Her breathing was none to steady either. He wanted her to want him more though. He wanted her crazy for him, and then after she had come a few times, he would propose to her and she’d have to say yes.

Reverently, he laid her on her back and caressed her breasts. His blood pounded in his veins as he sucked on her nipples until they were as red as wet berries. Touching her was heaven on earth.

He ran his hands lightly up and down her torso, almost but not quite touching the spot between her legs. Taking her foot between his hands, he massaged her toes, then sucked on each one. His hands ran up to her knee then back down again, over and over, going a little higher each time. He spread her legs wider and nipped the inside of her thighs, sucking gently on the underside of each leg.

“You’re killing me,” Samara groaned as he pulled her panties off with his teeth.

“Patience my love, patience.” He smiled at the evidence of her arousal. Slowly, he slid one finger inside her tight sheath. His control wavered as her inner muscles clenched around him.

He wasn’t going to last much longer.

When he felt her spasm beneath his hands he almost thanked God that he wouldn’t have to wait any longer to enter her. Sliding into her hot warmth, he groaned at the sensation of her muscles convulsing all around him. Driving into her carefully he tried to keep the tempo slow and easy, but Samara was having none of that. She used her legs to push up and quicken the pace until he couldn’t take it anymore. His body tightened with the extreme pleasure she gave him and exploded inside of her.

Connor couldn’t believe how quickly he lost control. He wanted her to lose control, and he had certainly accomplished that, but he was supposed to keep himself in check.

Nothing had gone right tonight, now he was afraid to propose. He was afraid he’d screw that up, too.

“Oh Connor. Tonight has been the best night of my life. You make me so happy.” Samara sighed and cuddled against his chest.

“How can you say that? I ruined dinner, I forgot about dessert, and then I lost control. Nothing went right.”

“I like it when you lose control. You make me lose control every time, it’s only fair that you fall apart sometimes, too. Besides, dinner wasn’t ruined, I’ve done much worse in my time. And we can have dessert in bed. See, everything is just fine. It’s been a fantastic night, very romantic, and very thoughtful. You’ll have to be a jerk more often if this is the way you make up for it.”

"I'll remind you that you said that. Did you see the flowers by the bed?" Connor asked, fear clenching his gut. It was now or never.

Her face softened as she glanced at the nightstand. "Oh, a long stem red rose, how lovely. You're a romantic at heart. Thank you." Samara gave him a kiss to show her appreciation and snuggled into the pillows.

"Don't you want to smell the rose?" Connor asked in a panic.

"Uh, okay."

Samara didn't know what was so special about the rose, but she got up anyway. After all the work Connor went through to make tonight special, she was more than willing to humor him.

Her body still hummed from the incredible orgasm she'd had, and her muscles felt loose and relaxed. As she picked up the bud vase by the bed, she noticed Connor was staring at her.

What was wrong with him?

When pulled the rose closer, she saw a shining diamond winking out at her from the center of the bud. Her heart stopped beating for a second, then picked up the pace twice as fast. She turned around to look at Connor, rose in hand, but unable to speak.

"Samara, will you marry me?"

"Oh my God."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"A yes, of course it's a yes. So that was what this was all about. Oh, you wonderful, wonderful, romantic man. I love you. Yes, yes, yes." Samara held onto the flower and wrapped her arms around Connor's neck. She rained kisses all over his face, while tears ran down hers. She was so happy she thought she'd burst.

"Let's see if the ring fits, I wasn't sure of your ring size, so the jeweler and I guessed." Connor took the flower out of Samara's hands and pulled

the ring out of it. His hands shook as he took her left hand in his and slipped the sparkling diamond onto her finger.

“Perfect. You did a good job. Oh, Connor, I can’t believe this. It’s beautiful, how did you ever get it without me knowing about it? How did you ever afford it? You can’t even get into your bank account.”

Samara’s heart fluttered as she admired her ring. It was at least a carat, with a traditional gold band and two diamond baguettes on either side of the glorious pear shaped diamond. It shined and shimmered in the candlelight, and Samara couldn’t keep her eyes off it.

“I borrowed the money from Jared. He consented to be my best man. I want to be married as soon as we can. I know that things are still uncertain, but I want you to be my wife, like I’ve never wanted anything before.”

“Oh, Connor, I want to be your wife, whenever and however you want. I’d like my parents to be there, but I don’t need a big church wedding. I’d look pretty silly in a huge, white gown with this big tummy of mine.”

“You’d look lovely, and if you want to wear a wedding gown, I’ll put on the monkey suit. As long as we do it soon.”

“As soon as we can, you better believe it. Oh Connor, you make me so happy. Life is beautiful.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Life sucked. Harry's car had been repossessed that morning, he was sleeping in the office because his house was being foreclosed upon if the lawyers could find him to serve him the papers. He had a meeting with his superiors this afternoon, and he was sure it wasn't going to be good news.

Things were unraveling fast. If he didn't hear from the computer weasel soon, he'd have to run for cover and forget about the money. He didn't trust him to split the money. In fact, Harry didn't trust anyone anymore. His nerves were so shot, he jumped every time someone said his name. When the phone at his belt rang he almost wet his pants.

"Hey, I think I got a line on O'Riley." The caller didn't bother to identify himself.

"Finally. Where is the bastard?"

"He was spotted on Cape Cod at a jewelers shop."

"What the hell is he doing buying jewelry on Cape Cod?"

"Maybe he wanted a new watch, how do I know? What do you want me to do?"

"Get some men, lots of them, find his hideout. When you've got him surrounded, take him, and anyone who's with him out. I want the body riddled with bullets and dumped in some back alley somewhere. Make sure the body is found with some incriminating evidence on it, make it look like a gang hit. Do it fast, tonight."

“It’ll take a little while to hire some men, this isn’t exactly Miami, you know.”

“Just do it. I don’t care how. Just get it done, and fast.” Disconnecting the phone, Harry’s brain began to spin. Maybe he could salvage something out of this yet. If he could just get the weasel to find the money, he could pay off the loan shark, throw some money at his ex-wife, and find a hole to hide in. He had to get that money.

His belt rang again. It was the weasel, maybe today was his lucky day after all.

“What have you got?”

“I got the hard drive, you had better meet me. You’re not going to like this.”

“What is it?” Reynolds asked with panic in his voice.

“Just meet me at the diner on Main and I’ll fill you in.”

“When?” Reynolds was sweating again.

“Twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes later Reynolds was chain-smoking cheap cigarettes in the diner. The weasel showed up with no computer and a furtive look on his face. “Did you make sure you weren’t followed?” he asked checking nervously over his shoulder.

“Of course I wasn’t followed you fool. Just tell me what was so important I had to fight traffic to get here in twenty minutes.”

“I got the hard drive. The guy I hired got it for me in two days flat. God I’d love to know how he did that, I mean I couldn’t get word one...”

“Would you wax poetic about your cyber-god some other time? What the hell happened when you got the hard drive?” Reynolds practically shouted.

“It’s not there.”

“What’s not there? I thought you said he got the hard drive?”

“He did, the money isn’t there. It’s all been given to charity.”

“What!”

“It’s gone. All of it’s gone. I can’t even trace it to get it back.”

“What do you mean you can’t trace it?”

“He made anonymous donations. I can’t prove he made them even if I could find the different charities. It’s gone, cut your losses and move on, Reynolds. You’ll never see the money.”

“I need that money, you don’t understand...” Reynolds trailed off.

“He doesn’t, but I sure do. Now why do you think the head of the Miami DEA office is here in a cheap diner meeting a hacker?” Jared said, sitting next to Reynolds and cramming him into the corner of the booth.

“Who are you? How do you know who I am?” Reynolds asked with wide-eyed panic.

“How did you find me? How do you know who he is?” the hacker asked, looking panicked as well.

Jared grabbed the weasel’s arm before he could make a break for it.

“Let’s just say I’m the appetizer, ah, and here comes the main course. The boys in blue, what great timing. I’ll meet you all in booking. Ah, what a beautiful day.”

“You can’t do this to me. Do you know who I am? I’ll bury you. This is all a set up.” Reynolds was still screaming while they read him his rights and stuffed him into the squad car.

The weasel kept denying any connection to anyone. “I have no idea who they are, I don’t know what is going on, there must be some sort of mistake. I want my lawyer.”

Jared thought he might just make a recording from the tape he had in his pocket and give it to Connor for a wedding present. Thinking of Connor, he had better call him and let him know he could come out of hiding, and go get the marriage license.

“Hello?” Samara answered the phone.

“Hey, beautiful. Is Connor around, I’ve got good news for him.”

“Oh, I’m sorry Jared, he went to the convenience store down the street to get me some caffeine-free soda before I lose it completely. He should be back soon. Can you tell me?”

“No, it’s only fair I tell him first, just make sure he calls me as soon as he walks in. But you can start packing.”

“You are a frustrating man Jared, but I’ll forgive you if you found a way out of this mess. I may never come to the Cape again.”

“I’ll accept your apology after I talk to Connor.”

Maybe he’d make a tape of the interrogation, too. Reynolds and the weasel were through booking, they were both denying any connection, or any wrongdoing. Jared thought he’d give them a little longer before he dropped the bombshell of evidence he had on them.

He imagined the D.A.’s office would be more than willing to make a deal with one of them by the time everything came out in the wash.

After showing his government credentials to the Miami P.D. he was admitted into the interrogation viewing room.

“You can’t pin this on me, you can’t pin anything on me. If you weren’t so inept you’d know where to look for the real dirty cop. Look into O’Riley’s file and see what turns up. I bet you he’s hiding out now with his gang buddies, laughing at you for being such stupid idiots. You’ll see that I’m right when his body turns up dead in some alley somewhere. You’ll be sorry then.” A smug smile played about his lips.

A chill went down Jared’s spine. Somehow, Reynolds knew where Connor and Samara were hiding. He found them. And there was no way Jared could get to them on time.

Frantically, he dialed their number, swearing when it rang and rang. “Damn it, answer the goddamn phone.” Sweat ran down his face. “Where the hell are you?” Jared started running, making all the calls he could

while driving towards the airport. He had no idea how he was going to get to Cape Cod before the shit hit the fan, but he was going to do his best.



Samara was so happy at the thought of leaving she started packing things up with a smile on her face. She couldn't wait to get home and get things ready for the baby. Now that she was in her sixth month, she was really looking forward to being home and near Macayla for her last trimester.

As she was packing up the leftover boxes of macaroni and cheese she noticed the light blinking in the kitchen. It took her a few moments to remember what it meant. At first she thought Connor accidentally tripped the alarm when he came back from the store, but he was always very careful about such things. He wouldn't slip up now.

Without wasting any more time wondering what was going on, she raced to the generator shed and pulled the door closed. It was hot and stuffy in there, and she could barely breathe, but she would stay until she heard Connor telling her to get out. She was not going to be like one of those idiot women in the movies who went to investigate the noise, and then got used as a hostage.

Her heart hammered. She couldn't hear anything over its frantic beating. She reached behind her and grabbed the gun Connor had hidden there weeks before.

Could she actually use it to kill someone? With shaking hands, Samara loaded the weapon the way Connor taught her, and held it tightly against her. She'd do what she had to in order to keep her baby safe.

Please God, don't let Connor be hurt. The litany ran through her head as she strained to hear anything outside the shed. She almost shot

herself in the foot when she heard a scream coming from the far side of the house. Someone must have gotten caught in one of the traps.

It definitely wasn't Connor out there.

She started praying faster.

"Jake, what happened to you? You get caught in a bear trap?"

Samara could hear men talking so close to her she was afraid they'd be able to hear her heart beating out of her chest.

"Who the hell knows, just get me down from here. The guy must have the place rigged or something. Maybe we should have gotten more help."

"How the hell were we supposed to find anyone out here in east bumble-screw? It's one guy and one girl, and this time they won't be sneaking up on us. We'll be the ones with the guns ready, no one's gonna get the better of me twice."

"Yeah, well if you don't get me down, it'll be you against both of them, and let me tell you, that chick ain't no pushover. She got in a few kicks before the guy got me upside the head."

These must be the same guys that had grabbed her in Miami. Why didn't it surprise her that the one she took out would blame it on a guy instead of her? She peeked through a crack in the shed, trying to see where they were.

At the very corner of her vision she could see one goon take a knife out of his pocket and cut the rope holding the one he called Jake by the ankle. Jake fell to the ground with a thud that shook the ground.

"You could have held onto the rope you know. Man, you could have broken my back that way."

"Quit your complaining, you're down aren't you? Now let's get moving before the whole town knows we're here."

The two men crept towards the door to the house. Samara heard a phone ring and prayed it wasn't Connor trying to get in touch with her.

She watched as they kicked in the door, it didn't take them long to figure out she wasn't there.

"Now what do we do?"

"We wait, he'll be back soon. I'll go out by the road and keep an eye out for him. You stay here and see if you can get an idea of where they went. There's a shed out back, maybe they're humping each other in it."

Oh God! They were coming her way. Samara loosened her death grip on the heavy gun. She didn't want to use it, but she would if she had to.

When she saw the man coming towards her hiding place, she used one of Connor's favorite swear words. It was the same guy she took out in Miami. She knew he wouldn't be so easy to take out again. Once the element of surprise was gone, it was usually the stronger person who won the fight. She had the training, but her timing was off, her body was unbalanced and slow, and this guy was bound to remember her from last time. She'd have to use the damn gun now. There was no way she could avoid it.

Please let Connor get here soon.

Could she really shoot someone in cold blood? What if she just shot him in the arm and missed? She was hot and sweaty and the guy just kept on coming. There was nothing else out here. He could only be headed for the shed. She wiped her hands off and steadied her grip. She'd backed up against the back of the shed when the goon kicked open the door. She was so startled she squeezed the trigger and shot right over his head.

"Get away from me. I have a gun and I'm not afraid to shoot you." She had no idea what to do next? As soon as her gun went off the guy dove to the side. If she stuck her head out, he'd be able to shoot her. If she stayed in the shed he could shoot it full of holes and she was bound to get hit eventually.

Crouching down to make the smallest target possible, she pressed herself into the corner and put the generator between herself and the door. She didn't know what else to do. She was trying to be as still as possible when she heard an ominous creaking. The boards she was crouched against gave way, and she tumbled over backwards. Before she could get up the goon had a gun to her forehead and an evil grin on his face.

"Get up slowly, girlie, you won't knock the wind out of me this time. Now give me the gun, you won't be shooting me either. Come on, get up, we're going to have some fun this time around." He hauled her up by the arm and kept the gun pressed to her head. He pulled her arm up behind her back and yanked it painfully as he told her all the things he was going to do to her before he killed her.

Samara's mind whirled furiously. She knew how to get out of the arm hold—she'd practiced for something like this for years. But Lord, she never thought that she'd ever have to do it for real to protect her unborn baby.

The baby. That was how she could get out of this.

"Don't hurt my baby! Please, I'll do anything, but don't hurt my baby." Samara cried as she bent protectively over her stomach.

"What baby?" asked the goon, stepping back and looking around, inadvertently taking the gun off Samara's head.

Before he could figure out what was going on, Samara stood quickly and slammed the back of her head into the goon's nose, snapping it audibly. Breaking out of the grip on her arm, she punched him in the stomach. When he doubled over with a *whoof*, she grabbed the hand with the gun and twisted it as hard as she could, bringing him to the ground in pain. The goon choked on the blood pouring from his nose, but he wasn't so far out of it that he forgot the gun still in his hand.

“Bitch, I’m going to shoot you in the stomach and let you watch your kid die.”

That was all Samara needed to hear. She was more than willing to just hold him there until someone with a little more authority came along to take over, but no one was going to threaten her kid.

“That was the wrong thing to say, asshole.” Samara broke his wrist with a quick snap, then slammed her elbow against the base of his skull.

Now, where was Connor, and was he still alive?



Connor had turned into the lane when he got an uneasy feeling in his gut. He’d relied on his gut for too many years to ignore it now. Quickly cutting the motor, he left the truck in the lane. If someone came up behind him, which was pretty unlikely, they would just have to wait until he came back for the truck.

Sliding out the passenger side of the truck, he grabbed the pistol out of the glove box. His senses were in overdrive as he stuffed the gun in the waistband of his jeans, and made his way quietly through the woods.

Connor saw the thug he had tied up in Miami sit on a tree stump a ways back from the driveway. The guy was actually smoking.

What kind of idiot waited with a gun out, and smoked so everyone with a nose could spot him? Connor guessed the caliber of henchmen these days was just as shoddy as everything else. Before he could decide what to do about him when he heard a gunshot come from the direction of the shed. He wanted to run to Samara, but if he did, the idiot who was just now getting up from his spot would shoot him in the back.

Best to take care of him quickly and then get to Samara.

“Jake, are you okay?” The thug called out. “Jake? Probably shot himself in the foot,” he muttered as he threw down his cigarette and jogged for the house.

Connor got a running start and slammed into him from the side. The guy was big, and had a great deal of muscle under his fat. He was up faster than Connor expected. This wasn’t going to be as quick as he had hoped.

“Well, it’s about time. We’ve been waiting for you. Looks like old Jake got the girl again. I owe you for that hit you gave me in Miami. It won’t be so easy this time.”

“Whatever you say. Who hired you? You haven’t the brains to pull this off on your own.”

“Don’t you worry about who hired us. You’ll find out when you’re rotting in some back alley somewhere.”

Connor pushed all thoughts of Samara away. He couldn’t afford to be distracted now, for both their sakes.

“So, I take it you didn’t like the taste of your sock in your mouth when you woke up.” Connor tried to judge the skill level of his opponent. *More of a brawler than a fighter.*

What was it Samara said? Watch the hands. They were spread way out instead of up on guard. He left his entire middle open for attack. Connor bet that this was the same guy who broke into Sam’s house.

“What was worse, getting hit from behind, or having a pretty blonde kick your ass when you broke into her house?” Connor taunted, watching his eyes.

“Bastard. She didn’t kick my ass. I got out before the heat came. I’m no pansy. No girl or pretty boy is gonna take me down.” The thug rushed Connor, arms stretched out to grab him.

Connor ducked under the guy's arms and pushed him up against a tree, grabbing the gun out of his pants before the creep got his senses back.

"As much as I'd love to spar with you, I really need to check on my bride. Put your hands up against the tree." Connor pulled the hammer back on the gun he had pressed against the thug's thick neck.

With the guy's hands against the tree, Connor decided time was of the essence and just knocked him unconscious. He'd come back and tie him up later. He hated to leave a live enemy behind him, but Samara was in trouble and he didn't want to take the time to find something to tie him up with.

Connor blended into the woods and headed around the house to the shed. If Samara had done what she was supposed to, she'd be in there now, well armed.

As he rounded the corner, he spied Samara standing over the limp body of the other guy from Miami with a gun in her hand. His heart tripped with relief, she was okay.

"Samara. Don't shoot," he called out before he stepped into her view. When she pointed the gun skyward, he ran to her. "Are you okay?" His knees felt weak as he pulled her into his arms.

"I'm fine. I'm a little sore, but other than that, surprisingly okay. How are you? There's one more—"

"I got him, he's in the woods. I wanted to make sure you were okay before I tied him up. I guess I didn't have to worry about you."

"Oh Connor, I was so scared. I hid out in the shed like you told me too, and I didn't know where you were. I was so afraid for you." Samara buried her head in his shoulder and wept.

"There, there, we're okay now. You did good, you didn't try to be a hero. Let's just tie up these jokers and call the police. There's some fishing line in the shed we can use that." He took a deep breath, inhaling

her fragrance and thanking God she and the baby were safe. “I think things have just about come to a head, Jared can fill us in on all the details when we tell him what happened.”

“Oh. I forgot to tell you.” Samara looked up from his chest. “He called right before I saw the blinking light. He said he wouldn’t tell me the news, but you were to call him as soon as you came home.”

“I’ll go get the phone as soon as I tie up these jokers and call the police.”

Hours later, the police had left with a warning for Connor not to leave town until they’d gotten more information.

“It’s gonna take days to get all of this cleaned up.” Samara massaged the small of her back after sweeping up another pile of broken glass.

“We’ve got time. It’ll take at least a week for the local authorities to get everything figured out enough that I can be cleared of suspicion.”

“Don’t bet on it. I pulled a few strings,” Jared said, stepping over a pile of debris.

“Jared. How did you get here so fast?” Connor crossed the room and shook his hand.

“You don’t want to know, trust me. I broke just about every regulation there is. You two had better be worth it.”

“I’d like to think that I am at least.” Samara gave a saucy wink.

“You’re looking a little bigger than the last time I saw you, slim. Living in the back end of nowhere must agree with you.”

“How nice of you to notice.” Samara grimaced.

“Why don’t you tell us what you know, while we finish cleaning up,” Connor offered before Jared got himself in more trouble.



“So, it turns out that Reynolds had a gambling problem, and he went dirty to feed it. You got his payment by accident, and he set you up to take the fall. Only you didn’t fall, so he had to do some quick dealing to get your computer so he could get your passwords. The scare tactics were his, to make you think it was a drug dealer after you so you would run and leave your computer in a place he could get to it. He’s trying to make a deal with the D.A., but he doesn’t have much more than a phone number to offer. He’ll be in the tank for a long time, that is if he doesn’t get killed by those he’s trying to roll over on first.” Jared took a deep drink of his beer.

“Now that’s a thought I can live with.” Connor clinked his beer bottle against Jared’s.

“Kind of makes you all warm and fuzzy, doesn’t it?”

“I’m just glad your name has been cleared and we can go home. I’m really sick of this place,” Samara said.

“Me too, we can get married this weekend and take our honeymoon after the baby is born. It wouldn’t be the same if you couldn’t drink on the honeymoon.”

“True, but it would be nice to have my parents at the wedding, and they don’t get back until September, and by then I’ll be the size of a house. I am not getting married when I’m eight months pregnant. We’ll just have to wait until after I have the baby. Maybe a Christmas wedding.”

“Over my dead body. My child is not going to be born without some wedding vows between us.”

“Oh really? I think this baby is going to be born regardless of what you want.”

“If I may interrupt this budding war?” Jared asked. “Why don’t you have a quick J.P. ceremony soon, then do the whole thing for real after the blessed event. I’m sure your parents would forgive you for jumping

the gun if you still had the church wedding they've always wanted, and that way you can fit into your dress too."

"Very funny. I think I could live with that, as long as Connor here doesn't get cold feet."

"Ha Ha, I'm ready anytime you are. Let's go home tomorrow and get the license. We can have the blood tests done and be ready in no time. You going to stick around long enough to be my best man?" Connor asked the still smirking Jared.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world. I'll even pay for the reception at the restaurant."

"That's sweet of you, Jared."

"Don't say it, don't you dare." Jared glared at her.

"He's such a nice man," Samara said it anyway and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Epilogue

Connor walked into the Rasta Mon alone and sat down at the bar. He couldn't wait to give Alex the surprise of his life.

"Hey, mon. Haven't seen you since you almost keeled over in the bar. What happened to you?"

"I met up with a couple of girls who've kept me pretty busy the last few months," Connor said, hiding his smirk behind the beer Alex set in front of him.

"Ah, mon, I was hoping things would work out between you and the blonde. She was a fine piece, a fine piece."

"Don't I know it. In fact, she should be meeting me here soon."

"Good job. So will you be making the right choice with her? She's not one to stick around if you take too long."

"Already done my friend, already done. We're on our honeymoon. In fact, here she comes with the other girl I was telling you about."

"Other girl? What you doing?" Alex asked in obvious disbelief as Samara walked in holding a little bundle against her shoulder.

"Hey Alex, how about pouring me a drink? I married this joker, I'm going to need all the help I can get."

"It's too late to turn back now. You married me twice, there's no getting out of it this time." Connor kissed her gently.

"Why did you get married twice? And what do you have there Miss Samara?"

“Let me introduce you to Caitlyn Alexandra O’Riley.” Connor grinned from ear to ear. He scooped the sleeping baby from his wife’s arms and pulled back the light covering to show her off to her honorary uncle.

Just looking at this little bundle made Connor’s heart skip a beat. It still boggled his mind that this beautiful little girl with the tuft of blonde hair was his. He might not be the best dad in the world, but he would die trying. He loved his girls so much, he felt like he couldn’t contain it all inside himself.

“When? How?” Alex started

“When was last January, the how, well I imagine your dad had that talk with you a long time ago.” Samara laughed at his befuddlement.

“But what about your job? You can’t leave your girls for weeks at a time anymore. You need to be around, watching over them.”

“Already taken care of my friend. You are looking at a new man. I have a steady job, with benefits and everything. I can’t stand being away from my girls. Why do you think we brought the baby on our honeymoon with us? We couldn’t just leave her for a week,” Connor said, nuzzling his nose against the baby’s soft blond hair.

“But we don’t have a problem leaving her with her Uncle Alex on his night off so that we can go out dancing,” Samara said, taking the baby back, handing her to the startled bartender, and twirling her husband onto the dance floor.

“You’re not sorry we took Caitlyn on our honeymoon, are you, honey?” Connor asked, pulling Samara closer to him.

“Not at all, I don’t think I would have been able to enjoy myself if we had left her at home. Besides, in a way, we’ve already had our honeymoon. We just did it before we got married,” Samara said with a twinkle in her eye.

Connor laughed as he picked up Samara and carried her back to Alex and the rest of his family.

About the Author

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What would you do?

Trophy Girl

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You're a NASCAR fan...pretty into it, thanks to your dad. You know a lot about the drivers, the tracks, the cars. Even though you try not to, you hear the rumors and see the off-track interviews. You know the reputation of the series champ, bad-boy Zander Torris. You know he's devastatingly good looking, and charming to boot, but with a different piece of voluptuous, blonde eye candy on his arm every weekend, you have zilch respect for him.

The only good thing you see in him is that he's a very generous benefactor for the camp where you're a nurse volunteer.

So when he walks into your clinic, unannounced and unexpected, and asks you—girl-next-door, unglamorous you—to that evening's benefactor's dinner, what do you do?

Hint, he's not taking no for an answer, so be ready at 6...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Trophy Girl*:

Zander's hand rested on the curve of her lower back, making it very difficult to continue fighting against his insistent control of the situation. The heat from his hand flowed through her, heating her skin, boiling her blood. He looked way too delicious in that dark suit. He'd shaved as well,

a citrusy waft of his aftershave teasing her nostrils, making each of her senses beg for their own samples of this much too virile male.

Why couldn't he be a regular guy? Then she could enjoy, even anticipate building on the attraction she felt. But no, he had to be an untouchable. Someone she could lust after from here 'til doomsday and never have. Not for real anyway.

As it was, nobody was going to believe he not only asked her to be his date, but he'd taken her shopping for clothes. Sexy clothes. What the heck did that mean anyway? And how could she not respond? She wasn't dead, after all. Still, a small part of her was grounded enough to know that regardless of his final purpose, he needed for her to look good on his arm.

Ah hell. He was right. She hadn't had a man buy her clothes like this before.

The scent of vanilla greeted her as she stepped through the doorway. Her pump clad feet sunk into the plush cocoa-colored carpet. An immaculately dressed woman rushed up to them, smiling. Yeah, she recognized Zander. That had to be it. Either that or she simply read money in his tailored jacket and charcoal, brushed-silk shirt with same color tie. He could dress, there was no doubt about that. He wore success well.

After the woman had thoroughly ogled him, then made eye contact, attention was turned to Molly. She was simply going to go along with this, unless, of course, he intended to put her in something sleazy.

"Black, yes?"

Molly shrugged and looked up at Zander. He nodded and gave her one of those looks that made her feel like she'd already removed all her clothing. She shivered as his hand brushed her arm, but followed the saleswoman down to the dressing room with careful steps.

The fitting room was the size of a master bathroom, complete with mirrors on two walls, wall hangers for her own clothes and marble counter for her purse. Amazing.

"Mr. Torris has already suggested this for you." Molly followed the woman's long pink fingernail to the very elegant dress hanging on the far wall. Draped on the counter were silk stockings, panties and just below it, a pair of strappy heels. Had he thought of everything?

"He wasn't sure of your size," she said and smiled, her eyes twinkling. "I think he was pretty accurate describing. But if something doesn't fit, let me know."

"I will."

Okay, she was excited. Hard not to be when being treated like royalty. She slipped into the stockings and dress, sighing as the silk whispered against her bare flesh. Her nipples puckered as the material cupped her breasts, draping elegantly over them. She smoothed the narrow straps over her shoulders, then let her fingers trace down the sides of her curves and rest on her hips as she surveyed her appearance in the mirror. She should have trusted him.

The skirt was layered; the hem uneven. It reminded her immediately of the sketches of faeries in the children's books she kept in her office. It hugged her waist, lying smooth over her stomach. She even adored the neckline, an elegant draping of material that made it sexy, but without showing even a hint of cleavage. One couldn't find dresses like this in regular department stores, that was for sure. The straps in the back crisscrossed. Shame she'd left her hair down so she couldn't show off the elegant string of black beads that lay draped along her shoulder blades.

"Molly?" Zander called through the door. "What do you think?"

She twirled around, half in wonder, half in disbelief. "Oh my God, this dress is gorgeous."

Without preempt, Zander opened the door and joined her in the room. Suddenly, it didn't seem so big. She sucked in her breath, wondering if she'd ever get used to how powerful his presence was. His eyes roamed over her, the color darkening even as his mouth spread into a satisfied smile. He looked like the cat who had the canary trapped, and was about to have lunch.

"You're not supposed to be in here!" she cried, backing up and checking to make sure the dress covered everything it needed to. Her bra lay on the floor between them where she'd dropped it in her haste. She hated the heat in her cheeks as his eyes lazily roamed over her, then her discarded clothes, then back to her again.

She may have known who Zander Torris was for damn near a decade, but she'd only met him today. It was far too soon to be sharing this moment—one bordering on intimacy—in a fitting room, no less. Yet she couldn't deny it. Her nipples had pebbled beneath the soft material the moment his gaze had rested there. Anticipation spun in her stomach, and lower. Never had she felt turned on from a man simply looking at her—fully dressed, at that. Her heart pounded, worried he could see her arousal through her clothes.

"We don't want to be late," she said, or rather, choked out. What was wrong with her body? Around him it seemed to behave so uncharacteristically.

"I'm not sure I want you wearing that dress." Voice low, matter-of-fact, and sexy as hell. Despite the meaning of the words, her body responded as if was an invitation to strip.

Molly had to pry her eyes from the way the shoulders of his shirt strained when he crossed his arms over his chest. He'd removed his jacket. Yowza. *Concentrate, Molly, look him in the eye. You're eye candy, not dessert. He's told you as much.* "Wh-why?"

"Cause it'd be dangerous."

Lord, she knew it was a trap, knew he said it as pure flattery but damn it, it worked. The wicked half smile on his face, the gleam in his eye. He should have been an actor instead of a driver, the man was amazing. "Well, thanks. So, Mr. Hot Shot, what will it be, the dress or my suit. Frankly, I don't care." She shifted her weight, and set about picking up her clothes, hoping to personify the confidence she lacked.

"The dress. What panties are you wearing?"

Her hands instinctively slapped onto her thighs, holding the skirt down. "None of your goddamn business." The tingling in her body pooled between her legs, making her well aware of the silk pressure of the thong's material against her most intimate parts.

Sexy, rich, who cares, he didn't need to know anything about her panties...or lack of. She repeated that to herself at least three times as he studied her.

"Well, I thought I had them pick up a garter and thong, but you're not wearing a thong with that. I'll be right back."

He stepped out, shutting the door behind him with a gentle click.

Words she usually saved for stubbed toes or drivers who cut her off tumbled from her mouth. What had been so wrong with her own black French cut bikinis? Seriously. She was slipping out of the thong—which he'd undoubtedly have to pay for just because she'd tried it on—and was just reaching for her own undies when he came in again.

"Here, I like these better."

These were low-cut, satin boy briefs with a nearly sheer lace front. He held them like he handled women's panties all day. Hell, he probably had enough experience. Good reminder, she decided as she snatched the scrap of fabric from him and nodded toward the door. "Just because you're buying doesn't mean you get to see them."

He turned around.

Her heart thundered in her chest. She clamped her thighs together, amazed her body found his presence in the room while she was naked under that skirt all the more arousing. "Out."

"Just slip them up under your skirt."

"Don't you dare move or I'll scream rape." She was really more afraid of screaming in other ways, because if he moved, it meant only one thing. Her body shuddered as she imagined him pinning her against the wall, shoving her skirt up and burying his face in her pussy. She bit her lip to keep from gasping. Her legs felt like putty. Oh, God, how was she going to survive the night?

Alex Rossi leads a double life, and it may cost Grace Nolan her son.

72 Hours

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The Devlin Group: A privately-owned rogue agency unhindered by red tape and jurisdiction.

Grace Nolan walked away from the Devlin Group carrying Alex Rossi's child in her womb and his bullet in her shoulder. But a ghost from the past has kidnapped her son, Danny. The ransom—Alex Rossi. To get her son back, Grace will have to step back into the life she'd left behind and reveal her secret to Alex.

With vengeance for his mother's murder nearly at hand and a deadly substance on the loose, the last thing Alex Rossi needs is to find himself at the business end of Grace's gun. Now the clock is ticking as they race to save a child and stop a madman bent on destruction.

But Alex has a secret of his own, and it may be the ultimate betrayal.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *72 Hours*:

Something's burning. The thought hit Grace Nolan a mere second before the alarm shrieked.

"Hold on!" She ripped off her headset, then pounded down the stairs. Dammit, this couldn't happen again. She'd worked so hard to make sure it wouldn't.

The room was quickly filling with smoke, and Grace grabbed a potholder. She yanked open the oven door and took out the smoking

cookie sheet. With a curse, she dropped it into the sink and turned on the tap.

The pan popped and warped as the chocolate chip briquettes slid into a black, soggy mess in the sink.

“Crap!” she yelled at the smoke detector, flapping a towel under it to clear the smoke.

She could disable any security system known to man, and sell the CIA its damn own secrets, for chrissake. Why the hell couldn’t she bake a decent batch of cookies? A boy should come home from a long day in second grade to something warm and homemade with love.

When the alarm had chirped its last chirp, Grace rummaged through the cabinet for the Chewy Chips Ahoy. After tossing a few on a plate, she shoved the package back behind the bran flakes and glanced at her watch. Just enough time to wrap things up with Carmen before she poured Danny’s milk.

“Forget to set the timer again?” Carmen Olivera asked after Grace retrieved the headset.

She nodded, then shrugged at the Latin beauty in the high-definition video screen. “I think I forgot the vanilla, anyway. Do they taste the same without the vanilla?”

“Do I look like Betty Crocker? You need to get out more, *chica*.”

If only she could. “Who’d have thought motherhood’s harder than infiltrating Russian military installations?”

“Honey, I *know* it is. Why do you think I run so fast from men?”

“Because they usually have badges from some alphabet agency or another, and want to see you in an orange jumpsuit?”

“That too. You should come back to us, babe. Can you believe Gallagher and I are staying at the freaking Plaza Royale?”

"I've been to the Plaza Royale. And I quit the agency eight years ago, Carm. When are you going to believe me when I tell you I'm not coming back?"

"Never. You know the Devlin Group—we *never* give up."

"Yeah, like Mounties, only a little more juvenile, and a lot more delinquent. And speaking of delinquents, how's Gallagher doing lately?"

Carmen rolled her eyes. "Not too happy about being the hired muscle, but Dev didn't have anybody else available. Pretty good money just to hang around and make sure nobody kills me, if you ask me."

"Damn straight," Grace agreed. Sean Devlin had founded a very lucrative business brokering assignments for the loose network of international freelancers specializing in just about anything. His primary focus was assisting government agencies whose hands were tied by red tape, but he certainly didn't do it for free.

"Like hanging out pool side's such a hardship for him," Carmen was saying. "You'd think he's on vacation for all the attention he's paying me."

"Based on some of his previous jobs, I'd say this is pretty close to vacation for him."

"Knowing my luck he'll try to cut the power to the camera bank and set off the fire alarm instead."

"What's the job?" Grace asked, knowing Carmen would tell her if she could, shrug it off if she couldn't.

"Some pencil pusher from a biochem company got it into his head to sell a sample of a new biotoxin to the highest bidder."

"Wow! I hope you brought good gloves."

Carmen pulled her sable mass of hair into a sleek ponytail. "A very unsexy, but surprisingly flexible hazmat suit, actually. It makes blending

in a bit of a challenge, though, so the whole thing's gotta go down like clockwork."

"And the seller?"

"We'll leave him for the big, bad buyers to take care of. The client doesn't want the publicity of prosecuting a guy for managing to steal a very scary concoction out from under their noses."

"People really have to start taking better care of their scary concoctions."

"Yeah. Nice to know there are people making up poisons so they can have an antidote to it by the time somebody else makes it up."

"It's a scary world out there," Grace agreed. Just one more reason she had traded in her cat suit for an apron.

"I wish you were still in the field with me, Grace. I'd feel a lot better if you had my back."

Not a chance. When the Devlin Group had poached her away from the FBI, she'd jumped at the chance to leave her small-town, white bread upbringing behind. Miss Most-Likely-to-Organize-Carpools was going to be an international super agent.

It didn't take long for the flash to fizzle. Fast cars, hard people, and too much adrenaline. Each mission left her more jaded and more tired. She could barely recognize the person in the mirror at the end of each day.

Not until the doctor treating her for a gunshot wound told her she was pregnant did she have the strength to walk away.

Being a civilian contractor for legit government agencies didn't pay as well, but it let her be home with Danny. Her mission now was to be both mother and father to one hell of a great kid—the only mission that ever made her curl in her bed and cry in fear of failure.

"You know I can't raise Danny like that."

And she did know. Carmen Olivera was the only person connected to the Devlin Group, besides Sean himself, who knew about Danny. Her need to have an ear to bend had overcome her initial decision to never tell a soul. *Nobody* knew who his father was, though. She'd told them it was her doctor, and Carmen and Devlin—the only two people she'd kept in contact with—had no reason not to believe her.

“Maybe when Danny's all grown up, you can come out and play, huh?”

Grace laughed again and shook her head. “Sure. I'll just stock up on the Geritol.”

They chatted for a few minutes, then she severed the digital connection to her former life and returned to Mommyworld.

She was pouring milk into a plastic cup when the screen door slammed.

“How was your—” She turned.

Her throat closed. The clock ticked.

Cold milk splashed over her bare toes.

The man smiled.

“Your son won't be coming home, Ms. Nolan...for now.” He held up an 8x10 photo.

Danny, with a large, tanned hand pressing against the backpack he still wore, ushering him onto a small plane. No markings were visible on the aircraft. No other faces in the picture. Only Danny's. The camera captured him looking over his shoulder, his blue eyes under his Red Sox cap wide and liquid.

“You bastard.”

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